



Gender roles in Colombian mountain areas

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Summary

This paper focuses on rural and indigenous women living in the Colombian highlands and their relationship with the environment, based on secondary research on the Andean culture, particularly the Inga nation culture and Tayrona descendants' nation culture. Although there has been in the past four decades a sharp decline in women's total fertility as well as a decrease in mortality rate, the size and structure of Colombian families remain the same. Women continue to take care of the cooking, washing, housekeeping and fetching water and fuel, and also birth, raising children, and maintaining family health.

Colombian women made significant gains in literacy in the 1990s, with an illiteracy rate of 4% and functional illiteracy of 8%, with the highest female illiteracy prevalent in the coastal areas and southern mountains. The barriers to women's participation in politics began eroding in 1954 with Colombian women gaining the right to vote. A 1998 quota requires 30% of senior executive and judicial positions to be reserved for women. In rural areas, women's organisations are involved in planning and consultative committees and extend to regional and national forums, but the implementation of policies has been affected by the sharpening of the armed conflict in which grassroots' communities resisting participation in the conflict are attacked.

There has been an increased participation of women in the economy over the past several decades (52% for urban women, 38% for rural women) with the employment of rural women at 36% in services, 27% in commerce, and 23% in agriculture. Women are hired as temporary workers in the labour-intensive task of weeding, harvesting, and threshing, while those with permanent jobs

work in agri-industries. Rural women also work their own plots and attend to their animals helped by their children. These are, however, regarded as domestic activities and do not count in government statistics and are not recognised as productive. The invisibility of rural women's participation also extends to activities such as fishing, mining, and handcrafting, as well as reproductive activities.

Most rural women are not covered by the Colombian social security system (health and retirement) because of their low involvement in stable, remunerative activities. Health care services in rural areas are deficient, particularly in remote regions. Recent surveys show that the mortality rate among rural women is a result of insufficient nourishment and low quality of life. Food security among Colombian peasants is increasingly harder, due to limited access and control, mainly of good land. Although both Colombian men and women inherit land, most rural landowners are men.

Rural poverty has been increasing since 1993, when the government opened its markets to agricultural commodity importation. In 1998, one-third of the 12 million rural populations was living in misery, the incidence of poverty being highest among women-headed households. The Colombian armed conflict has displaced about 1,500,000 rural people, mostly women and children. Women-headed households have increased due to the deaths of men and their enrollment in illegal armed groups. The conflict and the agricultural crisis have hit women hardest as they bear the greater burden of feeding their children and are also used as the spoils of war by groups in conflict.

The culture of the Andean group living in the highest areas of the Andean Mountains observes a conservative family structure based on patriarchal values. Women are in charge of child raising and carry out all the domestic activities, whereas men have economic control and make decisions. Women must remain virgins until marriage or risk being abandoned; unmarried mothers suffer social discrimination and frequently are bereft of the support of their child's father. They do not benefit from education, as they must become workers to provide incomes to feed their children.

Where small landholdings for subsistence foodstuff production is the norm for the peasantry, land tenure is important in determining women's active role in household plot activities and also in their participation in agricultural commodities' marketing. The sexual division of labour in agricultural production changes with the household unit losing access to its subsistence means. As Andean women are increasingly drawn into agricultural activities, they gain access to socialisation and recreation spaces traditionally reserved for men. Women may drink beer along with men in market places, but their participation in decision-making spaces remains limited.



Within the Inga nation, located 2,000 meters above sea level in the southern region of the Colombian Andean Mountains, women have an active participation in community decision-making positions. In fact, some women have been elected as *Gobernadoras de Cabildo*, the highest civil authority of the Inga nation. Traditionally, the Inga people live in houses surrounded by plots called *chagras*. Some Inga families still use their *chagras* to cultivate diverse products as it has been done traditionally, while others use it to cultivate a single crop and to raise livestock. The Inga women contribute to agricultural activities working in the *chagras* and taking care of domestic animals.

The Inga nation has preserved a medical tradition in which therapeutics are based on the use of plants. Hispanic medical principles and other indigenous medical knowledge have been incorporated into their medicine. They use plants from their own region as well as from other regions of Colombia, mainly from the Amazonian forest. Their shamans, called *Taitas*, are men with the knowledge of how to use the *Ayahuasca* plant. This is a hallucinogenic plant, which among the Ingas is called *Yagé*, and it is considered a sacred plant of power and knowledge.

Inga women are the traditional physicians of their community, specialised as midwives *tocadoras*, and *yerbateras*. Midwives assist women before, during, and after childbirth, using plants and their hands in their therapeutic assistance. The *tocadoras* or touchers see bone fractures and internal medicine (lesions of organs). They use their hands to heal. The *yerbateras* or grass-healers treat stomach illness, children's diseases, and reproductive disorders. They have a profound knowledge of medicinal plants and sometimes use bones or nails of animals as medicines.

Midwives and healers get their learning from other women, so any Inga woman can become a midwife and healer. Most of the women physicians are over 70 years of age and are not remunerated for their work. They live just as the other Inga women, working on the home plot, raising their children, and taking charge of domestic activities. Some Inga women produce woven articles as *sayos* or ponchos and *chumbes* or bands, traditional items produced for the community or sold to tourists.

Among the communities less influenced by Catholicism, household activities are equitably shared between men and women, whereas in the Catholic indigenous families, women are in charge of all the reproductive and domestic tasks. In addition, women act as midwives, whereas shamans, called *Mamos*, are men who have knowledge about the use of medicinal plants, although the wives of shamans have partial access to such knowledge. In addition to the traditional indigenous medicine, the nations of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta also have access to the Colombian health system.

