

## **Dismantling Patriarchy:**

**Understanding Women's Struggle for Gender Equality Within  
Ecuador's Indigenous Movement**

## 1. Introduction and Background

The systematic exclusion of women from political, economic and social power permeates all societies to various degrees. Indigenous women are often subjected to multiple forms of discrimination due to race, class and gender, and the case of the multi-ethnic state of Ecuador is no exception. Research shows that limited political participation and influence over policies hinder indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women from participation in society on an equal basis with men (Fine-Dare, 2014; UN Women, 2014). Standing at the forefront of the struggle for indigenous rights in the last three decades, CONAIE and its regional affiliates - CONFENAIE, ECUARUNARI and CONAICE<sup>1</sup> – comprise Ecuador's principal indigenous movement. However, it has historically been male-dominated despite its many female members due to a strong patriarchal culture, constituting a barrier to women's participation in leadership and decision-making. Maintaining the complex balance between universal individual rights and collective rights poses another challenge in ethnic social movements, wherein gender issues are often considered Western ideas and therefore dismissed (Ranaboldo & Solana, 2008). Women are thereby facing a two-pronged dilemma while fighting discrimination and exclusion inside and outside of the movement.

Against this backdrop, CONAIE has embarked on a new path to achieve gender parity in its decision-making. In 2013, it launched a three-year strategy with the support of UN Women, aiming to empower women of various ethnic backgrounds and strengthen their local, regional and national leadership (UN Women, 2014). According to Katy Betancourt Machoa, leader of CONAIE's Women's Section, women within the movement are seeking to achieve justice for indigenous peoples by including their gender in the agenda setting. Consequently, efforts are made to encourage the movement towards applying the same vigour to the struggle for gender equality, as has been the case in the struggle for autonomy, the environment and the defence of indigenous territories against neoliberal development projects (Benitez, 2015).

The movement frames its demands within the Buen Vivir<sup>2</sup> paradigm, which informs Ecuador's alternative development model and prioritizes the well being of the collective. By adopting a holistic view of the world, this worldview outlines a way of co-existing with all living forms on Earth, with equality constituting one of the cornerstones (Bremer, 2012). Although research on Buen Vivir continues to expand, studies on aspects of gender within this context remain scarce (See e.g. Maclean, 2014; Fine-Dare, 2014). Simultaneously, gender issues continue to be neglected in many social justice movements (Bhattacharjya et al., 2014). Nevertheless, León (2010) argues that indigenous women's struggle for gender equality in Ecuador runs parallel to the struggle for Buen Vivir to enable profound structural changes in society. Greater equality within the movement will have an effect on society as a whole as women's demands can be raised to a higher degree as part of the movement's agenda. As the movement constitutes an influential political actor, as well as one of the key players in the quest for a society aligned with Buen Vivir, research on how the demands for gender equality are being formulated within Ecuador's indigenous movement is essential to increase our understandings of both of these struggles.

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<sup>1</sup> Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE); Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENAIE); Confederation of Peoples of Quichua Nationality of Ecuador (ECUARUNARI); Coordination of Indigenous and Black Organizations of the Ecuadorian Coast (CONAICE).

<sup>2</sup> An Andean indigenous life philosophy and political alternative, which challenges the prevailing development paradigm.

## **2. Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this multiple case study is two-fold. First, I seek to understand the dynamics behind women's struggle for gender equality in Ecuador by situating it within the context of the struggle for indigenous peoples' rights and Buen Vivir. Hence, I aim to explore interpretations of the struggle for gender equality among female members of CONAIE and its regional affiliates. Secondly, this study will also shed light on the implications of those narratives for the achievement of gender equality within the movement. In relation to the emergence of the gender strategy mentioned above, it is imperative to understand the movement's take on the issue, as it constitutes an influential advocate for the rights of a diverse array of peoples with different cultures, histories and from distinctive geographical locations. I aim to develop the understanding of the world vision that informs these women, thereby contributing to the limited research on how to achieve change in gender relations within ethnic social justice movements. Moreover, this project will add to the scarce literature on gender within the Buen Vivir paradigm. Research has yet to cover the increasing number of postcolonial feminist theories that have materialized in Latin America during the last decades. Can the emergence of these new forms of feminism that are rooted in a collective epistemology be discerned in the struggle of Ecuador's indigenous movement? Or are these women finding other ways of formulating their struggle for gender equality?

### **2.1 Research Questions**

With this context in mind, this study will address the following research questions:

- How is the struggle for gender equality understood and formulated within the principal indigenous movement of Ecuador, in the context of the struggle for indigenous peoples' and Afro-Ecuadorians' rights and Buen Vivir?
- In what ways are members of CONAIE and its regional affiliates working towards increased gender equality?
- What implications do the existing narratives have for the achievement of gender equality within the movement?

