



**A FABRIC OF KNOWLEDGE,
VINDICATIONS, AND DREAMS**

THE FABRICS OF LIFE STORIES:

**PARTICIPATING AND LEADING
POLITICAL PROCESSES**



CREDITS:

∞ **General coordination:**

Teresa Zapeta, *FIMI Executive Director.*

∞ **Stories Project Coordination:**

Cecilia Ramírez Pérez, *Indigenous Women's Global Leadership School Coord.*

∞ **Senior Writer:**

Alma G. López Mejía

∞ **Interviews made by:**

Fresia Paineofil, Winnie Kodi, Rohani Inta Dewi and Elvi Cheruto.

∞ **Typographic correction:**

Javier Trejo Tabares

∞ **Cover illustration:**

Daniela Vanessa Herrera Castro

∞ **English translation by:**

Grupo Heca-Servicios Lingüísticos <https://grupohecatranslations.com/en/>

∞ **Layout by:**

Eloisa Washington

∞ **Technical collaboration:**

María de León Mazariegos

∞ **Copyright**

© **International Indigenous Women's Forum FIMI, 2020**

∞ **Reservation of rights**

The content of this publication may be reproduced without authorization but always providing the source of it and its use will be always for a non-commercial purpose.

This publication was funded by Tamal Pais. The contents and comments of this publication are the responsibility of FIMI, who has the authorization of the members and communities in the present document.

Comments to this publication can be submitted to the FIMI International Indigenous Women's Forum c.ramirez@FIMI.org

Address: Av. Horacio Urteaga 534-602, Jesús María (Lima 11), Perú.

Photography Credits:

Picture 1: ©FIMI. Altar ceremony opening activities. New York City, United States. p. 7.

Picture 2: ©FIMI. Exhibition of cultural pieces by GLSIW participants. New York City, United States. p. 11.

Picture 3: ©FIMI. Opening ceremony altar of the GLSIW Africa regional training program. City of Nairobi, Kenya. p. 14.

Picture 4: ©FIMI. Award of diplomas to women leaders participating in the Africa regional capacity building program. City of Nairobi, Kenya. p. 17.

Picture 5: ©FIMI. UUnited Nations entry, participants of the 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 19.

Picture 6: ©FIMI. Postcards presented to FIMI/FIMI by Arctic participants. New York City, United States. p. 20.

Picture 7: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by Dr. Myrna Cunningham. p. 22.

Picture 8: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by Dr. Myrna Cunningham. p. 23.

Picture 9: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by Dr. Myrna Cunningham. p. 25.

Picture 10: ©FIMI. Participants of the 4th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 26.

Picture 11: © FIMI. Participants from Kenya, during the GLSIW Africa regional capacity building program. City of Nairobi, Kenya. p. 29.

Picture 12: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Aeisatu Bouba. p. 30.

Picture 13: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Aeisatu Bouba. p. 32.

Picture 14: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Aeisatu Bouba. p. 33.

Picture 15: ©FIMI. Group activity during the GLSIW Africa regional training program. City of Nairobi, Kenya. p. 34.

Picture 16: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant, Esupat Ngulupa. p. 38.

Picture 17: ©FIMI. Exhibition of cultural pieces of the participants of the 6th edition GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 42.

Picture 18: ©FIMI. Exhibition of cultural pieces of the participants of the 6th edition GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 44.

Picture 19: ©FIMI. Exhibition of cultural pieces of the participants of the 6th edition GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 46.

Picture 20: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant, Ellacarin Blind. p. 47.

Picture 21: ©FIMI. During the seminars at Columbia University, participants of the 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 48.

Picture 22: ©FIMI. Group photo of the participants of the 5th edition of the GLSIW. Columbia University, New York, United States. p. 50.

Picture 23: ©FIMI. Participant Lisa Natividad, 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 52.

Picture 24: ©FIMI. During the activities of the 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 55.

Picture 25: ©FIMI. Closing ceremony, GLSIW Asia regional capacity building program. City of Gujarat, India. p. 58.

Picture 26: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Maribeth Bugtong. p. 61.

Picture 27: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Maribeth Bugtong. p. 62.

Picture 28: ©FIMI. Group of participants, GLSIW Asia regional capacity building program. City of Gujarat, India. p. 63.

Picture 29: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Rani Yan Yan. p. 65.

Picture 30: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Rani Yan Yan. p. 67.

Picture 31: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Rani Yan Yan. p. 69.

Picture 32: ©FIMI. During the opening of the GLSIW Asia regional capacity building program. Gujarat City, India. p. 70.

Picture 33: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Sreyniang Loek. p. 72.

Picture 34: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Sreyniang Loek. p. 75.

Picture 35: ©FIMI. Group activity, South American regional capacity building program of the GLSIW. Santiago City, Chile. p. 77.

Picture 36: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Ana Ceto Chávez. p. 78.

Picture 37: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Ana Ceto Chávez. p. 80.

Picture 38: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Ana Ceto Chávez. p. 81.

Picture 39: ©FIMI. Participation of Daniela Benítez during side event; 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 83.

Picture 40: ©FIMI. Participation of Daniela Benítez during side event; 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 84.

Picture 41: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Daniela Benitez. p. 85.

Picture 42: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Fresia Paineofil. p. 89.

Photography Credits:

Picture 43: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Fresia Paineñil. p. 92.

Picture 44: ©FIMI. During the delivery of diplomas to the participants of the regional capacity building program South America of the GLSIW. Santiago City, Chile. p. 93.

Picture 45: ©FIMI. During the delivery of diplomas to the participants of the regional capacity building program South America of the GLSIW. Santiago City, Chile. p. 94.

Picture 46: ©FIMI. During the delivery of diplomas to the participants of the regional capacity building program South America of the GLSIW. Santiago City, Chile. p. 96.

Picture 47: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Marbelina Oller. p. 98.

Picture 48: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Marbelina Oller. p. 99.

Picture 49: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Marbelina Oller. p. 100.

Picture 50: ©FIMI. Group activity during the GLSIW Mesoamerica regional capacity building program. Guatemala City, Guatemala. p. 101.

Picture 51: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Norma Sactic. p. 105.

Picture 52: ©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Norma Sactic. p. 106.

Picture 53: ©FIMI. Activity during the GLSIW Mesoamerica regional capacity building program. Guatemala City, Guatemala. p. 108.

Picture 54: ©FIMI. Delivery of diplomas, Mesoamerica regional capacity building program of the GLSIW. Guatemala City, Guatemala. p. 109.

Picture 55: ©FIMI. GLSIW coordinator, during the Africa regional capacity building program. City of Nairobi, Kenya. p. 114.

Picture 56: ©FIMI. Closing of face-to-face activities of the 6th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 115.

Picture 57: ©FIMI. Delivery of Diplomas, 2nd edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 116.

Picture 58: © FIMI. During the conclusion of seminars at Columbia University of the 6th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 117.

Picture 59: ©FIMI. During the group activities of the 6th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. Pág. 119.

Picture 60: ©FIMI. Participants heading to Columbia University, 5th edition of GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 121.

Picture 61: ©FIMI. During seminars, regional training program Africa. Nairobi City, Kenya. p. 122.

Picture 62: ©FIMI. Participant of the 6th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States. p. 123.

Picture 63: ©FIMI. Group activity during the GLSIW Africa regional capacity building program. City of Nairobi, Kenya. p. 124.



I. INDEX

| | |
|---|-----------|
| I. INDEX..... | 7 |
| 2. ACRONYMS..... | 11 |
| 3. PROLOGUE..... | 14 |
| 4. BACKGROUND..... | 17 |
| <i>Myrna Cunningham Kain.....</i> | 22 |
| A gathering of knowledge: the emergence of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women | 23 |
| Experiences, challenges, and dreams in building leadership for indigenous women at a global level | 26 |
| Main lessons | 28 |
| Life stories:..... | 29 |
| indigenous women leaders from Africa..... | 29 |
| <i>Aeisatu Bouba- Cameroon - Mbororo</i> | 30 |
| Leadership as a defense for life..... | 31 |
| Global Leadership School to strengthen the capacities of indigenous women. | 33 |
| Individual and collective dreams | 36 |
| <i>Esupat Ngulupa Laizar– Tanzania - Maasai</i> | 38 |
| Leadership for activism in favor of indigenous women | 39 |
| The Global Leadership School: a learning mechanism from and for indigenous women | 41 |
| Individual and collective dreams | 44 |
| Life stories: | 46 |
| indigenous women leaders from the Arctic and Pacific..... | 46 |
| <i>Ellacarin Blind–Sweden - Saami.....</i> | 47 |
| Leadership as an indigenous woman | 48 |
| Participation in the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women | 49 |
| Dreams of leadership..... | 51 |
| <i>Lisa Natividad–Guam - Chamoru</i> | 52 |
| Leadership as an instrument of resistance..... | 52 |
| Global Leadership School: a space for participation | 54 |
| Individual and collective dreams | 56 |
| Life stories: | 58 |
| indigenous women leaders from Asia | 58 |
| <i>Maribeth Bianco– Philippines – Igorot</i> | 59 |
| Leadership as a collective process | 60 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| Global Leadership School as a tool for the defense of the indigenous women’s rights | 61 |
| Individual and collective dreams | 63 |
| Rani Yan Yan– Bangladesh - Rakhine y Marma..... | 65 |
| Leadership as the indigenous women’s strength | 66 |
| Global Leadership School: a space for indigenous women’s networking | 68 |
| Individual and collective dreams | 70 |
| Sreyniang Loek– Cambodia - Bunong | 72 |
| Leadership as an indigenous woman | 72 |
| Participation in the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women | 73 |
| Individual and collective dreams | 75 |
| Life stories:..... | 77 |
| indigenous women leaders from Latin America | 77 |
| Ana Ceto Chávez– Guatemala – Maya Ixil..... | 78 |
| Leadership as a path towards peace and balance..... | 79 |
| The Leadership School: an opportunity to relearn | 81 |
| Dreams and challenges | 82 |
| Daniela Feliciano Benítez de Díaz– Paraguay - Nivaclé | 83 |
| Leadership to strengthen the self-esteem and knowledge of indigenous Nivaclé women | 85 |
| Global Leadership School for empowerment and resistance in the struggles of Nivaclé women | 86 |
| Challenges and dreams: Indigenous leadership development..... | 88 |
| Fresia Paola Paineñil Calfuqueo– Chile - Mapuche Lafkenche..... | 90 |
| Leadership woven from the living example | 91 |
| The Leadership School: a space for learning and knowledge..... | 93 |
| Individual and collective dreams for change | 95 |
| Marbelina Oller Campos– Panama - Guna | 98 |
| Leadership as a song of the soul for the defense of indigenous women’s rights | 99 |
| Global Leadership School for Advocacy | 102 |
| Challenges and dreams to continue accompanying new leaderships | 104 |
| Norma Isabel Sactic Suque– Guatemala - Maya Poqomam..... | 105 |
| Leadership as a strategy to promote the indigenous women’s movement..... | 107 |
| Global Leadership School: a training space for indigenous women in defense of their collective rights ... | |

| | |
|--|------------|
| | 110 |
| Challenges and dreams for indigenous women’s leadership in decision making | 112 |
| <i>Cecilia Ramírez Pérez–Mexico - Mixtec</i> | 114 |
| Being part of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women: an opportunity to learn and unlearn .. | 116 |
| 5. CONCLUSIONS..... | 119 |
| Identity and origin, determining factors in the being of women leaders | 120 |
| Decisive relevant events in the lives of those women leaders..... | 121 |
| Indigenous women’s leadership: a banner of struggle and defense for life and rights | 122 |
| Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women: a gathering of knowledge..... | 123 |
| Challenges and dreams: a new cycle in the development of leadership | 124 |
| 6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | 125 |



2. ACRONYMS

A

AMICAM: Alliance of Indigenous Women of Central America and Mexico

AMIP: Palinecas Indigenous Women's Association

AYNI: FIMI Indigenous Women's Fund

C

CEDAW: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CIPO: Indigenous Peoples Organization Cambodia

CIYA: Working Group of Indigenous Women Cambodia

CONAMUIP: National Coordinator of Indigenous Women of Panama

CONAVIGUA: National Coordination for the Widows of Guatemala

CONMAGAXI: National Coordinator of Maya, Garifuna and Xinkas Women

CSW: Commission on the Status of Women

D

DEMI: Office for the Defence of Indigenous Women

F

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

G

GLSIW: Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women

GIZ: German Cooperation Agency

I

IIFW: International Indigenous Women's Forum

L

LOOCIP: Longido-Community-Integrated-Program

M

MOLOJ: Political Association of Mayan Women

MUIXIL: Association of Suffering Women of the Ixil Area

O

ODS: Sustainable Development Goals

OAS: Office of the General Secretariat of the Organization of American States

P

PAWANKA: The Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Learning Fund

S

SFS: Slow Food Sápmi

U

UN: United Nations Organization

UN WOMEN: The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

UJIP: Indigenous Youth of Paraguay



3. PROLOGUE

Indigenous women are writing their own history.