Most of Colombia's high barren plains are located in the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta and in the southwest portion of the Andean mountains. Endowed with ecosystems rich in flora and fauna, such as the Andean Forest and the high barren plains, this has been declared a Biosphere World Reserve.

The ecosystem is under the threat of agricultural expansion. The lack of opportunities and land have made the colonists migrate from lowlands to highlands looking for uncultivated and unowned land. The colonists clear forest to carry out extensive livestock and mono-crop production, causing damage to biodiversity, fresh water, and soils, and harming the poor peasants and indigenous mountain people who depend on land, water, and forest for subsistence and income. Deforestation affects land productivity and forest degradation generates erosion and avalanches. The lack of fuelwood pushes women to purchase gas stoves and generally increases the dependence of indigenous and peasant women of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta on the market economy.

The unsustainable practices of the colonists, such as fires, non-native crop species, and inadequate use of agri-chemicals, have produced an adverse impact on the high barren plains' ecosystems and on its hydraulic potential. As a result, the fourth richest country in terms of hydropower resources worldwide is facing a scarcity of fresh water, affecting biodiversity, and vast areas of the Colombian Andean region with agricultural potential have been abandoned. Former small and medium peasant farmers have migrated to the cities; others have joined the armed groups in conflict, whereas other poor peasants are still cultivating exhausted soils and destroying natural resources. Rural poverty has driven some peasants of the southern Andean Mountains into cultivating illegal crops, particularly poppy crops, causing further deforestation and erosion. To eradicate these illegal crops, the Colombian government sprays chemical herbicides from airplanes, with an adverse impact on foodstuff crops, and human health.

The indigenous and mixed parentage inhabitants of the high plateau and of the high barren plains follow traditional values and depend on agriculture and livestock. Mostly made up of poor peasants and indigenous peoples confined to lands above 2,500 metres, their isolation has contributed to indigenous natural resource management. Some common characteristics among indigenous nations living in high mountains include the fact that territories are collective property; mountains are not only their habitat but also have a spiritual value. Nature is not at the service of human vanities, but human beings depend on nature and must protect it. Consequently, indigenous nations have traditionally observed respect for water sources and animals and have harmonised their agricultural activities with nature.

Within indigenous nations of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, nature is the mother of everything, and women represent the mother. In a culture that sees



conservation as a mission, both men and women share natural resource management. For example, they do not cultivate the land surrounding water sources and use rainwater to irrigate crops. Water for cooking and washing is provided from deep pools and streams and is stored in their households. Men bring it and women control its use.

This good practice of water resource management has its roots in their cosmogony. As an indigenous leader from the Kogui nation explains,

“Sea was the mother. Mother was river, lake, stream, and sea. Mother was not people, nor a thing. Mother was spirit of unborn; it was thinking and memory. That is why land is present in water sources, that is why it is forbidden to cultivate in their surroundings. We produce subsistence, we belong to land, we have to deliver in exchange for what it give us.”

But among the inhabitants of the high plateaus, traditional sustainable agricultural practices have almost disappeared, since many of them have adopted Green Revolution technologies and practices such as mono-crops, improper use of agri-chemicals, and forest clearing practices.

Women still contribute to biodiversity and sustainable use of natural resources by cultivating native medicinal plants along with food crops on their household plots, which contribute to flora biodiversity conservation. As gendered division of labour allocates women the responsibility to collect fuel and store fresh water for household activities, there is a growing concern among women that the water sources and forests are threatened. In fact, the main factors that threaten mountain natural resources are out of women’s control: mega-projects (petrol exploitations, dams, non-ecological tourism); industrial illegal crops (coca and poppy crops); and illegal armed group activity. In turn these contaminate soils and water sources as a result of oil pipelines explosions and push people to cultivate illegal crops which causes deforestation and erosion.

Although men and women are both sources of knowledge on sustainable resource management practices, women are practically not consulted by the environmental decision-making agents, even though there is a mandate regarding that from the Ministry of Environment. When women do contribute to natural resource planning, it is often at the local level. This limited participation in decision-making means that women’s knowledge and needs are often ignored in policies and plans that affect them.

Conclusion

Colombian mountain women contribute to the workforce reproduction, culture preservation, local community development, and to sustainable natural resource management. Due to rising poverty in highland areas,

women have increased their participation in agriculture and service activities and have turned traditional handicraft activities into a remunerative activity. Yet such changes have exacerbated women's work burden but not improved their position and condition within rural society or their political participation.

Rural women's contribution is not properly recognised, as most of their activities do not have monetary or commercial value. Within indigenous nations though, women's roles are better appreciated as they are linked to their cosmogonies and national survival as well as to aboriginal ancestral knowledge. Women of mixed parentage living in high plateau regions and high barren plains are limited by Andean cultural codes that place them in inequitable positions within their communities, particularly in terms of decision-making. Mountain women may have access to natural resources, but their control over them is limited due to cultural factors, government projects, the influence of illegal armed groups, and poverty.

Despite the loss of sustainable practices with regard to natural resources, Colombian mountain women have an important role to play in natural resource and biodiversity conservation. Unfortunately, this is neglected. Seven years after the Beijing Summit, the environmental commitments have not been implemented fully in Colombia, particularly the removal of obstacles to women's full and equal participation in sustainable development with equal access to and control over resources and the integration of rural women's traditional knowledge and practices into environmental management programmes.

