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# Sikuani indigenous women: ancestral practices and current ways of educational and social participation

## Mujer indígena Sikuani: algunas prácticas ancestrales y formas actuales de participación educativa y social

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### Abstract

Even though social participation of minorities has begun to take a more relevant role in Colombia, there are still some populations that struggle to be heard and considered socially, politically and economically; indigenous women being one of them. As a result, knowledge about indigenous women's social participation in their territories is partial and limited, since most of it is derived from men's voices and the official government perspective. Consequently, the present study takes into consideration the insights shared by three Sikuani indigenous women regarding their participation inside their community. Their narratives were collected

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through field notes and semi-structured interviews, which then were contrasted with existing theory; this allowed researchers to directly approach women's feelings and perceptions regarding their involvement in different social processes. The results show that they hold in high regard their traditional labors concerning the care of their families, as well as their interest to educate themselves and become more active leaders for the sake of their people's well-living.

## Keywords

Access to education; Ancestral practices; Gender discrimination; Indigenous knowledge; Social participation; Women and development; Women's participation.

## Resumen

Pese a que la participación social de las minorías en Colombia ha comenzado a adquirir mayor representación, aún hay algunos grupos que luchan por ser tenidos en cuenta social, económica y políticamente, entre estos las mujeres indígenas. De tal manera, el conocimiento acerca de la participación social de las mujeres en sus territorios es parcial y limitado, pues la mayoría de veces esta se ve representada por las enunciaciones masculinas y los sectores dominantes de la nación. En este orden de ideas, el presente estudio toma en cuenta las visiones compartidas por un grupo de 3 mujeres indígenas Sikuani alrededor de sus formas de participación en su pueblo. Sus narrativas fueron recolectadas a través de diarios de campo y entrevistas semiestructuradas, las cuales fueron contrastadas con algunas posturas teóricas. Lo anterior permitió que los investigadores lograran comprender los sentires femeninos y sus percepciones con respecto a sus intervenciones en diversos procesos sociales. Los resultados muestran que ellas sienten un gran respeto por las labores tradicionales relacionadas con el cuidado de sus familias y manifiestan su interés por educarse y poder actuar como lideresas para aportar al buen vivir de sus pueblos.

## Palabras clave

Acceso a la educación; Conocimientos indígenas; Discriminación sexual; Mujer y desarrollo; Participación de la mujer; Participación social; Prácticas ancestrales.

## Introduction

Over the last few decades, indigenous women from all over the continent have begun to fight and look for spaces to participate actively in decision-making processes regarding their territories. This struggle is part of their need to be self-recognized critically as “epistemic beings” with the authority to question, criticize and abolish systematic oppression in their lives (Cabnal, 2010). As a result, they feel the obligation to express their necessities and to draw attention towards their lives and tasks as active participants in their territories, with the sole purpose of revitalizing and recreating new ways of harmony in their lives.

Although indigenous women from Colombia share those same feelings, their situation varies greatly, mainly as a consequence of “five centuries of colonization, displacement, political imposition and cultural integration” (Villa & Houghton, 2005, p. 16). While said issues have had terrible consequences on all social contexts, the rural areas have been particularly affected; indigenous people are an insightful component of rurality and consequently, they have suffered the severity of war in Colombian territory. Indeed, “indigenous women in Colombia continue to experience multiple forms of discrimination that restrict their political participation, including in the peace process ... and manifest in political, social, cultural, and economic discrimination, and direct violence” (Salamanca et al., 2017, p. 5). However, these spaces have been used mainly by the spokesmen of the communities, refraining women from sharing their experiences regarding the effects the armed conflict has had on their lives, as well as their ways of participation as members of their territories.

Due to this, indigenous women in Colombia have not had enough opportunities to raise their voices and express their ideas, opinions and feelings regarding their ways of life. According to Corporación Humanas (2015), they have managed to become political agents, but there is an outstanding lack of knowledge about the inequality that affects indigenous women, which in consequence, portrays the lack of policies and decision making regarding their well-being (Jaspers, Montaña & mujeres ONU, 2013). In fact, the western world has a univocal perspective regarding indigenous women’s jobs, struggles and involvement in the development of their communities.