These four inspiring books published by the International Indigenous Women's Forum describe the trajectory of extraordinary Indigenous women throughout the world. The 43 stories are about how they built their strength, vision, organization and advocacy to become defenders of their peoples, lands and cultures and weavers of a more just and peaceful future.

As is evident from the life stories we read in these books, Indigenous women do not see themselves as passive spectators or victims. In numerous instances, Indigenous women have bravely taken up the roles of mediators and peace builders, defenders of their lands, of the environment, of their self-determination. They have been promoters, creators and teachers of their cultures. They have been defenders of individual and collective human rights. Indigenous women have sought to address these issues at the local, national and international levels. At the United Nations, they have been advocates and leaders since the very first year of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, in 1982 in Geneva. Indigenous women were active participants and major contributors during the more than two decades of negotiations regarding the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by the General Assembly in 2007. They were major contributors at the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in 2014. Through their advocacy they have impacted the work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the follow up processes of the Beijing Global Conference on Women. Indigenous women are now clearly among the international actors that count. Their leadership is organic to the Indigenous Peoples movement, informed by it and informing it.

It is no surprise that a unique Indigenous women's organization, FIMI-the International Indigenous Women's Forum, sprang out of such a strong movement. As an umbrella organization of Indigenous women from around the world, FIMI has reached a level of visibility and respect that few enjoy. In its 2020 Global Study on the Situation of Indigenous Women and Girls FIMI also tells the story of how the Indigenous women's movements, inspired by the Indigenous women's struggles at local and national level, worked over the years to place their issues on the international agenda, in order to strengthen respect, galvanize action and achieve implementation of collective and individual rights.

The wise leadership and input of Indigenous women led to the realization that a space had to be created for reaffirming that empowerment and leadership can be acquired through a process of participation, capacity building, and organizational strengthening; through unlearning, knowledge sharing and learning. This gave birth, in 2013, to FIMI's training project, the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women (IWGLS, for its acronym in Spanish), and specifically, the International Program on Human Rights and Advocacy Strategies. The Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University had the honor to accompany the process from the beginning and to host Indigenous women leaders for an annual seminar.

The life trajectories of women described in these books demonstrate the strength, depth and validity of a strategic program such as the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women. The bonds, knowledge sharing, mutual encouragement and inspiration participants experience are unparalleled, so that Indigenous women can continue their multifaceted struggles with more vigor and determination.

The publication of these books is an occasion to pay tribute to all the Indigenous women, protagonists and survivors of these struggles and to express solidarity for the Indigenous human rights defenders who are prosecuted, imprisoned and even killed in various countries for defending the rights of their peoples.

We recognize Indigenous women's courage and leadership. They are not alone.

Five strong effective social movements in the last decades accompany their struggles: the human rights movement, the women's movement, the Indigenous Peoples' movement, the peace movement and the environmental movement. These movements have had a sustained relation with the UN over the decades and a global impact. Indigenous women symbolize the meeting point of these international social movements.

Let us not forget that advocacy at international level is an extension of our citizenship from the national to the international level. Since states and non-state actors also act internationally and take decisions that will affect our lives, we, as active citizens that want to shape our own lives, also follow these processes internationally. We become international actors and influence decisions as well. This is people's advocacy.

Resistance, persistence, resilience, vision for life: *four words that embrace Indigenous women's struggles. Indigenous women are telling their own stories and creating more just societies with their many visible and invisible acts that sustain life every day. They continue to uphold a fundamental principle: DIGNITY*

The words of the Guatemalan Indigenous leader, our sister Rigoberta Menchú, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, resonate in the lives of many:

"What I treasure most in life is being able to dream. During my most difficult moments and complex situations I have been able to dream of a more beautiful future."

As our sister Myrna Cunningham, whose vision led to the creation of the Global School says: "this means being like an artisan who weaves, paints, and combines various materials to create a work of art", and that is how she understands facilitation, as the art of sharing, learning, and teaching.

The journey of FIMI's Global School has been inspirational and will continue being so as more Indigenous women join in.

Elsa Stamatopoulou

Director Indigenous Peoples' Rights Program,

Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University



4. BACKGROUND

The International Indigenous Women's Forum (IWWF/FIMI) is a global network of indigenous women that articulates local, national, and regional organizations in Asia, Africa, the Arctic, the Pacific, and the Americas.



The FIMI encourages the participation of indigenous women in international decision-making processes, ensuring the consistent and substantive inclusion of the perspectives of indigenous women in debates that involve human rights.”

It has a work plan divided into four strategic programs:

- 1. Political participation and advocacy,*
- 2. Capacity building,*
- 3. AYNI, the Indigenous Women's Forum; and*
- 4. Research and emerging issues.*

The FIMI believes in learning by doing and in the cross-fertilization process between practice and theory. Access to more information enables effective participation, and through such participation, capacity building is strengthened. Consequently, it reaffirms that empowerment and leadership can be acquired through the implementation of a process that combines participation,

capacity building, and organizational strengthening.

Per its mandate for capacity building and leadership strengthening, in 2013 it launched its training project, **the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women (IWGLS, for its acronym in Spanish)**, specifically, the International Program on Human Rights and Advocacy Strategies. The program has a duration of one year, with the objective of strengthening capacities, knowledge, and leadership of indigenous women activists and leaders from various regions of the world, so that women leaders may have the strength and wisdom to have an impact at different spaces around the world in favor of the lives of indigenous women. The School was conceived of as space for training and learning by doing, in which women leaders begin to understand the meaning of global advocacy, which allows them to see how their recommendations and input turn into recommendations of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, so that they may provide important input on resolutions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), or the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Likewise, one of the motivations for creating the leadership school, on the one hand, was to promote actions in favor of indigenous women after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which was during the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995.

On the other hand, it was also created to benefit the indigenous women of the communities as they are aware that they are bearers of ancestral knowledge, are the main reproducers of their peoples' cultures, and contribute to their continuity and resistance; however, these women had no visibility. Therefore, it was believed that the School could help out in providing visibility to these contributions of indigenous women.

Participants in the initial experience were **21 women leaders** from different socio-cultural regions: **Africa, Asia, the Arctic, the Pacific, and the Americas**. In summary, the program is developed in three phases. For the purposes hereof it is explained below:

Virtual:

This first phase consists of online learning through a virtual platform, with a duration of three to four months.

Face-to-face:

The second phase consists of attending intensive seminars for a week at the United Nations headquarters, as well as at Columbia University, through its Institute of Human Rights. Likewise, at this phase, women leaders participate

effectively during the first week of sessions of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and meet with high-level United Nations officials.

Implementation of advocacy plans:

The third phase consists of the execution of Advocacy Plans, created by the participants, at the local, national, and/or regional levels linked to the global agenda of the Indigenous Peoples' movements.

With improvements based on the results of the first experience, the following year in 2014 the FIMI implemented a second edition, wherein 25 indigenous women from various countries



©FIMI. United Nations entry, participants of the 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States.

from the same regions mentioned above participated. Likewise, the corresponding training terms were included according to the designed methodology. In 2015, the School created mechanisms for the participation of 27 participants from different peoples of the world. Through the development of three training terms, the School was growing and expanding the great network of organizations that make up the FIMI.

Upon completion of each edition of the IWGLS, more new indigenous organizations and leaders were brought together by the FIMI as a global network. It strengthened alliances with Columbia University, United Nations agencies, cooperation entities, and other actors. Women graduates of the first editions joined together with other women activists, built alliances, and continued influencing in other settings, being convinced to continue practicing complementarity, reciprocity, and ancestral knowledge. They also legally incorporated their organizations, speaking out in an organized and strategic manner. Additionally, they formulated projects, accessed other funds, and/or continued to search for various resources. They still had more dreams, but they were clear about the fact that no matter how local their struggle might be, there were still more women with the same cause in other parts of the world.

Furthermore, former participants took on technical tasks of the FIMI, which in turn grew and expanded its networks to other countries that were included for the first time, such as some Pacific islands: Micronesia, Guam, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu; even though long-distance coordination with some leaders for their in-person participation in the School was difficult. Regarding the technical team, they were greatly satisfied with the work carried out; at a distance, they witnessed the projects carried out by the women leaders. Some former participants returned to the Permanent Forum on their own and met with the FIMI team in this and other settings.



©FIMI. Postcards presented to FIMI/FIMI by Arctic participants. New York City, United States.

They were grateful for the changes they experienced after participating in the School. In this context, the FIMI held the fourth and the fifth edition, in 2016 and 2018¹, respectively.

It is worth mentioning that from 2015 to 2018, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations agreed with the FIMI to lead the IWGLS with the aim of strengthening the capacities and knowledge of indigenous women leaders regarding food security and human rights. At this time, during three editions, the School implemented national programs in **Peru, Bolivia, India, Philippines, El Salvador, Panama, and Paraguay**. In the last edition, it led these programs in four socio-cultural regions: **Mesoamerica, South America, Africa and Asia**, where in leaders from various Indigenous Peoples and countries took part. In the different training levels, a total of 230 indigenous women participated.

1 In 2017, the International Program did not take place.

At the end of the **2018 edition**, a total of **120 women leaders** from 41 countries from various socio-cultural regions had participated in the School, resulting in a network of achievements and improved learning. The objectives had been widely achieved: providing visibility to indigenous women and helping them speak out at the international level due to the role they play in their cultures. So, it was necessary to tell about the fruits reaped by the School through a plan on how to compile the stories of the women leaders, focused on recording the voices, experiences, challenges, personal changes, and individual and collective hopes of their participation in the School. At the same time, it would be a good time to read in retrospect about the successes, improvements, and pending tasks of the work accomplished; and—why not? — to reinvent the most emblematic program of the FIMI.

In this work, former participants in the training process helped out with interviewing some of the women leaders. Subsequently, each story was put together to tell how dozens of indigenous women have joined hands to move forward towards worlds with less inequality, where cultural diversity may belong and each People may have continuity and develop themselves according to their own decisions.