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the stories of the respondents, this study will adopt an inductive approach, thereby allowing me to study the material in depth without being affected by pre-determined theories. Instead of testing a theory, I will draw on a set of theories and concepts. This angle helps to identify themes or concepts, which can further facilitate development of theory during this study (Creswell, 2012: 65ff). First and foremost, an intersectional feminist lens will be needed to analyse and fully grasp the narratives of women in the diverse Ecuadorian context. Western feminist theories have failed in analysing the multiple forms of oppression experienced by indigenous women by presupposing one universal female category, believing women have similar needs and interests. In contrast, the emergence of postcolonial feminisms has contributed to our understanding of such subjection. I will primarily draw from Mohanty (2003), a leading scholar in the field of intersectional feminism, who in *Feminism without borders* calls for a decolonization of feminism that enables dismantling of capitalist values. In response to this critique, grassroots feminist theories have emerged in Latin America, not within the academic realm, but rather from

indigenous communities. Taking off from a rather alternative epistemology, these theories are rooted in collective worldviews similar to the discourse of Buen Vivir, as a response to centuries of oppression caused by colonialism, racism and patriarchy, as well as exploitation of territories and natural resources. One of the most prominent examples is communitarian feminism, which is rapidly gaining ground in Latin America. While grounding justice demands within the collective, patriarchy is here viewed as a system that encompasses all oppressive structures, such as colonialism and neoliberalism, oppressing not only humanity but also nature. Addressing these inequalities, communitarian feminism is viewed as a means to achieving Buen Vivir for women and men alike (Gargallo, 2014).

Moreover, I will lean on Kabeer's theorisation of gender justice and empowerment (2005) which outlines three interrelated dimensions - agency, resources and achievements – that make up one's capacity to make strategic life choices. Understanding empowerment as “the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability”, Kabeer (2005: 13) emphasises the conditions of choice and argues that other choices must exist and not be disguised by oppressive structures (See also Kabeer, 2012). To understand the connection between resistance and empowerment, I will draw on the capability approach of Amartya Sen (2001) who argues that enhancing human capabilities results in freedom, as well as social change. I will also draw on Bhattacharjya (2014) who argues that despite gender justice being on the agenda of many social movements, deep structures building on assumptions about women's role eventually determine what demands are prioritized.

#### **4. Methodology**

As I am seeking to explore the discourses on the struggle for gender equality, as well as the dynamics behind its mobilisation through the perceptions and lived experiences of women engaged in Ecuador's indigenous movement, stories are at the centre of this study. Thus, this project will adopt a narrative research approach to make meaning of the stories told. By interpreting gender inequality and the struggle for gender equality through the perspectives of the respondents and lifting their stories, this study will to some extent address the systematic exclusion of this marginalized group (Mikkelsen, 2005: 94). The narrative research design of this study considers the link between personal experience and cultural context, thereby also assisting in the analysis of the setting of Buen Vivir (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In addition, I believe that my background in political sciences, gender studies and international development and management can enable a deeper understanding of the topic at hand.

##### ***4.1 Research Strategy and Case Selection***

The research will be conducted through a multiple case study during a period of eight weeks, which will be limited to indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian female members of CONAIE and its regional affiliates. As mentioned above, the cases I have selected together make up the principal indigenous movement in Ecuador and thus allow for a representation of the movement's national and regional level. The data collection will take place in the capital, Quito, where the head offices of the federations are based. However, I will exercise flexibility and be open to opportunities to visit the Amazon and the Coast, if it appears that the vast majority of the member bases of CONFENAIE and CONAICE reside there, or that most

meetings are held in those regions. Prior to the field research, I will do a four-month internship with Latinamerikagrupperna<sup>3</sup> (LAG) in collaboration with its partner organisation CONAIE, thereby allowing me to establish valuable contacts and find suitable gatekeepers within the movement to mediate my access to the field. This experience will also allow me to become acquainted with and gain a profound insight into the fabric of society, cultures and peoples. My contact person, Mr. Rodolfo Magne, will be of great help as he works closely with CONAIE and has a profound knowledge after many years of experience working with social justice movements in Latin America. As Creswell (2014: 71) points out, in order to build trust as a researcher, it is crucial to be transparent about one's motives from the initial contact throughout the process. I will start with building a relation of trust with the leaders of the Women's sections in each of the federations. Seeing as I have an advanced level of Spanish, which will be further developed during my internship, no interpreter will be required during interviews with Spanish-speaking respondents. However, in cases where the respondent only speaks Quechua or another native language, a translator will be hired. I am aware that this will lead to some data inevitably getting lost in translation. Thus, it is crucial to continuously discuss concepts and themes with the interpreter to improve the authenticity of the empirical data. Another way is to conduct multiple interviews with the same persons, allowing me to get clarifications and additional data.