Having said that, indigenous women’s life lessons and experiences have been hardly represented, since most of the time they have been expressed from a masculine voice and the official government perspective. Particularly speaking, knowledge about women’s contributions to their communities and participation as social actors is reduced. In order to address this issue, this paper explores the narratives of a group of Sikuani indigenous women in relation to their

social participation inside their communities, and how these have been reshaped historically, so as to answer the following question: what are the ancestral and current practices of Sikuani indigenous women as social actors inside and outside their territories?

## Theoretical Framework

In order to deeply analyze indigenous women's social participation, it is important to establish it from within their communities, since it is the communities that give these women a sense of their priorities, needs and the way they perceive access and control of their territories (Jaspers et al., 2013, p. 18). Subsequently, this section explores three main concepts regarding indigenous women participation within their communities: *Traditional Labors of indigenous women*, *Indigenous women participation*, and finally, *communitarian feminism: a new path to social participation*.

### *Traditional Labors of Indigenous Women*

The traditional practices of some Colombian indigenous women are linked to their roles as givers of life and caretakers of their communities; the above, according to Lozano Bustos y Etter (2012, p. 23). In the same sense, the National Organization of Indigenous People from Colombian Amazon (OPIAC for its acronym in Spanish, 2021), manifests that women are in charge of domestic labors and of protecting their families' traditions and culture. For example, in the Amazonian communities, women are responsible for the Chagras, also known as traditional crops, and the community stoves among others.

Additionally, Indigenous women are in charge of some inherited wisdom tasks related to the protection of communities and the preservation of their culture. Indeed, female wisdom is related to the well-being of their people's body and spirit, which is used by the women at the service of their communities (Lozano Bustos y Etter, 2012). Hence, some women are regarded as counselors, since they are consulted when a person from the community needs to decide about an important aspect.

At the same time, knitting and manufacturing utensils, bags, clothing and crafts are related to women's traditional social practices, which are used for protection of bodies or as spiritual support. Women in the ONIC assert that their knitting helps them protect their peoples, and their role is fundamental in the resistance of their communities (Lozano Bustos y Etter, 2012). As such, Knitting and embroidery are seen as techniques of ancestry, acknowledgement and reconciliation; they reflect the sense of collectivity, since each piece is unique and constructed from a deep understanding of life (ONIC, 2017).

Finally, more than working at home or doing crafts, the indigenous women participate actively in other functions such as animal farming and manufacturing of handmade products. Additionally, they do their housekeeping and take care of their children and family, which in most cases take longer hours than any legally recognized job (Tiburcio, 2009).

### *Indigenous Women Participation*

Social participation of native peoples and their communities in Latin America have opened spaces for indigenous women to be heard by governments and international organizations. This, aiming at the expansion of their citizenship and participation based on cultural pluralism (Del Popolo & Ribotta, 2011); thus, women have more opportunities to express their feelings and wisdom regarding the development of their peoples and countries.

Accordingly, women's reflexive spirit helps them to fight for the rights of their communities and their own, valuing and representing their complementarity, respect to the territory, harmony and balance principles. These actions help indigenous women in the country to become active social actors and permanent nurturers of life (ONIC, 2017).

Women have also had the opportunity to share their wisdom in different social spaces that range from their own family household, to community meetings that seek to promote women's resistance, autonomy and rights. In accordance with this, Amazonian indigenous women have started a fight in favor of their rights, specifically in terms of education for leadership and government; expressing their voices from their Malokas, Chagras and the jungle itself (OPIAC, 2021).

In fact, several indigenous women across the country have generated alliances to work collectively in order to strengthen their participation and contributions to the development of their communities, positioning themselves as communitarian leaders in order to mobilize their discourses and needs to reinforce their figure (Garcés, 2018). These efforts become more relevant in the current situation the country is experiencing, when collectivity and participation are fundamental tools to create organizations such as the Counsellor For Women, Family And Generation, which is derived from the ONIC and attempts to establish women and families' participation as active agents of the global agenda surrounding indigenous organizations and protection of indigenous women's rights nationally and internationally (ONIC, 2016; 2019).

All in all, indigenous women participation entails women's long time struggle to be heard and accounted for. They have characterized their need for participation as a way to express their concerns about the protection of their rights, and also to voice their attempts to care for their territory and their people's ancestral, social and cultural permanence.