The collected stories will state—based on the leaders' words—what the training program represented for their work and collective purposes, as well as their journeys. They will also expound on their resistances, satisfactions, references, and utopias.



Myrna Cunningham Kain



©FIMI. Photograph provided by Dr. Myrna Cunningham.

A wise, indigenous, Miskito woman, who has traveled along long flat and wide roads with strong and sure steps, in her tireless and committed struggle to defend, exercise, and demand the exercise of her rights, those of the women and Indigenous Peoples of the world, from a holistic and comprehensive point of view. She recognizes that the Miskito are a border people resulting from national governments, and due to the imposition of borders they have been divided between Honduras and Nicaragua.

Myrna studied Public Health, is a physician by profession and a defender of rights by her own conviction. Throughout her life, she has assumed different responsibilities in her country, related to the process of building autonomy in the regions of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. She contributed enormously to the building of a multi-ethnic State that in 1987 acknowledged for the first time the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Afro-descendant population that inhabit half of Nicaragua as a country.

In recent years she has worked at the regional and international levels, promoting —from her vision about life and the world— the rights of Indigenous Peoples, especially concerning education, health, autonomy, and territorial rights. In this journey and work, women, Indigenous young women, and Indigenous people with disabilities have been an important focus due to their contribution to their work, experience, and knowledge towards a better quality of life for all.

During her childhood, an event marked her

life. Myrna lived in a banana monoculture area, which determined the diet and productive activities of the communities. Since they only had one production item, child malnutrition increased dramatically. During this period, boys and girls got used to eating only bananas, since they did not have other foods to complement the necessary nutrients to ensure a balanced diet.

Then, according to her, a people which had perhaps been engaged to fishing, hunting, and nomadism, began to settle around the churches and banana collection centers, which encouraged her interest and determination to be trained and educated on the issue of health. One of her objectives was to find answers to health conditions and consequently understand the situation that brought about poor health services. Additionally, she lived near what was the first hospital, a place where autonomous regions are now located, which was only 10 kilometers away from her home.

These events marked Myrna's life and made an impact on her leadership as a woman in the defense of life, the rights, and the territory of women and ancestral peoples.

A gathering of knowledge: the emergence of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women

For Myrna, who already had a leadership trajectory and accumulated experiences and knowledge throughout her journey, it has been important to open new paths and build bridges so that women continue advancing their knowledge and their exercise of individual and collective rights.

One of her challenges has been promoting



training and advocacy spaces for indigenous women. It has been from this that she has proposed the idea of the creation of the Global Leadership School, which has been sponsored by the FIMI.

For her, the spirit of the school focuses on developing the capacities of indigenous women who are leaders in different parts of the world, so that they may have the strength and wisdom to influence in settings around the world. From her point of view, the idea of promoting a training space for and belonging to indigenous women arises from the identification of women who have already had experience as activists at a global level in their communities and countries, with a certain degree of knowledge and interest in specific issues, but mainly in understanding how these issues affect the lives of indigenous women in

their territories. In this regard, she says:

*“The school first puts these women in contact with each other because the first role of the school is to put them together on a virtual platform; but then, it offers them the opportunity to participate in one of the mechanisms that the United Nations has for Indigenous Peoples, such as the **Permanent Forum**”.*

Myrna came up with the idea of the Global School as a process of learning by doing, in which women leaders begin to understand what global advocacy means, which in turn allows them to see how their recommendations and input turn into recommendations of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and later into recommendations of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, or even into important input for resolutions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). She says:

*“In short, the **Global School** empowers women to take the voice of their communities to the international level, to influence the creation of public policies, which are later brought back to their communities so that they can advance their work.”*

Among the main motivations for Myrna to

propose the creation of the Global School was, first of all, the promotion of actions in favor of indigenous women. After analyzing the adoption of the women’s platform at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing she saw that indigenous women were not being reached.

“Indigenous women realized that either they were the ones who had to promote that something be done in their favor at the global level or else nothing was going to get done.”

She was also driven by the desire to benefit the indigenous women of the communities because they realize that they are carriers of ancestral knowledge, they are the main reproducers of their peoples’ cultures, with much to contribute in this regard; however, these facts still go widely unnoticed. Therefore, the school could provide visibility to these indigenous women’s contributions.

Based on her sense and expertise, the philosophy of the Global School contributes to providing indigenous women visibility in the creation of public policies from the international to the local level. In the promotion of a dialogue of information, that is, each one of them, from their own experience, could share their knowledge and insights in order to use a fundamental tool, such as advocacy, at different levels, making sure to emphasize the importance of understanding when one assumes the commitment to advocate since it is only achieved through dialogue. She points out:

“One cannot advocate solely through confrontation.”,

Myrna affirms that part of the school's spirit also consists of the systematization and documentation of how women have contributed to conflict resolution and the importance of their role in continuing to support this action. A decisive argument was to consider that, although progress has been made in the recognition of collective Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples and those of women, there is still a huge gap between the acknowledged rights and their practical implementation, which, according to her, can only be achieved if these rights are translated into procedures, policies, programs, and a budget. So, the school seeks to contribute to all of this.

She also remembers the different things that happened to create the Global School. She states that once the FIMI was created, different meetings were held to define the programs that were going to prioritize from the perspective of indigenous women. For this reason, from the beginning, they decided that indeed it was obviously an organization created for political advocacy. It was important to achieve greater participation of women at the global and regional levels, with the ability to dialogue with various actors and influence them. Therefore, they considered the necessity of developing these capacities in women.

The first steps consisted of the creation of a first academic committee, for which the FIMI convened a meeting of more than 30 indigenous and non-indigenous women in Mexico. In that meeting, they analyzed and discussed the idea of the Global School, such as in what ways the school would be accredited, the courses that would be taught, and what their content and organization would be. The result of this meeting served to bring about the first curricular offer of the Global School.

During this phase, it was essential for her to communicate to the attending women the spirit in which the Global School was thought



©FIMI. Photograph provided by Dr. Myrna Cunningham.

to be promoted: a space for the training and advocacy of indigenous women, ensuring that everybody understood its importance for women leaders around the world.

After this, it was necessary to search for resources to start the school, so the FIMI approached different cooperation entities and international donors to obtain resources, which was successfully achieved. With this, the School was opened. In this phase, the necessity of a person for academic leadership was identified, so a coordinator was appointed and the group of women for academic advising was reduced, which from the beginning played an important role in the selection of students and the monitoring of what the graduates do when they return to their communities.

From the beginning, Myrna was aware of how important it has been to have important contacts to become strategic allies in a politically important process for indigenous women as part of the FIMI, such as Lea Mackenzie and Mónica Alemán, who in that period played a predominant role in the management of the School.

She also recalls the valuable advice and accompaniment of Ana María Enríquez, through Vivian Stromberg from UN Women,

who supported the proposal from the beginning, because it allowed her to confirm her work in favor of indigenous women. Finally, the first donors, such as the Channel Foundation and other Dutch organizations which, in their role as cooperators, believed, agreed to, and contributed to the necessary resources to make this dream and project a reality.

From Myrna's perspective, the development and management of a process such as the Global School, for the strengthening of advocacy capacities of indigenous women, implied challenges, difficulties, and strengths, including the fact of having built strong alliances, for example, with Columbia University, which made a high-level academic endorsement possible, so the role of Elsa Stamatopoulou was fundamental; likewise, the mechanism for selecting the participants, ensuring that they came from networks and responded to organizations and groups of

women and young women of Indigenous Peoples; and the combination of the virtual stage, with the face-to-face stage in New York, as part of the teaching-learning process. For her, it has been valuable how the concept of learning by doing was applied, which has been fundamental for the participants; as well as the fact that it is a course offered in different languages, which is a great strength.

Also, she states that the greatest weakness in the process has been to ensure that the participants can enter the virtual platform, considering that the issue of virtual education continues to be a challenge for Indigenous Peoples since they have no conditions or resources to access the platform. This is something that still needs to be worked on so that both women and men have access and can make use of these tools.

Experiences, challenges, and dreams in building leadership for indigenous women at a global level

Myrna, as a wise woman, has traveled various paths in the defense of women's and Indigenous Peoples' rights, as an interlayer of dreams and realities for herself and indigenous women, has made an effort throughout her life in encouraging the fulfillment of her goals. In this journey, she identified that women must strengthen their capacities. For this reason, she decided to promote the school for leadership training, in which she has been one of the main facilitators. It was also a rewarding experience because she would learn and relearn together with the leaders.

She is also satisfied to be a facilitator of an intercultural course with students from various parts of the world, which has been challenging, mainly because of the virtual

follow-up. Regarding the in-person part, the use of a methodology that facilitates the dialogue of information as a two-way process—due to the importance of recognizing a large amount of knowledge in women—has been a challenge. However, she managed it through facilitation, so that they can share their knowledge, systematize it, and present it in projects and truly learn how to use it on the international stage.

For her, this means being like an artisan who weaves, paints, and combines various materials to create a work of art, and that is how she understands facilitation, as the art of sharing, learning, and teaching.

A challenge, according to her, has to do with the follow-up part that must be done with

each one of the students from the school itself; that is, how to ensure that once they get back from the training process —after being selected as part of regional networks— they can contribute to strengthening these networks.

For her, if something is making progress, it is because it responds to changes, that is why she deems important to rethink some aspects of the school, such as trying to link training more with global processes —for example, since the SDGs will still be in force for the next 10 years, the students need to be clear on how to link them in specific processes in their regions— and ensuring that, upon their return to their countries they can take actions to achieve the progress of these objectives with an Indigenous focus.

For her, it is necessary to focus more energy on CEDAW, and obviously, on using Indigenous procedures and mechanisms, but also all of the existing ones as procedures, treaties, and United Nations bodies.

From her point of view, the school has great significance for indigenous women leaders as it represents a huge aspiration, mainly

because they need to gain visibility; they want each of their processes, programs, and contributions to be recognized; as well as the fact that it opens up an opportunity for them to link them to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples, placing them in networks with a huge number of important international contacts with whom they can advocate.

“The students of the school highly value the possibility of connecting with other women leaders from other parts of the world from whom they can learn and share.”



©FIMI. Participants of the 4th edition of the GLSIW, New York City, United States.

Main lessons

During her leadership journey, Myrna has woven lessons adding different colored threads to her life to continue strengthening indigenous women and their peoples. Having promoted the Global Leadership School provided her with new learning experiences, including the courage of North American women leaders, who have a huge burden of pain as descendants of mothers who went to schools where they were strongly mistreated. The fact that they feel confident in making their accumulated pain of so many years known is a way of bonding with all of them. She also spent time with women leaders from other parts of the world, who dealt with situations of discrimination, perhaps not the same situations as the others, but they strongly affected their lives. Despite this, they stood up and moved forward with strength and power.

“It seems to me that the school is a space to build a sisterhood and it has played a role of collective healing among them.”

Another lesson has been to value how the school has managed to make known some of the collective processes promoted by women leaders in their countries, and pick up the energy and work of colleagues with different abilities, such as in the case of an Asian woman leader who has contributed to the disability network with her leadership, and the fact that she has participated in the School helped to bring the collective demands together, in addition to the individual demands submitted to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

As life lessons, she recognizes that they contribute with significant elements for her individual and collective growth, which she

greatly appreciates.