#### ***4.2 Field Methods***

To collect field data, I will use various participatory methods, as outlined by Mikkelsen (2005: 87ff). By using a combination of sources of data, information can be triangulated, thereby increasing the validity of the research (Creswell, 2012: 201). Data will primarily be collected through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. This structure will allow for in-depth information to be derived (Bryman, 2012: 491ff). I will conduct interviews with key informants, such as the leaders of the four organizations and their women's sections, to gain an overview of the movement's official take on gender equality. Likewise, interviews with female members will contribute to the understanding of their personal opinions and reflections. By complementing with interviews with UN Women representatives involved in supporting CONAIE's gender equality work, I wish to detect possible discrepancies in strategies. During this process, it is crucial to be conscious of power relations. My intention is to be reflexive during the entire research process, from the formulation of questions, through the carrying out of interviews, and lastly, the interpretation and presentation of the findings. As Sultana (2007: 375) argues, ethical research requires continuous attention to be paid to "[...] histories of colonialism, development, globalization and local realities, to avoid exploitative research or perpetuation of relations of domination and control." Thus, I will negotiate my positionality throughout the whole process, considering my background as a Swedish woman with Persian ancestry, holding educational and socioeconomic privileges. How can my position affect my understanding of the prevalent collective worldview within the field setting? How can my understanding of gender equality, being a feminist myself, influence the questions I ask and my interpretations of the answers? By being careful not to

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<sup>3</sup> In Latin America it is known as Solidaridad Suecia-América Latina (SAL).

speak for the respondents, but to allow them to formulate and express what gender equality means to them, I hope to overcome these dilemmas (Sprague, 2005: 121ff).

The interviews will be complemented with focus group interviews to understand group dynamics (Sprague, 2005), as well as secondary sources such as primary documents on gender strategies. All in all, I plan on conducting 15-20 interviews. Moreover, direct observation will be conducted through attending meetings and protests in order to understand the stories in their settings. As Mikkelsen (2005: 28ff) argues, participatory field methods like ranking and scoring provide tools to facilitate the understanding of key issues in development research, such as discrepancies in respondents' perceptions of the problem and uneven relationships. Using these methods in a "Possible Future Workshop", I seek to gain a deeper understanding of such perceptions as participants can draw on solutions to gender inequality. Through this, I also wish to discern common goals within groups of women, as well as possible power relations within those groups.

### ***4.3 Potential Challenges and Alternative Plans***

Despite being an oppositional force to the government, often criticizing policies and practices that contradict indigenous rights, the movement is accepted by the Correa administration as a key actor in the political arena. However, if this relationship would change to the extent that the research would be difficult to conduct, I could instead look into the struggle for gender equality within member organizations of La Vía Campesina. Seeing as it also is a partner organisation of LAG, working for indigenous and farmers' rights and having incorporated gender objectives, it would make up a viable alternative plan. Additionally, there is a small risk that my prior contact with CONAIE during my internship would cause an ethical concern as participants might see me as a representative of their support partner, LAG. Nevertheless, the relationship between these two organizations is based on mutual respect, where LAG supports CONAIE in their activities, rather than interfering with their methods. Therefore, I believe that this will not cause the participants to give me answers they believe LAG expects.

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### **Preliminary Budget Plan**

The following budget is calculated for the period x to x. The living expenses are calculated on the basis of half of the Swedish Tax Agency's subsistence allowance for living in Ecuador. As these calculations are estimates, rather than exact numbers, some room is also left for contingency.

| <b>Expenses</b>                                | <b>Amount in SEK</b> |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Travel To and From Stockholm - Quito           | 10 000               |
| Travel for MFS Preparation Course              | 1300                 |
| Vaccinations <sup>4</sup>                      | 0                    |
| Visa Cost                                      | 400                  |
| Estimated Living Cost                          | 12 200               |
| Travels Within Country                         | 1000                 |
| Interpreter (For Non-Spanish/English Speakers) | 1000                 |
| Insurance <sup>5</sup>                         | 0                    |
| Printing Thesis                                | 300                  |
| Contingency                                    | 800                  |
| <b>Total Expenses</b>                          | <b>27 000</b>        |

<sup>4</sup> I already fulfil the vaccination requirements for Ecuador.

<sup>5</sup> I will be insured through Kammarkollegiet via LUMID, Lund University.