## *Communitarian Feminism: A New Path to Social Participation*

For indigenous communities, Leadership is not understood as an individual process, in fact, it is conceived as an attitude of collective organization where exclusion is avoided. Thus, the purpose of leadership in native communities is to fight for their rights to human dignity, identity, culture, education, language use, etc. In the case of female leadership, women such as Dolores Cacuangó and Tránsito Amaguaña fostered political participation and leadership of indigenous women in their communities to fight for their individual and collective rights as citizens (Guala, 2010). These efforts have led to the construction of new southern epistemological positions; thus, contributing to the ecology of knowledge (De Sousa Santos, 2010) in order to recognize the multiplicity of being and knowledge in pluricultural contexts.

From this, communitarian feminism emerges as a political proposal. In the words of Guzmán Arroyo (2019) this new approach to leadership goes beyond the fight for territory; instead, it seeks to fight in the territory of words, which bases discourse in an alternate logic different from the one established by the European-centered model. Indeed, understanding this concept goes beyond the fight between men and women or between constructs created by the western feminism, it supports the articulation of diverse wisdoms of women inhabitant of Abya Yala. As such, communitarian feminism differs from western feminism in the sense that it stops reducing patriarchy as the mere relation of men towards women, since, by doing so, western feminism becomes functional to patriarchal perspectives.

Accordingly, Paredes (2014) states that communitarian feminism provokes and challenges semantically the western perspectives of feminism, since it is seen as a living episteme, which responds to the demands of the current society; when thinking processes fail to do so, they die out. Said understanding of the concept, permits to comprehend the role of women as key actors inside a historical scheme that has oppressed them even before the colonial process, and how, facing current active political participation, they can highlight the ways of resistance of their predecessors (Paredes, 2006). As a result, thanks to this other vision of feminism, indigenous women are looking for opportunities to intervene in decision-making processes of their communities, representing their current and traditional labors as well as their cosmovision.

## Research Design

The present study attempts to listen, reflect and understand holistically some female indigenous Colombian voices about their considerations towards their traditional practices and their social participation. According to the above, the current study is framed under the qualitative approach, because it attempts to describe and understand a social phenomenon (Hernández Sampieri et



al., 2014). In order to do so, the qualitative approach poses a series of characteristics described by Creswell (2014), which enable researchers to characterize social phenomena as follows: *a) Participants' meanings*: instead of focusing on the researchers' perspectives, it focuses on the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue. *b) Reflexivity*: researchers are expected to reflect upon their backgrounds, beliefs and other aspects that may influence the way they interpret the data collected. *c) Holistic account*: multiple perspectives are involved in the analysis and interpretation process, in order to present a larger picture of the addressed issue.

Since our purpose was to observe, understand and articulate the information gathered by the participants of our research, and then contrast it with theory, we decided to follow a basic qualitative study design. This type of study attempts to make sense of people's experiences, it focuses on meaning, understanding and processes rather than on a large number of participants and generalizations, which allows us to analyze our data inductively to address the question we posed at the beginning of the process and then present it through categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

## *Context and Population*

Given the nature of the study, being qualitative and focused not on generalities but on the insights and experiences of a specific group of people, we decided to work with a purposeful sample. In the words of Merriam and Tisdell (2015): "purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). Accordingly, the participants were a group of Sikuani indigenous women who are part of a reservation, located in Puerto Gaitán, Meta (Colombia). All of them have been interested in promoting their culture and women participation. In order to have a diverse register of voices, the information was selected from one woman older than 50 years old, and the others between 25 and 40 years old. The participants are voluntary, which means that they were interested in the topic, and thus willing to share their wisdom with us. Their occupations were different: one of them was a teacher, another a communitarian mother, the other one a women's coordinator, who arranges women's proposals to participate in social projects, but all of them coincided in being in charge of their household. Evidently, all of them are Sikuani, so they have always lived in the territory, they speak the language and deeply know their own culture.



## *Ethical Considerations*

In order to be allowed to carry out the research study, we presented the proposal to the reservation's governor, who gave us permission to address the women in order for them to decide whether or not they were willing to participate. As the process moved on and the women expressed interest in dialoguing with us, they were informed of all the components of the research and signed a consent form for us to be able to use the data collected through the chosen instruments. Once the women and the reservation's governor authorized the women's participation, we presented our proposal to the Ethics committee of the university that funds the research in order for them to verify the processes and allow us to carry out the study.