Myrna’s life story is a lesson in itself, her inner being as a leader, and a woman who builds bridges, overcomes obstacles, and leads the way for other women. It allows us to understand the importance of her existence, her presence on this earthly plane, a space in which she has created an opportunity for many generations of indigenous women leaders in the world, sowing seeds to achieve different ways that that specific, individual, and collective rights as indigenous women and those of their original ancestral peoples are recognized, respected, and vindicated.

She is an indigenous leader who, by her work, commitment, devotion, and dedication, has contributed to the respect and acknowledgment of the existence, history, and lives of the women and Indigenous Peoples of the world.





Life stories:
INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS
FROM AFRICA

Aeisatu Bouba



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Aeisatu Bouba.

“An indigenous woman is the mother of humanity, a defender of the rights of women and girls.”

Bouba is a Mbororo shepherd, a defender of the rights of women and girls of her People. She has taken her energy and strength from the values of her culture that fills her being with wisdom and balance.

At 42 years of age, she is proud of having been born in Alening, Bamenda, Cameroon in Africa, a land of shepherds who have historically sustained the Mbororos’ lives. She is aware that as an indigenous woman and many others from her People have suffered from double marginalization resulting in multiple forms of violence, preventing them from enjoying their fundamental and collective human rights as indigenous people. For this reason, she is striving to have the rights of indigenous women to be recognized through

her leadership.

She is married and has a son, who represents a way of creating a different human being and is respectful of life. She comes from a family of eight siblings, from a polygamous home according to her cultural traditions, since her father has two wives.

When she was in sixth grade, she had difficulties with her aunts, uncles, and grandmother, who questioned her father for sending her to school, since according to tradition it was time for her to get married. It was undoubtedly a difficult time for her father as well because at that time she was considered a stranger within the community as she was the only girl who went to school;

it made her feel marginalized.

Sadly, she states:

“They wanted my father to take me out of school and get married. It was a very difficult time for me because both my father and I had a lot of pressure and I felt traumatized.”

When she was a young woman, she witnessed how her cousin was forced to marry an older man whom she did not know, that’s why she usually ran away over and over again and her father beat her and told her to come back. Sometimes, her cousin would flee to the forest and stay there for days or hide on the roof of Bouba’s house. One day, her father had beaten her with a stick and she was unconscious for more than two hours. Despite this, her cousin continued to flee until her marriage did not work out and she was able to escape forever. She was able to participate in an adult literacy program and became a laboratory technician. This event had an impact on Bouba’s life. In this regard, she states:

“In my community, when they force you to get married and you don’t, they fear that you will never get a husband or that you will go astray and will disobey as my cousin did. So, when I finished high school and higher education, I started working and I could

choose my husband. We are happily married and he supports me.”

Leadership as a defense for life

Having closely witnessed the experience of her cousin encouraged her to promote her leadership for the respect of girls and women and the defense of their rights, taking into account that they deal with the same problems of abuse and violence. For this reason, she decided to do something to change that situation in her community.

In order to begin her work, she was supported and accompanied by her father, whom she identifies as an ally. He was one of the individuals responsible for organizing meetings and mobilizing the communities. The contribution of the community members, both men and women, who helped create the organization, thus ensuring its operation, was also valuable for her. With satisfaction, she states:

*“If you are not **supported by your community**, you will not be able to carry out your activities and they will oppose your efforts.”*

To move forward, she managed to ally herself with community leaders and heads of households, who, due to their rank at the community level, are capable of influencing to create awareness of the need for girls to go to school. Her husband also supports her with ideas as he is an expert in religion and



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Aeisatu Bouba.

indigenous traditions, so he has provided her with the knowledge that has been useful for her work with women and in the communities.

It has been important to identify indigenous women as leaders of leadership, whom she admires for their way of working, sharing information and experience. One of them is Lucy Mullenkei, open and willing to teach her knowledge and involve everyone, always seeking consensus.

Aeisatu has focused her leadership on supporting indigenous organizations for women and girls, as well as women's groups from civil society, political parties, and religious and traditional leaders, as these are the main sectors that can be influenced to create changes for the benefit of women.

It is significant for her to appreciate aspects of her culture that at some point may represent elements for leadership. Since the Mbororo are a people made up of shepherds, cattle represent part of their identity; they are a symbol of wealth because they are the only source of income, so it is important to take care of and protect them. This practice reflects a strong sense of leadership in the communities because as long as you can direct, guide, and care for livestock, you gain recognition to stand out as a leader.

It is significant for her to appreciate aspects of her culture that at some point may represent elements for leadership. Since the Mbororo are a people made up of shepherds, cattle represent part of their identity; they are a symbol of wealth because they are the only

source of income, so it is important to take care of and protect them. This practice reflects a strong sense of leadership in the communities because as long as you can direct, guide, and care for livestock, you gain recognition to stand out as a leader.

Global Leadership School to strengthen the capacities of indigenous women.

One of her objectives as a leader is to strengthen women's capacities, which is why having training spaces is one way to achieve it. When she learned about the Global School program, she got information about the content of its courses, decided to apply, and fortunately was admitted, so it represented a great opportunity.

She is mainly interested in strengthening her capacities, especially in the area of indigenous women's rights, lobbying and advocacy, and has the chance to coordinate with other women's organizations throughout the country and work as a collective, promoting the agenda of indigenous women at the international level. In her own words, she states:

“Being part of the School motivated me to share experiences and learn good practices among ourselves as indigenous women.”

Having been part of the School represented significant experiences, such as: receiving



an online course, learning to interact online with the facilitators and other participants, being able to share their experiences and contributions. Meeting the trainers and other participants after so many weeks of interaction was something wonderful. The training at Columbia University and the UN was very interesting. Receiving quality information and presenting the Advocacy Plan to make it known and identify the reaction of the other participants was an exciting time. It showed that the Plan topic was very interesting.

It was significant to write a statement and present it during the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, interacting with other organizations, and learning about how to participate. It was her first time at the United Nations.

Drafting an Advocacy Plan was quite a new experience. Her training provided her with a methodology to do so. She acknowledges

that the topic of her plan was challenging. Her proposal was about the development of capacities for traditional indigenous, religious, and community leaders of the Mbororo People in order to eliminate harmful traditional and cultural practices, such as child marriage, and promote access to education for girls. She was aware of how sensitive this topic could be, especially for training traditional and religious leaders to commit themselves to end a tradition that is part of the people's culture.

To support the Advocacy Plan, it is necessary to go by the international conventions and laws previously ratified by her country, which at the national and regional levels protect women and girls. These instruments guided her and helped her to support the actions of her proposal. With satisfaction, she states:

“I had to redo my Plan over and over again, but it was a good exercise because I had to continually review the documents. I still think about those articles to this day, and they have helped me to reinforce my capacities.”

Her contributions at the community level have included the reduction of child marriages through awareness campaigns and community activities, as well as obtaining the support of the solidarity fund, supporting many girls' access to education, which has allowed her to work more closely with civil society organizations on the issue of reducing child marriage.

She, as a member of the “Girls yes, Brides no” organization, proposed a coalition to promote the creation of the same organization at the national level to end child marriage in Cameroon. That organization is still currently in operation and she is one of its founders. Today they are working with the Ministry of Women and the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Government, from whom they have received positive support. Such an alliance started when Cameroon was launching the African Union project to end child marriage.

Along with two other organizations, she supports the improvement of Cameroon's penal code, advocating for laws and policies that protect the rights of women and girls, submitting documentation with legal and international support. As a result, the age of women to marry has currently been raised



©FIMI. Group activity during the GLSIW Africa regional training program. City of Nairobi, Kenya.

from 15 to 18 years old. She has also formed a group of women parliamentarians to work on the same issue and lobby for laws that benefit women and girls, as well as for their approval. In this regard, she states:

“We believe the group will help us in the efforts to change the law on child marriage, which is necessary for girls.”

Aeisatu’s contributions have focused on achieving girls’ and women’s rights to education, a life free of violence, and the exercise of their citizenship be recognized, a clear objective from the beginning of her leadership. Through her participation in the Leadership School, she reaffirmed her struggle to defend girls and women, which has involved great effort and a lot of work that she has been able to do thanks to her knowledge acquired in her training with the FIMI. With satisfaction, she states:

“I have set the issue of child marriage as a challenge because I am one of the victims, and I told myself that I should work on it so that it can be avoided.”

Implementing the Advocacy Plan in her community was a challenge. It was the first time that she was going to talk about the issue of early and forced marriage, as well as access to education among her own people. It was a difficult subject, especially because it was a historical-cultural practice that no one talks about or criticizes.

Her strategy to work on it was by taking

the religious leader of the community to the workshops to talk about child marriage from where the subject is touched on in the Koran. At the end of the workshop, the traditional leaders created a solidarity fund in meeting to support the most vulnerable girls who cannot go to school. The fund was available every year, with which school supplies were bought to support some girls who had to go through a selection process.

Unfortunately, the fund stopped working recently due to the English-speaking crisis and education in the Northwest region. Consequently, marriage and early pregnancy again increased, so to show the situation of these girls, it was considered necessary to make a documentary film, which was finally produced and is currently being used as an advocacy tool to help girls go to other French-speaking regions or learn a trade.

Implementing the Plan provided visibility within the community regarding the importance of talking about child marriage. People learned about what was being done, which has been recognized internationally through the “With and For the Girls” Award granted by the FIMI in 2017, as well as the 2019 Prevee Award at the local level of civil society for the work they do with indigenous women and girls in their community.

Having participated in the Global School provided great knowledge for her leadership, including tools for lobbying and advocacy, which are a constant in her work and are necessary for leadership. Today she continues taking advantage of her acquired skills to have the government involved in reviewing legislation and policies to benefit women and girls. In her own words, she states:

*“I am still using these skills to work with the community, as well as traditional and religious leaders, to end child marriage and any other type of **violence against women and girls**”.*

She has applied national, regional, and international instruments to make proposals and strengthen her arguments at work, and has used them as legal support documents in advocacy processes and awareness-raising activities in the community, using the articles on the rights of indigenous women.

Individual and collective dreams

For her, the collective actions aimed at promoting changes can be the result of dreams come true.

She strengthened her relationship with community members, who communicated to the organization whenever they found out that a child marriage was being planned; even the girls themselves called if they were being put at risk, so many of them were rescued. This situation made her understand that there has been confusion about the line between religion and tradition, which she managed to differentiate after she participated in a talk with the religious leader and community members, who also understood that marrying off their daughters at an early age did not mean following the religion, but rather that it was a harmful tradition that threatened their lives in most cases.

One of her dreams is to empower more women and girls so that someday no one talks about

violence against them, and more Mbororo women participate in decision-making platforms representing their communities, speaking about their problems, and advocating policies on matters that affect them, and so they do not need others to speak out on their own behalf. In this regard, she states:

*“When many women are empowered, the community benefits. If we have women in positions such as parliamentarians, mayors, ministers, I think they will think about how to bring **development to their communities in order to improve them.**”*

She also dreams of a change in the perception of women who feel marginalized within the community. She hopes that they will be recognized as bearers of rights as they are key members of the community, and their participation is important in the decision-making process. She is convinced that these dreams can come true to the extent that we work in an organized way, without losing contact with local and national leaders.