## *Instruments for Data Collection*

We implemented individual and group semi structured interviews, and field notes to collect the necessary data. Semi structured interviews are based on the researchers' experiences so that as the interview develops more questions emerge based on the interviewee's responses, and the session becomes an informed dialogue. Accordingly, questions must be open to change depending on the development of the activity (Vargas-Jiménez, 2012). Field notes are usually written descriptions of phenomena in situ (Mayan, 2001). By means of them, the process of triangulation of data and deep analysis was possible.

## *Data Analysis Procedures*

In order to analyze the collected data, we proceeded to examine the participants' interventions through triangulation, as a way of contrasting and comparing two or more sources of data: "by drawing on other types and sources of data, observers also gain a deeper and clearer understanding of the setting and people being studied" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 94). For the specific case of this study, we triangulated the interviews carried out with the participants, our field notes and pre-existing theory, in order to find codes and categories related to women's tasks and involvement in their territories. Through this procedure, we managed to group and organize the information gathered in order to understand the data collected from a broader perspective.

Table 1 presents the way the information was codified by instrument, session, and participant. Each one with its corresponding convention, for example: group interview = GIN, Number of the session = # and Participant 1 = P1. This process guaranteed the privacy of the data provided by the indigenous women.

**Table 1**

*Coding of information*

| Instrument                  | Number of the session         | Participant                  | Example |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|---------|
| Individual Interviews = IIN | 1,2                           | Participant 1- 3: P1, P2, P3 | IIN1P1  |
| Groups interview: GIN       | 1-2                           | Participant 1- 3: P1, P2, P3 | GIN2P2  |
| Field notes: FN             | Visit 1-5: V1, V2, V3, V4, V5 | Researcher 1,2: R1, R2       | FNV3R2  |

As a result, through the triangulation and grounded theory procedures, we were able to grasp the most relevant information concerning our participants' insights regarding their participation in their territory, from which three categories emerged.

## Findings and discussion

Once the analysis procedures were completed, there were different issues identified concerning our participants' common practices, which represent their contributions inside their communities. In order to present the above, this section portrays a discussion regarding the practices of our participants in their own words, in relation with the current information found in different theory and studies about the topic. Based on the triangulation of data consisting of verifying and comparing information obtained in different moments with the instruments (Benavides y Gómez, 2005), we were able to analyze and interpret the data from three different perspectives: first, there are long-established activities developed by the indigenous women, that is to say, activities learned for generations without being mediated by the official practices that the dominant institutions establish; second, the participants' insights regarding education particularly for women in their territories; and finally, their social participation and attempts to lead their communities for the sake of their well-living.

### *Ancestral Practices*

These activities are the ones women learn from their grandmothers and that form the specific knowledge that constitutes part of their identity and is built around their everyday life. It is well known that women's activities have been seen from the point of *housekeeping* -as a patriarchal model-, but according to the obtained information, beyond this idea, the participants consider this activity an important space of familiar and social construction. As such, the Sikuaní women highlighted three common fields of actions linked with their hereditary knowledge: *Housekeeping*, *counseling* and *Craft Working*.

**Housekeeping.** This activity is part of the everyday life of indigenous women. The idea of this category is to give a general understanding of our participants' quotidian activities in benefit of their communities, as expressed by them. Thus, house working can be related to a practice that not only refers to taking care of the house, but it also involves important family processes; women affirm they take care of the house, prepare the food for the whole family (Casabe, Mañoco, Yare, etc.), but such a process is not a mere act of mixing ingredients in a bowl, it actually entails a complex, dynamic ritual in which every action must be carefully and slowly imbued with the woman's energy and good thoughts. Therefore, as the seeds are planted and cared for, and as they are collected and cooked keeping the nutrients coming from the land, a thoughtful spiritual process must be followed. In the words of a participant: "For example, people who are housewives, we have all the jobs... I have to have a specific day to prepare Casabe and Mañoco..." (IIN1P2)