She believes in the importance of passing on her learning, that is why she is developing leadership skills in girls, promoting meetings to train them and develop their capacities. When she carries out activities, she involves them in the planning process so that they make their ideas known and contribute to the program, through the training of female leadership as an exercise in generational replacement. This is how she identifies smart and passionate leaders to represent women in meetings, participate in activities, and become members of the organization. She explains:

“I am involved in the intergenerational exchange of knowledge with women in identifying with whom we can work, regardless of their level of education, because they have great wisdom, are very intelligent, and contribute in an extraordinary way to the programs.”

seeds in fertile ground so that their specific, individual, and collective rights are respected, fulfilled, and defended from their being and feeling as defenders of life.

She believes in the importance of promoting the topic of gender to prevent other people from speaking on behalf of women since this would diminish men's bad attitude toward women and allow for men to feel responsible for contributing to the household chores.

From her point of view, it is necessary to promote income-generating activities so that women do not depend on their husbands, so as to minimize violence against them. Another action would be the creation of spaces to share their experiences, such as community, individual, and organizational exchanges to share their challenges and triumphs, and learn good practices from each other.

Learning about the leadership journey of Aiesatu confirms how women weave collective ties as a network of support and solidarity, which from their perspective makes it possible to change the practices of their People that are violating their specific rights.

Her story serves as a benchmark and example that show a tireless struggle for the recognition and respect of the dignity and being of Mbororo women and girls, in which she has obtained additional knowledge and know-how that she has managed to multiply through capacity training, leaving behind

Esupat Ngulupa Laizar



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant, Esupat Ngulupa.

“We are indigenous women, even though we change in some aspects, although we have education, we continue speaking our language and practicing our ceremonies.”

Esupat is an indigenous Maasai woman leader who has walked with firm steps in the defense of her rights, and in the fight to reclaim from her culture those values that pertain to defending life.

She was born in the province of Longido, Tanzania, Africa. She belongs to the community of transhumant herders. She has raised a family of four children. At 48 years old, she identifies herself as an activist who works with women, supporting them to fight against discrimination and traditional customs that oppress them and limit their decision-making. She is a women’s representative in local

government and a member of the board of directors of the Maasai Women Development Organization (MWEDO).

Her position of authority in the community does not make her feel superior to other women. When she attends traditional events or ceremonies celebrated in her tribe, she joins the group of women, sits and eats together with them, as a sign of equality. She affirms:

“I’m not here for a miracle. I’m fighting to be here where I am because I went through all of the difficulties. It took us many years to find a way to row against the current.”

She comes from a family of nine siblings, of which she is the youngest. Just like most girls at her age, she had to marry while very young. She managed to study, unlike the majority of women in her community, but it involved various difficulties.

When she was young, she could not choose who she was going to marry. Her parents decided for her, a situation which she hated and never agreed with. At that time, there was no way to hide or complain about their rights. Not doing so implied a high cost and she did not have money to avoid it, so, finally, she agreed to marry. She remembers she prayed that this would not be her destiny.

She faced challenges, such as discrimination against being a woman when speaking in front of men in the general assembly. It was difficult for them to see a woman taking the floor. She remembers their looks of anger as if she was doing something wrong. In this regard, she states:

“Many times, men would ask me: ‘where did you learn to behave this way? Why do you speak like a man?’ Others blamed my husband, saying that he was a bad man because he allowed me to attend these meetings and have a position.”

One time they accused her of attacking and destroying the culture because of her attitudes. That did not discourage her; on the contrary, she always questioned the fact that women were not allowed to hold some leadership positions, such as president, as they represented a group of women. The answer that she got was that in this way women were kept away from the most important decision-making bodies.

Leadership for activism in favor of indigenous women

Her life experiences made her the activist woman she is today, engaged in working to empower many women, who are discriminated against because they do not contribute with resources to their families and do not own any property. She organized groups as a platform for them to raise their voices and complain about their needs, as a space for them to identify income mechanisms to support their children, especially for girls to go to school.

A key aspect at the beginning of her leadership was her basic knowledge about her rights as a basis for daring to speak without anyone’s permission, and to say what she thinks, an attitude that has been an example for other women. She has noticed this attitude more often in youth who are interested in decision making. She explains:

“I leave challenges at home, and when I go out I am strong and I do what I am supposed to do because if you show your weakness and they realize it then they think they can harass you to stop what you are

doing. Leave your fears at home, go outside, put on makeup, and make yourself beautiful, raising your voice with strength.”

She participated in a Human Rights course in Moshi, where she met a lawyer who taught her about her rights, giving examples of how women live for and by others as if they lived at home with someone with a disability, who did not let them move forward. This made her reflect, as historically women do everything for their husbands, living together with them as if they were disabled people who cannot do anything for themselves. In her own words, she states:

“Mary asked us if any of us had a disabled child at home and we all said no, so she said: ‘you are always taking water to the bathroom for someone, serving food on the table for someone who has hands and legs and the ability to do what you do, but he does nothing. It amazed me because it was the reality for all of us.’”

She was trained in community development and human rights activism by Professor Saruni Ole Sena from Kenya. In this process, they identified her potential as a leader, so they took her to a one-year course on leadership, a period in which she read a lot, became empowered, learned from others about the challenges dealt with as leaders in different

places.

Esupat has found several people whom she considers her allies, including her mother who has already passed away, but whom she remembers saying: “let my three daughters study until they fly off to wherever they want to go.” She was someone who made her reflect when she wanted to leave everything and separate from her husband, reminding her of the challenges she had gone through and asked her not to ruin her life. Sadly, she recalls:

“I remember my mother’s words: ‘You’ve been through so many challenges and you’re still here, so why do you want to ruin your reputation for little things? You have to be smart, and strong; you cannot run away from challenges, you must learn from them; they are good teachers, and you have to turn them into opportunities.’ She marked my destiny, motivated me, and didn’t let me get discouraged.”

She was a strong, generous, and a female leader who had the opportunity to attend the pre-Beijing meeting in 1985 in Nairobi, but other people took advantage of her and used her ticket because she did not know how to read and write. Another ally has been her husband, a man who values being with a strong and independent woman, and who worked very hard for her to be elected in the local government.

She is grateful for the example of female leaders who lead women’s organizations; who lead, guide, and empower her, such as Lucy Mullenkei and Ntonini Mweddo, and of those

who are part of her government, such as Gertrude Mongela, Ana Makinda, and Asha Rose Mukiro.

Esupat has prioritized her work as a leader by supporting girls, boys, and women. Her experience with the local government has allowed her to realize that the majority of the population does not have access to services such as water, roads, and health centers, especially women from indigenous communities who go to fetch water, walking 10 or 20 kilometers away, leaving their children unattended at home, going through a lot of effort to get it. Such a situation confirms how important it is to work from the inside where decisions are made to provide visibility to women's reality and make it a priority. She also supports other groups such as civil society, youth, and politicians because she believes that she can also advocate changes for the majority's benefit.

Within her culture, she identifies some elements that may represent authority or leadership, such as the black wooden staff held by leaders as a symbol that identifies them as such. In the case of women leaders, they cannot be identified by any element. Their authority is represented when they intervene in meetings because in the past they were not allowed to be leaders in the community, which is why there is no representative element of their leadership.

In the case of those who are part of the local government, the term Muheshimiwa means "honorable"; it is something that can differentiate themselves from others. So, as a woman, they may have the opportunity to be invited to some ceremonies, but they must respect the culture and act according to their principles. She is aware of these values and believes that these can be reclaimed in order to understand the meaning of leadership and authority.

The Global Leadership School: a learning mechanism from and for indigenous women

Esupat is a leader with a vision of change and of rejecting whatever does not seem right to her, so she is constantly looking for opportunities to progress and learn. When she obtained information about the Leadership School, she got interested in participating because she identified that the International Indigenous Women Forum, which sponsored the training program, was an organization led by women and was committed to empowering them in the education of their rights in the international arena. With emotion, she states:

"When I learned that the in-person session was going to be held at Columbia University, and

I had never been to a university before, I felt that I had started a new chapter in my life. I was going to be a student at that University during that week, and there I learned a lot."

Being able to connect with other women leaders and be part of the Global School was a significant experience that marked her leadership, as she realized that there were indigenous communities in other countries and other indigenous women like her, who

©FIMI. Exhibition of cultural pieces of the participants of the 6th edition GLSIW. New York City, United States.



were dealing with similar challenges. Finding out that she was no longer alone, but that many other women were fighting in other parts of the world for the same goals, allowed her to confirm that it is possible to change the situation of indigenous women around the world.

When she came back to her country, she was able to challenge many community leaders through what she had learned. She was no longer the same person as before; she could speak about the rights of women in the community to contribute to decision making. She would not have achieved that if she had not learned about extraordinary topics during her training with the FIMI.

Drafting the advocacy plan was not easy because she had never worked on a similar document. Due to the lack of access to online

information, she was unable to come up with its outline. She also did not know how to use a computer. She had to learn at that time, which meant a great challenge; but, fortunately, she was supported by the FIMI team to be able to write it.

She did not have resources for its implementation. However, she tried to put it into operation, dealing with some challenges, such as training women on their rights. When they returned home, they shared the information with their husbands, who convinced them not to act accordingly with what they had learned. It has been difficult to change the way people think in the community. Despite this, she believes that things are changing as this new generation is open and available to learn, with the possibilities of promoting changes.

At present, she works with a new group of

250 women, training them to be independent, and she proposed to them opening up a bank account. With such funds, they are planning to purchase the best breed of goats to produce cheese and milk collectively and allocate one part to their consumption, and the other part to selling and obtaining some income. In this regard, she states:

“I want to train others to be independent and to be role models for other women’s groups. I will teach them to make cheese because I am a cheese producer.”

Esupat is part of the Committee of the Livestock Forum and a member of the decision-making body. She was motivated by women to stay there and thus create a legacy for others and the next generation, as well as implement a plan to continue with what has been started.

She is acting as general director of the Longido Community Integrated Program (LOOCIP) organization. She is responsible for the coordination and management of funds. This is a temporary position until they hire someone to take it over. She is associated with an organization in Denmark, a savings and entrepreneurship project that promotes that women work independently, an organization that is satisfied with her work. With satisfaction, she explains:

“I want to see what the results will be with the women who contribute financially to their families. Now the donor wants 50 more groups, so I don’t know how we will manage

it, but we will find a way.”

Coordinating with other sectors and achieving advocacy spaces, she has been a member of the International Advisory Board of the Global Land Tool Network of the UN-Habitat for 4 years. She was fearful about holding this position because it was a high-level committee. She had doubts about what her contributions could be as a local level leader in a space like that, and she realized that it was just what they needed, a voice that will allow them to connect closer to reality.

She asserts that being part of a training space with the Global School allowed her to acquire new knowledge, such as about international conventions in favor of Indigenous Peoples. Upon her return, she deemed important to verify which of these conventions had been ratified by her country and she was able to realize that progress had been almost zero. It was a valuable experience as she could verify the difference between what was happening internationally concerning the signing of the conventions and the reality on the ground.

She learned about high-level networking, management, and coordination, as well as about the rights of women and Indigenous Peoples in general. She understood how indigenous women can be part of decision-making bodies at the international and national levels.



©FIMI. Exhibition of cultural pieces of the participants of the 6th edition GLSIW. New York City, United States.

Individual and collective dreams

Esupat is a woman who has dreams and faces challenges, which is why she decided to educate her children and thus ensure that they assume their indigenous identity. She confirmed that you can have more knowledge and continue maintaining your identity, that is why she formed a team of strong women, with whom she works and coordinates activities, being sure that together they can promote changes.

One of her main dreams is to leave a legacy through which people can remember her. She hopes that her People maintain their cultural values that dignify life and eliminate harmful practices that threaten girls and women. Collectively, she seeks that the community reduce discrimination against women and have gender equality working on the ground.

She is aware of the need to pass on her experiences to young women, starting with

her daughter. She suggests working with indigenous youth who have dropped out of school because they got pregnant at an early age and had no one to pay their fees, or who were forced to marry at an early age. Furthermore, with the women's groups in the communities, where there are young girls, to ensure that there is continuity in passing on the knowledge from older women. This is a way to give shape to the knowledge she acquired and make the spirit of knowing come true.

In this process, she pointed out that the language barrier represents a great challenge because most of them do not know English or national languages, so it has been difficult to translate all of the information learned in the Global School into the indigenous language. This is something which they should work on, involving young women and thus promoting opportunities to learn and teach.

Her leadership experience has led her to conclude that there is still a need to train women, especially on issues such as land rights, sexual and reproductive health, issues in which it is necessary to involve girls; but mainly, teach them alternative sanitation and reproductive methods when they are already menstruating.

According to her, the strategy may consist of training at school, training women within their groups in the languages spoken in their community, starting the training with a small group of women who can then visit other different groups.

The journey through her story allows us to recognize how, amid challenges, the leadership of an indigenous woman becomes a constant challenge, because it is developed amid cultural practices that threaten the dignity of women. At the same time, it is based on principles that give meaning and value to leadership. This is a path along which she has identified training as a valuable tool for promoting changes, which can be based on new information and learning to the extent that these always respond to the reality of women, as well as the recognition of their own knowledge.

Today Esupat's leadership is a model for other indigenous women of the Maasai People because of their perseverance, energy, and strength. She has managed to raise their voice to defend their rights and those of the indigenous women of their region. In the exercise of her role as a local authority, she shows how, from her perspective as a leader, changes can be promoted in favor of the most vulnerable population such as girls and youth, who are part of the present and future generations.





Life stories:
**INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS FROM THE
ARCTIC AND PACIFIC**

Ellacarin Blind



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant, Ellacarin Blind.

“Ellacarin, is a wise indigenous Saami woman, a spinner of life, and a leader empowered in the defense of the rights of women and her people.”

She is 61 years old. She was born in Arjeplog, Norrbotten County, Sweden, a land where her ancestral roots were established. She lives in the city of Umeå. She is proud to be part of the Saami culture, from which she has adopted values and principles that give meaning to her life.

The fact that her culture is settled in countries such as Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in Russia is important because her indigenous people are territorially strong, maintaining their existence in the middle of the Western system.

She identifies herself as a sociable and respected woman as she is part of several

local organizations and associations, including the National Association of the Saami people in Sweden, a space where she supports the preservation and promotion of her people’s culture. She is a member of the Saami Women’s Organization that belongs to the Sami Nisson Forum, which is made up of Saami leaders in Scandinavia and Russia.

She currently lives with her boyfriend and has a 24-year-old daughter, who is a student at the University of Uppsala, Sweden. They comprise part of her family and give meaning to what she does.

She comes from a reindeer herding family from whom she learned the value of caring for and

protecting animals and nature. She grew up in a Saami boarding school for 8 years where she received schooling. She remembers her deceased parents because they taught her many values and spoke the North Sami language, being a fundamental pillar in her life.

An event that impacted her life was that her daughter was born 3 months earlier than expected, which meant a lot of work and care to ensure that her daughter grew up and survived because she was premature. It made her a strong woman and caring for herself and those around her.

Leadership as an indigenous woman

She needs to have contact with other indigenous women from all over the world as it has allowed her to have a great social network of diverse people. For this reason, her commitment to being part of various organizations has allowed her to promote her leadership, work hard on gender issues, and promote the rights of women and the Saami people.

With her experience, she has managed to participate in the Soroptimist International

network and some other local and regional women's networks. She is also part of Slow Food Sápmi (SFS), who in turn are members of Slow Food International. In these spaces, from her leadership role, along with her organization, she has sought to establish cooperation with Inuit women in Greenland, which was not possible because it has been difficult to contact a women's organization in that territory.

Her leadership has focused on organizations,



so she is a member of the board of directors of the Saami Nisson Forum and a project manager in her National Saami People organization in Sweden, thus contributing with her skills and abilities.

In this process, she has been supported by members of her network, as well as other Saami women, who have accompanied her on this path, becoming her main female and male allies.

It has also been important for her to identify leadership mentors in the lives of other women, such as Maj Lis Skaltje, a Saami woman who has guided her work, as well as her mother and aunts, strong and empowered women from whom she learned the value of moving forward with sure steps on whatever path she has to tread.

Ellacarin, as part of the Saami people, believes that having representative symbols of authority and leadership in her culture is a type of riches, represented in the role of

the elderly women who have an important position in society because of their wisdom, experiences, and knowledge. As a people, they have great respect for the elderly because they are the ones who still know their culture and language; they are the ones who, until now, have preserved them.

From her perspective, leadership must take on as principles the older people's way of life, as they have gone before the new generations. The older generation provides advice and guidance about how authority, leadership, and life should be overall.

Participation in the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women

Being part of a training space has been of great interest. One of the reasons why she applied was to realize that the global program could open up other opportunities for allying with indigenous women, as well as for becoming stronger on gender issues of which she was already aware and that she needed to understand from another perspective.

One of her significant experiences was networking with other indigenous women around the world to work to defend their rights. She realized that even at a distance and in different conditions in each country, they have to deal with the same exclusion issues and similar difficulties, just because they are different from other women.

After she participated in the Leadership School, she was invited to Brazil to a large gender conference with more than 400 women from all over the world, which represented a very important step in her leadership. During that event, she gave a lecture on Elsa Laula, one of the most famous Saami women between 1887-1931. She also managed to position the contributions of indigenous women from her country and the challenges they are dealing with.

As a leader, she believes that she has centered her contributions with the National Association of Swedish Saami People, as a member of the Saami Women Organization that is part of the Sami Nisson Forum (SNF), and also on the

Soroptimist International network and other local and regional women's networks. She has mainly focused on preserving culture, strengthening women in their leadership from the Saami indigenous gender perspective, which has been a great challenge that they have managed to deal with together with their colleagues in the organization. At the international level, she provides support in her substitute role in Slow Food Sápmi, as part of the Food International area.

An important result after participating in the Global School was to promote the organization of a world conference on indigenous gender in coordination with her colleagues from the Sami Nisson Forum, which she hopes will take place in 2020 or 2021. For her, this represents a great challenge, as it will be possible to analyze and discuss how the gender perspective is understood and lived from the perspective of women and the Saami people, which she was able to understand after her leadership training at the FIMI.

Among the valuable things that she learned included becoming acquainted with the indigenous women's movement at the regional and global levels, as well as how to strengthen their leadership by learning new methodologies, information, and advocacy tools. It was also valuable to have more knowledge about networking and alliances with other women and sectors that work in favor of women and their indigenous peoples throughout the world.



Dreams of leadership

One of her dreams is that their organization is sustainable since they have always had to manage resources to sustain their work; they do not have an office and are spread throughout Scandinavia and Russia, without many resources. Consequently, she hopes that in the intermediate term the Sami Nisson Forum has an office with a leader responsible for ensuring the permanence of this organization that works for the defense of their rights.

Another dream is bringing together all of the indigenous women who contribute to the world, supporting their struggles for indigenous rights, and that these are fulfilled and respected. She hopes in the immediate future to rejoin the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York in order to present their demands and progress as women of the Saami people.

For her, passing on her experiences and insights to the younger members of the Sami Nisson Forum and other Saami women who are interested and engaged in these issues is a commitment, which she also believes is part of her mission as a leader of her people.

Ellacarin's life story is that of a leader who assumes her identity as an indigenous woman in her mission to rescue and preserve the values and principles of her Saami culture, which she recognizes as the basis for her leadership.

Throughout her journey, she has found the sense of working for the defense, recognition, and fulfillment of their individual and collective rights in the strength of the indigenous women among her people who, together and in alliance with organizations, contribute to making this a reality.

Lisa Natividad



©FIMI. Participant Lisa Natividad, 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States.

“The indigenous woman is the one who has a descent and origin, who has been raised by indigenous people, who understands the beliefs, values, and practices of her people’s culture.”

Lisa is a leader who identifies herself as being part of the indigenous Chamoru people by origin, whose worldview recognizes that the earth and what it produces belongs to everyone and to those who inhabit it.

She was born in Guam, an island located in the western Pacific Ocean, which is politically one of the fourteen unincorporated territories of the United States of North America, a land where she grew up and learned part of the values and principles that gave meaning to her identity. Today, as a professional, she contributes with her skills by working as a teacher at the University of Guam in the School of Social Work, which has allowed her to share new knowledge with young people.

She remembers that her mother worked for the Secretary of Energy in the United States for a long time, up until she retired. She was

part of the personnel of a military base that handled toxic material, which turned out to be harmful to the health of people who lived in the surrounding area. Being part of that reality raised her awareness to need to dedicate herself to activism with indigenous reservations and work for indigenous peoples.

Leadership as an instrument of resistance

Among her people, the organizational structure is matriarchal and matrilineal. According to her people’s culture, leadership begins from birth. Families prepare women at a very young age so that from then on they can be leaders in their community. The aforementioned has been a basis for beginning



her mission of leadership.

When she found out that the military was going to build their base in the town, she and her people were quite upset about it. This event promoted the need for resistance to prevent this from happening. At that time, she supported those who organized the confrontation against the military. In this regard, she states:

*“They prepare us from a very early age and that has shaped me as a leader. This preparation came in useful later on when **I supported my people in the face of the injustices they experienced.**”*

From the moment she decided to support the resistance movement against the military, she was supported by the association as her main

allies. Furthermore, the fact that women and men complement each other in their roles in her town has allowed them to work collectively as a team. This is one of the values that she considers essential to achieve changes in the reality of the people of her town.

Being supported and accompanied by other people in her work and in the different actions that are carried out in favor of indigenous peoples is very important.

She has identified other indigenous women as models of leadership, such as her mother, grandmothers, and women among her clan, who from the beginning established the parameters that have defined what it is to be an indigenous woman. Their examples, values, and experiences allow us to know what it is like to be women and leaders as part of their responsibility, of which they are proud to pass on and fulfill.

Likewise, she has identified —in local leaders, who do not belong to her clan, but who have a parental leadership role— teachings that have

been useful for the exercise of her leadership. For her, finding examples to follow — in both women and men— is a strength, as a result of complementary work.

Her career has allowed her to work with women from the Pacific — from whom she has also learned— such as Sandra Creamer from the International Indigenous Women Forum (FIMI), who has been a very important person in different processes, such as the Pacific Women’s Network.

Her leadership has focused on supporting indigenous groups and women in civil society, doing part-time work with organizations. Also, she has addressed issues related to the situation and conditions in which indigenous peoples live, which has allowed her to contribute with her knowledge and skills to strengthen the capacity for understanding the role that each one must play for the management of resources and thus improve

this reality.

She regrets that due to the influence of other cultures and the modern context in which they live, there are no longer traditional objects, symbols, and practices that represent authority or leadership. However, she believes that it is important to restore some symbols that were used in ancient times. For example, because of her experience, the young people call her Saina, which is a parental role that means wisdom, and when they realize that another woman possesses it, she is known in this way. With satisfaction, she says:

“In my case, they call me Saina Lisa, and thus they show respect for my role.”