In a short description of a field note, it is evidenced that before starting the process of cooking, there exists a prior complex logistic action beginning with the sow of the Conuco (Crop), the collection and finally the cooking of foods. The following idea was manifested in an excerpt of a researcher: "It is a patient action that reflects the importance of women giving strong support to all the family" (FNV5R2). These ideas are supported when, in the middle of a conversation with the indigenous women, one of them comments: "Our activities have not changed because we continue plowing the savannah and working on it to get our foods". (GIN1P1)

Clearly, these traditions have suffered different changes as it happens in any culture as time goes by. Even when there are some specific activities done by women as part of their traditions, the youngest girls divide their practices in traditional activities (helping their families) and new activities (going to school). This is evident when a participant mentions: "Nowadays it is another time, our girls do not have enough time (to develop traditional activities). They study. Even when sometimes they help their grandparents with the banana trees" (GIN1P2)

According to the above, it can be inferred that the previous data coincide in the idea that housework is a mostly assigned function to women. The researchers confirmed this idea when a participant affirmed: The mother is the one who stays at home cleaning the house (IIN2P3). Related to this, another participant mentions: I have to be in the kitchen, look! in the bedrooms organizing everything... (IIN2P1). These ideas are completely linked with the ones exposed by OPIAC (2014b), when mentioning that women are focused on domestic activities, which allow them to protect their families. Hence, all these conceptions perfunctorily represent the complex dimensions in which indigenous women perform daily.

These activities are also evidenced in the field notes, which describe indigenous women's life, because "after the Sikuani women wake up -between 4:30 or 5:00 am-, they begin the day making coffee for the members of the family. Afterwards, they start sweeping the kitchen and the surroundings to continue preparing food before the kids go to school and the husband goes to work; the rest of the day, they are always doing things related to the house keeping" (FNV4R1).

Clearly, the previous activities can be interpreted as imposed on women, but from their own perspective, they are seen as a way of participating and taking care of the culture and values of their populations and as a way of being actively involved in their communities; thus, positioning themselves socially.

**Counseling.** An important function of the indigenous women is the ability to act as advisors, which allows them to transmit values and fundamental issues of their culture for both indigenous women and men. As Hughes (2004) exposes:

The richness of their Peoples has its origins in the transmission of values through community education, in which women have played a central role as midwives, counselors and spiritual guides, allowing the transmission of their traditional values and teachings, which are crucial to the development of health models that are part of keeping with their cultures and traditions. (p. 23)

Evidently, for indigenous populations, the contributions of female thinking and practices enrich their identity and strengthen who they are. In most cases, when men are absent, women assume the double role (Male and female) in order for their families to go about their lives. When discussing this issue with a participant, she mentions:

The instruction is that when the husband is not at home, women are the head of the household ... then, we decide: you have to do this, we are going to do this over here ... Thus, mothers or grandmothers are in charge of sitting down and start giving advice: "Look son! you must not do this, do not steal, do not hang out with bad people, do not use drugs. And for women, the advice goes to take care of herself and to avoid relationships with husbands or engaged men. (GIN2P3)

The previous excerpt reflects Nemogá's words (2011), who considers that indigenous women... are mothers, grandmothers and counselors who transmit part of our complementary knowledge with the male forces. Doubtlessly, indigenous women's participation inside their territories is fundamental, since it is seen as a pillar in the family's processes for the sake of "well-living". When asking them about whether or not women's advice is important for their sons, the participants answered YES in unison, which really represents their importance in the construction of their communities' cultural patterns.

In a wider point of view, it is relevant to mention the creation of organizations such as the Counsellor for Women, Family and Generation, which not only advises women about their forms of acting and participating, but also, they guide the future generations determining routes for the

well-living of young people in their populations. This organization aims at providing spaces for women to participate in different instances and allowing a wider visibility of their way of thinking and of perceiving the world.

As a conclusion, women have been in charge of giving advice that allows the family and the community to have a certain horizon in terms of values, identity and culture, which should not be invisible. For this reason, from their houses to national level counselors, women acquire forms of recognition that give their labors meaning.

**Craft Working.** Crafts can be considered as a creative building process, done with a specific material, to obtain a certain profit; however, this turns out to be a reductionist view of this complex task. Having said that, the artisanal practices are the reflection of a symbiotic relationship, since it tangles knowledge, dreams, and senses that semiotically cannot be ignored when valuing these kinds of productions.