Global Leadership School: a space for participation

For Lisa, it is necessary to continue training to be able to serve, that is why when she saw the announcement published by the International Indigenous Women Forum (FIMI) she applied to the Global School. One of her motivations was to learn about international law, so she can use it in the development of laws, since, in the context of the United States, this legal system is not followed, which is why indigenous peoples are losing many battles. When it comes to applying laws as indigenous persons, your country rejects them. Therefore, it is necessary to know about the tools available from the United Nations.

During her participation in the Leadership School, she had valuable experiences, such as learning from Dr. Elsa of Columbia University, who was clear in her way of presenting subsidies, and coherent when understanding

the international instruments for the defense of the rights of indigenous peoples. Furthermore, her networking —which began at the FIMI’s School— with indigenous women around the world, with whom she still maintains relations through associations, friendships, and leadership relationships, were meaningful experiences that have influenced her as a leader. In this regard, she tells us:

“A valuable experience after the school is that one of my sisters from the Philippines, Gigi Banes, is here in Guam. We brought her to give lectures at our university.”

She recognizes that her training as part of the Global School allowed her to learn to formulate the advocacy plan. It has been a wonderful task for her because it forced her to think about what her next step should be, as part of her movement and in her work. She was able to analyze these elements with the methodology to develop the plan. The process implied defining a series of content and it also allowed women to identify concrete actions to improve their living conditions in the communities.

Even though her plan was not sponsored from the beginning, she could manage resources when she participated in an event, where she focused on presenting her plan, thus obtaining financial sponsorship, with which she works together with other colleagues to carry out her actions. She deems it important to have had financial support because many times when it is not available, it becomes a limitation that women have to deal with. Having worked

together as a team for the implementation of her plan allowed her to coordinate, not only with the Chamoru indigenous group but also with other networks across the Pacific, an experience that gave her another perspective on how to work from concrete actions, with clear objectives and results to achieve.

Today she asserts the importance of continuing to contribute to different spaces and sectors with her leadership. Therefore, she continues training indigenous girls to participate in programs. She supports local indigenous women's organizations and peaceful networks. She is a member of an association along with Sandra Creamer, who is linked to the FIMI, as well as with Dr. Gigi Banes, with whom she is studying in programs in the Philippines to teach people from their villages about the difficult situation that people experience and the importance of carrying out coordinated and collective work.



©FIMI. During the activities of the 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States.

One of the main lessons during her participation in the school was to study in depth the importance of international agreements and conventions as instruments that can be used to defend the rights of women and indigenous peoples, as well as to learn about articles and content to support defense mechanisms in favor of the peoples at times when it is required to have defense arguments.

Another lesson has been about how the organization and participation system in the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues works, an opportunity to know through practice how this space for discussion, analysis, and approach is developed, which favors women and indigenous peoples.

Individual and collective dreams

For Lisa, dreams begin with the personal changes that she has been able to experience. She feels more sure now that she knows about international law. She believes that she is confident about how indigenous systems work and is proud of her indigenous identity and of the people to whom she belongs; but mainly because she can confront the US system, which mocks international law and does not give any importance to indigenous peoples.

Her greatest dream is that women can be brought together through the Pacific indigenous network since it has been difficult for women to work together on a specific issue. In her own words, she states:

*“My dream is that all our women can work together on our issues and solve them, and give lessons to the government on **how to work together.**”*

For her, it is important to pass on her experiences or insights, as she does with her students that she is educating during her daily routine. She hopes that they will regain their knowledge and put it to the service of other people. Also, she has identified Julia Muñoz, a leader who —she assures— can give continuity to what she has started. This is significant for her since she considers that knowledge becomes alive when it can be passed on and shared.

She firmly believes in the need to strengthen networking among indigenous women from different regions of the world as a space to submit proposals for problems affecting the exercise of their rights. She asserts that the FIMI has a great possibility to promote this network through processes of socialization in what the Global School students have achieved in their communities and countries.

Her story has been about knowing her steps as a model of struggle for other generations, so that they may know how cultural values and principles that give to support their demands and collective actions can be maintained within themselves from the identity of an indigenous woman living in such a globalized context.

Having been part of the School as a training space positively marked Lisa's leadership, allowing her to recognize that she has left impressions in the lives of women and youth about what should be the defense of the peoples and indigenous women's rights.





Life stories:
INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS
FROM ASIA

Maribeth Bugtong-Biano



An indigenous woman working for Indigenous Peoples. An apprentice who strives to broaden her knowledge and skills.

Maribeth is a woman from the Igorot people, who within her being carries the strength and light of her ancestors to support her leadership.

She is 35 years of age and part of a People that provide the origin to her story. As they continue fighting to promote their rights as indigenous people, despite being witnesses and victims of daily human rights violations, this confirms to her the strength of the peoples. As a mother, she works for the future of her children, convinced that she will contribute to a better future for the next generation, including them. She strives to broaden her knowledge and capacities to contribute to

Indigenous Peoples and women.

She recalls that in elementary school and middle school, teachers always assigned her tasks that required the ability to lead groups of students, which helped her develop and shape her leadership. In the student organization, she held relevant positions to work with students and teachers. She also participated in academic competitions, which allowed her to learn and be trained with tutors. It required effort and dedication to respond positively. In this regard, she states:

“I thank the teachers for placing their trust in me to be able to do things, not only for my own benefit but also for other classmates and the school.”

Leadership as a collective process

Maribeth affirms that leaders are not made all by themselves, but rather by working together with other people to start something or to work for everyone’s benefit, and she believes that leadership is developed gradually. Her leadership began in her childhood, getting involved in different spaces according to the

conditions in which she was living and growing up. She was studying in college and graduate school when she got a job. She believed it was important to work as part of a team and not necessarily as a team leader. Today, she asserts that her work in organizations such as Indigenous Peoples’ International Center for Policy Research and Education (TEBTEBBA) and the Asian Indigenous Women’s Network (AIWN) opened up opportunities for her to become a leader and work in a team.

From her perspective, leadership is developed through experiences and spaces where contribution, learning, and service is possible. Along this path, she values the support of her colleagues from TEBTEBBA and former colleagues from the public university where she had the opportunity to work; in addition to her family’s support, whom she considers to her main allies on this journey.

It has been important for her to have leadership



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Maribeth Bugtong.

examples who have been role models and from whom she has learned, including indigenous women such as Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Myrna Cunningham, Ellen Dictaan-Bang-ao, Ruth Batani, Ibu Rukmini, and her mother, whom she admires and takes up her knowledge to apply it in her life and leadership, even though she has not had close contact with some of them, but she is aware of their work and they are her inspiration to continue.

Her leadership focuses to a great extent on promoting gender equality from the perspective of providing visibility to women's contributions, to empower them as indigenous people, and strengthen the rights of indigenous youth and children, considering that so far these are the most vulnerable sectors having their rights violated.

From her Igorot identity, Maribeth identifies symbols from her culture that represent authority and power, such as Inayan, which is used as a guiding principle in everything they do, whether in leadership or any other basic task. When an individual appreciates the

Inayan, they will do everything in their power to benefit their partner or companion and avoid harming them, even if it is the environment. From this energy, the individual does the right thing not only for their own benefit but also for that of others. If this is not fulfilled, if they act against the welfare or happiness of the community, they will receive a negative impact or a punishment from hidden mud or darkness.

For her, this life principle sustains the actions and work of indigenous women who put their leadership to the service of the community and must be passed on to and inherited by children and youth so that this way of acting does not get lost, but instead becomes more and more established and practiced.

Global Leadership School as a tool for the defense of the indigenous women's rights

Because of her eagerness to learn and share, she is always participating in spaces where she can increase her knowledge and share her experiences. Therefore, the training program proposed by the FIMI was a new opportunity for her to increase her knowledge and improve her advocacy skills, and thus gain experience participating in international mechanisms and learn from experts, human rights defenders, and indigenous women.

It was valuable for her to have been admitted to the Global School because it demanded of her a greater commitment to women and young people.

During her participation in the Leadership School, she had significant experiences, such as meeting other indigenous women leaders and learning from them. It was also important to participate in activities during the Permanent Forum. The course at Columbia University helped her learn about the political dynamics surrounding indigenous peoples' efforts to gain recognition and human rights. With satisfaction, she states:

“After the Global Leadership School, I think my work in the programs we are implementing has improved.”

Drafting the advocacy plan has been another valuable experience, which meant conducting an analysis exercise, making clear and objective proposals. She learned that this is a process in which one must be clear about the direction and issues to be addressed. For her, this education has been a useful tool to understand the importance of accurate data as a key element to develop the foundations of the plan.

As part of her leadership, she continues supporting collective processes at the local and national levels. Regarding advocacy mechanisms, she supported the supervision of a research process that collected data to position the situation of indigenous women in their organizations that are part of the Asian Indigenous Women’s Network (AIWN). For the development of indigenous youth, she participated in the implementation of the training module and training activities at the community level aimed at indigenous youth.

After she participated in the Global School, she made arrangements with the FIMI to monitor the implementation of the leadership training process in India and the Philippines for a few months, which represented an opportunity to implement what she had learned in the School. As a result, she was a co-facilitator of the virtual platform and her contribution partially consisted of organizing the in-person version in the Philippines. She is still responsible for the organization with members of the Asian Indigenous Women’s Network, as well as the activities during the following months.

For her, coordination is an important step

to achieve the goals and objectives set to promote advocacy from the local to the national levels.

Her main lessons learned during her training have been about the functioning of the United Nations’ system and learning from experts regarding advocacy processes and defense of the collective rights of indigenous women and native peoples has been of great value in enhancing her leadership.

An important lesson consisted of clearly understanding that the strengthening of the indigenous women’s network is an important tool to promote the human rights of indigenous women. She believes that to do this task, indigenous women need resources and capacity building, which she confirmed after she participated in the Global School. In this regard, she states:

*“A woman cannot do this task alone. **Supporting each other and learning constantly** is what we always want to achieve with the AIWN and Tebtebba partners.”*



©FIMI. Group of participants, GLSIW Asia regional capacity building program. City of Gujarat, India.

Individual and collective dreams

Maribeth believes that dreams are achievable rights and must begin with the individual and collective changes. As an individual, she dreams of becoming a human rights lawyer focused on indigenous women's rights. To this end, she knows that it is necessary to prepare and continue working hard. At the organizational level, she wants to create an organization that works with women and indigenous peoples at the local and community levels, where the systems for human rights protection and the already established approaches for the sustainable development of indigenous women and their peoples are used.

She is aware that it is necessary to share the

acquired experiences with other people in principle, so she is first going to pass on her learning to her children, nieces, and all of the boys and girls she knows, as well as to women leaders who she is now accompanying from the organization.

To continue strengthening indigenous women, she believes that it is necessary to follow up on training programs on research issues for advocacy, which allows indigenous peoples to make sustainable development plans, as well as to promote communication strategies to convert data into knowledge that can be assimilated and passed on to more women and other sectors. She believes it is important to create courses in English as a

second language in regional and international participation, through learning tutorials as a necessary tool and promote internships that can help develop capacities in the field on these topics.

Maribeth's life story helps us to understand how the values and cultural identity of an indigenous Igorot woman sustain leadership based on the sense of "we," represented in the Inayan as a guiding principle in everything she does; in the search for good common and mutual aid, avoiding damaging the environment of their people.

She represents strength, wisdom, and balance as principles to promote changes in women, children, and youth in the search for conditions that allow for them to exercise their specific and collective rights. Her leadership is a benchmark for other women, who just like her, have the initiative to strengthen their skills and knowledge and are willing to share them so that they can multiply.