In view of this information, Mordo (2002) argues that the definition of the role of an artisan should be more than that of a “doer”; it should be recognized as a that of a “Creator”, since knitting is the way to tell stories, to represent feelings and conceptions of the world (cosmovisions). Based on this, an indigenous woman who is part of the study affirms that:

*For example, we were taught to create ceramic and clay objects...the grandmothers taught her daughters and so on. Then, they would know how to elaborate a “Tinaja, Budare” and recreate species of nature: Doves, or whatever thing they would see and that they can do by weaving. (IIN3P2).*

To sum up, craft workers are considered creators because more than “doing a craft”, through their work, they represent their visions of the world in a complex symbolic system different from the verbal ones.

In general, the participants of this study expressed their insights regarding their ancestral practices highlighting three actions: Housekeeping, Counseling and Craft working. Although housekeeping can be seen as an oppressive action from the western point of view, for the participants, this is the opportunity to take care of their family and community. Moreover, counseling is the way indigenous women promote values to the younger generations and it also becomes the form to preserve their culture. Finally, craft working becomes a social semiotic practice that allows women to recreate their knowledge in a constant process of interaction among different symbols; thus deserving the title of creators.

## *The Paradox of Education for Indigenous Women*

Nowadays, education has become a universal need for empowerment worldwide, particularly for vulnerable populations. In the case of Sikuani indigenous women, they see education as a key factor when it comes to being able to participate actively in their communities; despite this, their access to training and education is still limited. Through our different conversations, we could see how, from their perspective, even though education gives them job opportunities that are only available for trained people, the reduced educational opportunities are a big concern for them. In this sense, more and more women have started to see the importance of educating themselves in several labors to work actively in different areas. As such, this section addresses the participants' opinions first as a tool to empower themselves and work, and second as a concerning limitation for them to get jobs in and outside the community.

Thanks to the data collected, we can infer that the participants perceive a significant change regarding their position inside their communities. Accordingly, they emphasize the differences that they have observed in terms of their job opportunities nowadays, given the training and education opportunities offered to them; as opposed to previous times, when their main role was staying at home and taking care of their family. In the following excerpt we can observe how one of them express these perceptions:

*Women nowadays study... girls also study ... why? Because there are so many training and workshops, people come and explain and the girls now understand... They now finish high school, unlike before. The girls now understand they need to study first. Some years ago, 12, 13-year-old girls got married and got pregnant, now this doesn't happen so often because their mind is not closed anymore, now they know that studying comes first and the husband comes second. (IIN2P1)*

According to the above, the researchers deduct that as women started to have access to more education, they saw it as a tool to be part of the labor forces and provide for their families. It is through education that they see the possibility to continue expanding and multiplying their ancestral knowledge, while, at the same time they have the opportunity to access the western world; the field notes confirm this, since “the way these women see education is quite interesting, since they see it as a way to re-signify their ancestral practices, but also opening up to the western world in order for them to continue existing” (FNV1R2). About this, Santamaria (2015) establishes the fact that for Colombian indigenous women, education becomes one of the most important aspects to address, since it is through education that they can generate more participation and leadership inside their communities. Thanks to this, female indigenous women have achieved higher levels of social participation, enabling circulation of knowledge and invigorating themselves as educators in their communities. Keeping this in mind, it comes as no surprise the fact that Sikuani indigenous women conceive education as the paramount condition to get a job even inside their own communities. In the following lines, we can see how they have understood the necessity to educate themselves in order to access economic opportunities:



As I said before, sometimes we do not get opportunities because we are not formed, nowadays if we are not trained, we don't have job opportunities. We have to study to defend ourselves, right? to respond and to know the rights. (IIN1P2)

The previous excerpt allows us to evidence that Sikuni women consider they need education for them to have access to different jobs, and also the fact that they need more opportunities to educate themselves: “we could perceive women’s frustration when we talked about education. It is a matter of getting a job, and being more independent economically” (FNV3R1); they express their concerns about not being able to study, this consequently deprives them from getting jobs and helping their families, which goes hand in hand with Radcliffe (2014), who states that indigenous women experience greater disadvantages when it comes to education because of factors such as their reduced access to education and labor forces, as well as the discrimination they experience among other aspects. The following excerpts present the participants’ perceptions in relation to their access to education, and how this shapes and reduces their job opportunities.

Before, they told us that we were favorable for work, and gave us some diplomas, and now it is not the same, because it turns out that they need women who graduated from high school even if they don't have the knowledge we do. (GIN3P3)

From the previous excerpt, we can infer that for these women, education has become a problematic issue, since it has become another way to feel discriminated against and left behind. According to the above, we can see that the participant tells us about the lack of support and help in order to obtain education and training in different areas, which brings as a consequence the impossibility for them to access job opportunities, even when they have empirical knowledge to develop it. This goes hand in hand with one of our field notes, where we say:

There are many girls and women in the community who are eager to learn and work. However, they are not given any jobs because they do not have proper training, but no one comes and trains them so they can work. (FNV2R1)

Indeed, even though Sikuni women know and understand the need to educate themselves, they lack opportunities to do so; which is why, according to Santamaria (2015), the circulation of knowledge has become a very important aspect to work on inside several communities from Amazonia, aiming at developing strategies for women to access education that allows them to become political leaders and educators inside the community, fostering and expanding education and leadership for all indigenous women locally and regionally.

All in all, thanks to the data collected, we could observe how Sikuni indigenous women feel about education. Despite their awareness about education giving them more opportunities in order to belong to the labor forces of their communities, the lack of opportunities to access it are reduced, which in consequence, keeps them from broadening their skills. Thus, education paradoxically becomes both their biggest tool and their biggest obstacle to become part of the social development of their communities.



## *Social Participation and Female Leadership*

Based on the information shared by the participants, social participation is relevant for them, depending on the effect it has on the well-being of their community. Accordingly, during the last years they have started to look for different ways to act in different social, political and economic projects, which seek to benefit their people. In the following lines, we present the data that emerged from the analysis, where the women express their needs and concerns regarding their participation in their communities.

Although indigenous women play a very important part in the development of their communities, they struggle to participate actively when it comes to making decisions or giving opinions about the future of their people. For some time now, they have been looking for equity in terms of participation, which in consequence has brought to the table their need to forge leadership among them. One of the most visible ways of leadership that indigenous women have generated is communitarian feminism, which in the words of Paredes (2015), seeks to recover indigenous women's ancestral fight to build the proposal of a community where women are half of everything in pursuit of their people's well-living. Accordingly, Sikuani women enunciate their effort to be more active participants of their community's decision-making processes. One of the most remarkable aspects of their efforts to become leaders is the need to always look for the wellbeing not only of themselves, but also of all their people.

P2: we want to propose a female candidate for governor of the reservation.

R1: a female candidate?

P3: Yeah, we are thinking about who it could be.

P1: But we need a person that is prepared, that does not only benefit their family, but who works for the sake of the whole community. (GIN2P1,2,3)

In regard to the excerpt above, we can observe how the participants want to be more active and engage more women in the processes of the community. We can also observe how their desire to participate aims at fostering their community's well-living, bringing everyone to participate and benefit from their leadership. Indeed, they see the need to develop initiatives that guarantee economical management to support the collective interests of the whole instead of individual or single families' needs. In order to achieve this, women are constantly proposing and executing development projects focused on the improvement of the life quality of their peoples (Meentzen, 2001), even though they struggle to be heard and considered. In the following excerpts we can see how, despite trying always to propose new projects and looking for ways to participate more actively in their community, they have not yet managed to be heard and to have some female representation in government or project instances:

In our reservation we can give our opinion, we can say what we need, or what needs to be fixed, which is why the secretaries need to know how to write, to take notes in order to keep in mind all of the opinions and ideas. We cannot be divided, for us as indigenous, politics is not “he voted for me now I have to vote for him”, that is why we promoted secret vote, to prevent conflict. A woman has not been governor, one of my aunts was the substitute governor because she lost for one vote. We are still looking for a woman that represents us and who is a good candidate for governor. (IIN3P2)

Evidently, the words of our participants reflect the efforts they and many other women have made in order to lead projects that benefit their community, but they also feel that they are not seen as leaders by the men and are excluded and in charge of household tasks. This feeling is very common in women from indigenous communities across the continent; Meentzen (2001) asserts that inside indigenous communities, many women suffer from exclusion and reclusion. They are ascribed as “cultural nurturers” and are responsible for the cultural and physical survival of the indigenous societies, which in consequence limits their opportunities and options for personal growth. This is also reflected in the field notes:

Women want to do other stuff related to food sovereignty and so many other projects to carry out in their territory, but they feel they can't do much because they don't have money, and money is “the boss” (in their own words). (FNV3R2)

When the interviewer asks one participant about her involvement in a project she answers: “Since last year we have been fighting to obtain it, but we just got it. Several women are working on it, to show the men we can do it, we can work”. (IIN1P1)

As it can be inferred, indigenous women struggle constantly in order to be seen as leaders in their communities and consider that their efforts are most of the time underappreciated, which is why they always look for ways to demonstrate their capabilities to work and be economically participative. In Paredes' (2015) words:

Nowadays, political participation is not enough for us women. Now, we want to decide and participate in equal conditions when it comes to the management of the country's destinies. These proposals are founded on the workshops carried out in different communities, where women have begun to strengthen our abilities to decide and project the society we want, translating dreams into public policies we call “de-patriarchization” for the well-living. (p. 109)

Indeed, it has been a constant struggle for indigenous women to find their voice and to become visible subjects of their communities, in order to give their opinions and propose projects.

To sum up, Sikuani women still have a long road to walk in order for them to be able to participate more actively in the development of projects that benefit their communities. Thanks to the data collected, we could evidence that they see these projects and their participation as a way to secure their community's well-living, leaving aside individual benefits. Despite this, they still feel they need more visibility and support from their community in order to carry out their ideas, to show their worth and to be more taken into consideration politically and economically for the sake of their people's food sovereignty and well-living.

## Conclusions

Even when women assume traditional labors such as housekeeping, there are actions like preparing food that have a strong meaning when talking about looking over the health of the family members. Therefore, the action that in the western knowledge is known as cooking, for the Sikuani women, is a ritual to provide their relatives with the energy from their land and their own. Another traditional labor they have is being advisors, which let them share their ancestral knowledge and values. Finally, knitting becomes a process of “Creation” that represents the reconstruction of their cosmovision.

The participants’ insights regarding education allowed us to understand their evident need to access it. They expressed the need for education as a relevant factor to indigenous women in general, since it is a way to re-signify their ancestral practices and convey the western world. However, the lack of opportunities to train and study is a big concern for them, since only women who study and are able to train themselves are the ones who get a job. This situation is worrying for them; during the last years, most girls and adolescents have started to see the need to study, but as time passes, the few opportunities they have to educate themselves become obsolete to keep up with the demands of the ever-changing western world. Accordingly, they feel that even though education should help them boost their productivity, it denies them opportunities that their mere empiric knowledge could give them.

As for social participation and female leadership in their territory, the participants of this study consider that they still have a long road to go, since the spaces for them to get involved in social and political processes are reduced. About this, they consider that even though their community is well organized, they still need to look for spaces to be part of decision making practices, since they still struggle and feel the need to prove themselves as leaders before the men of their territory. Despite these issues, they consider their participation relevant since it is not a matter of their individual well-being and that of their families, but about their whole people’s well-living.

Evidently, whether it is through traditional tasks or looking for tools in the western world, Sikuani women are always finding ways to contribute to the growth and well-living of their people. Their self-imposed responsibility to do so starts in their homes by taking care of their families: feeding them, advising them, knitting, etc. but it does not end there, their dreams and aspirations aim towards a better education and possibilities to participate actively in the development of their communities.

## Limitations and Further Research Questions

The most relevant limitation when it came to collecting data, was the mobility between the university and the community, given the road restrictions between Bogotá and Puerto Gaitán, Meta, since the road was closed several months because of landslides that made it dangerous for us or the women to travel. Another limitation we found, was that there were not too many women who were recognized as leaders by themselves or by the community, which consequently, led us to enquire and ask around the inhabitants of the reservation to find the participants of our study. Given the findings of our research and this last limitation, we would like to pose the following question for further research: Are Sikuani women working on some strategies to foster their education and social and political leadership? If so, what strategies are being implemented to foster indigenous women's leadership and education inside their territories?

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with any commercial institution or association.

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