Rani Yan Yan



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Rani Yan Yan.

We are brave and strong women, not only with ourselves but also with our family and People. We are recipients and creators of culture and identity.

Rani is an indigenous leader whose lineage is invested by the Rakhine and Marma cultures, which she inherited from her parents, giving rise to her identity and knowledge.

She lives in Chittagong in southern Bangladesh. She designates herself as a Human Rights activist, which is her passion and part of her life. She is the wife of the Chittagong tribe's King. According to her, you cannot simply be a queen or a king; you have to love and work for the people.

She remembers that her parents were the first in her village to venture to the capital city and try to find schooling to educate her and her three siblings with effort and struggle. For this reason, they lived far from their family. Forty

years ago, only a few people lived in the city. She learned from her parents to be brave for everything they went through at that time. She explains:

*“My mother’s voice always said: ‘if you believe in something, you have to go for it. If you see that nobody is working on it, keep going. You cannot be mediocre. **Do the best you can.**”*

Her life was influenced by her parents, who worked hard to raise their family and face the difficulties that arose. Their strength was inherited from their ancestors; this is how she understands it.

Leadership as the indigenous women's strength

According to Rani, her path to leadership began when she realized that she had to fight, make connections, find local, national and international allies in the face of a difficult situation that they had to go through as people. 10 or 12 years ago she was granted a subsidy by the Australian government. She learned that there was a fire and many houses were burned somewhere in Chittagong. At that time, she felt frustrated because she was so far away from her country. After that event, she decided to do something; she brought together all of the indigenous women who were studying in southern Australia and organized a demonstration in front of the Parliament building. In the end, they delivered a statement in which they evidenced the violation of indigenous rights committed in Bangladesh.

This represented the beginning of her leadership because even though she was in another place, she felt the need to show solidarity towards her people and to vindicate her indigenous identity. She states:

“That event marked the beginning of my leadership. I realized that activism is what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

Since the beginning, it has been important for her to have female and male allies to achieve what she has achieved so far. Her first ally was her very supportive husband, then her parents, who have been close to her in difficult circumstances. Also, the leaders of civil society organizations and human rights activists from Bangladesh, who are part of Indigenous Peoples, and those who are part of other peoples.

For Rani, an ally is someone who works alongside her, supports, and strives to carry out their commitments and responsibilities under her leadership, that is why she recognizes the aforementioned allies as the most important ones.

Part of her journey has been influenced by the example of indigenous women, who are her leadership mentors. She has learned a lot from so many indigenous women, whom she has met in the very remote areas of Bangladesh which she has traveled through. They have knowledge that has allowed them to survive for so many years and, despite the difficult situation they live in, they are strong women, they are activists fighting for human rights, women, and indigenous rights. They are her examples because of their perseverance, strength, and leadership. She explains:

“There is a great woman who refused to stop fighting even after suffering a gang rape, which made her feel more motivated to fight. She inspired me a lot. Even though it happened six years ago, she has continued fighting to this day.”



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Rani Yan Yan.

Her role models have become her strength because they represent life lessons to put into practice. She wants to try to get a little closer to the level of dedication that they have demonstrated.

During this time, her support has been focused on promoting a different form of leadership, since traditionally, in most communities, it is assumed by men. Upon her return to Bangladesh, she promoted the appointment of women as village chiefs. As a result, they have a woman leader, something that did not happen six years ago. For this reason, she focuses her work mainly on indigenous women, not only at the government level but within the community itself. Her main contribution is to make them aware of their rights as indigenous women.

She leads an advocacy team made up of representatives of women's, youth, and civil society organizations. She is also advising indigenous youth from different groups that come from 11 communities, with whom she is committed to supporting in the defense of their rights and restoration of their identity.

Living in the urban area far from the communities and being invaded by another system makes people no longer practice certain values of their culture. This is a constant challenge for her. An important value that strengthens the community is the relationship with neighbors. If someone has problems, people will help; this is practiced especially in the villages. Another value is the celebration of the appreciation ceremony for what was received. These are some principles

of their culture that persist in rural areas and that make communities strong in the face of any adversity. Unfortunately, in the urban area, it is more individualistic now, so it is necessary to take them up again.

For Rani, these values must become foundations for the exercise of authority and leadership from the community, local, and national levels. In her own words, she states:

“You will be recognized as a leader if you know what they need. We work together. We work for society. If you work for yourself, you will not be considered a leader.”

Global Leadership School: a space for indigenous women’s networking

Before entering the Global School, she worked at the national level with organizations and realized that no indigenous women from her community represented them at the International Indigenous Peoples’ Forum; in her country’s delegation, there were only Indigenous men. So, one of her motivations for participating in the Global School was her need to learn about Human Rights instruments and the importance of learning in depth about these issues with experts.

One of her valuable experiences was meeting other Indigenous women and sisters from all over the world as it allowed her to realize that they have similar problems and live in similar conditions within different contexts. It made her feel stronger, surer, and sympathetic with respect to the struggles of the indigenous women in the world. She explains:

*“I feel stronger knowing that I am not alone, that **there are many [women] in the world fighting for the same goals.**”*

Drafting and implementing the advocacy plan involved putting into practice their accumulated experience and the knowledge acquired in the Leadership School. Her proposal consisted of mechanisms for the participation of indigenous women so that their voices were heard in the National Implementation Plan of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Her proposal consisted of getting indigenous women involved in the national dialogue, based on their knowledge about its content and their understanding of the spirit of its approach. The plan was implemented in the first phase because it required resources, and obtaining them has not been difficult.

Being a member of the Chittagong indigenous women’s network facilitated workshops and training so that women could be aware of the SDGs and commit themselves to participate in a dialogue at the national level. It added valuable experience to her leadership and she was able to identify the challenges involved in developing collective and advocacy processes at the national level.

After participating in the School, she has worked at the community level to carry out training and workshops about the

implementation of the advocacy plan, through which she collected information regarding indigenous women from various organizations, and presented it in national and international forums.

She asserts that the Leadership School created indigenous women's networks, enabling the generation of alliances, arrangements, and support. Now she is connected nationally and internationally with indigenous women she has met through the program and with whom she is in contact and has built bridges of collaboration between them. All of this was possible through the valuable opportunity she had in her training and participation at the School.

For Rani learning is a constant because it allows her to continue promoting changes in

herself and in other people, and being part of the Leadership School was an opportunity to achieve it. She learned about the participation mechanism provided to Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations, through a different teaching methodology: learning-by-doing, which she is qualified to apply because she has the necessary tools to work with Indigenous Peoples.

Now she is sharing her new knowledge with women, which gives her the possibility to promote new women's leadership.



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Rani Yan Yan.

Individual and collective dreams

Rani is a woman who knows how far she can move forward as a leader, that is why she affirms it is important to get closer to her dreams and achieve changes that start with herself. Now she feels more confident about participating in public spaces such as international forums, making proposals from indigenous women. She feels confident about speaking with the government and other claimants to negotiate and promote alliances in favor of Indigenous Peoples. Her work expanded from the national to the international level thanks to the knowledge acquired during her participation in the Global School.

One of her dreams is to be able to live longer because in her country threats against life are constant and living free of violence has become a dream for most of the people. Sadly, she states:

“If you speak out, you will die. That is the message we receive all the time. We have to shut our mouths and protect ourselves.”

She dreams of a society where one can speak out, where it is possible to share experiences, be free, without being discriminated against for being indigenous women. To achieve this, she knows that they have to continue fighting as peoples. She is a woman committed to her responsibility — together with the organizations of women and Indigenous Peoples— of



striving to fulfill dreams that at the same time become challenges. She states:

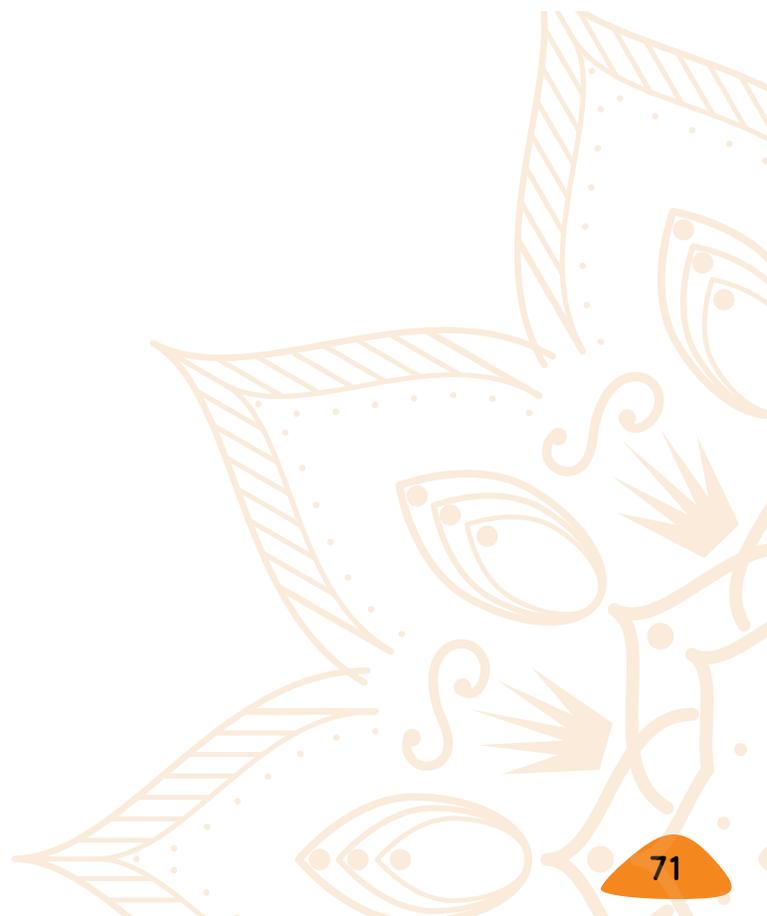
“You can die in silence, or raise your voice and die. I need two or three lives to make this dream come true. We are Indigenous, we have been here so long. This is our land; it is not for sale.”

She is convinced that learning and experiences should be shared as they can be useful to others. She has worked with young people, a new generation, to whom she is passing on her knowledge and with whom she is putting her experience into practice. She truly hopes Indigenous youth can make a difference.

She believes that other issues such as the gender perspective in indigenous communities, the impacts of climate change, and the meaning of the Sustainable Development Goals need to be addressed. For her training and workshops continue to be a good strategy to raise awareness among women and youth.

Going through the spinning process of Rani's leadership helps us to know how an indigenous woman retakes her rights and assumes them as part of her life to later fight to exercise them from a collective perspective, along with other women, empowering them as right holders.

She is an example of how to make knowledge and learning become useful tools for others, especially when they are shared and socialized to promote collective identities among indigenous women for their empowerment.



Sreyniang Loek



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant
Sreyniang Loek.

Sreyniang is a young leader who is proud of her Bunong identity, a people that have passed down to her their history and values so that she could be a fighting woman. She believes in the strength and energy of indigenous women as right holders.

She was born among the indigenous Bunong People in Monduliri, Cambodia. She is 27 years old. She is grateful for the opportunity to study at the Royal University of Law and Economics to become a lawyer. She is a member of the Local and National Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA), which works on indigenous youth education, media, and community support through projects for human rights defenders and indigenous peoples. She is responsible for organizing empowerment projects for the indigenous women in Asia.

She remembers that being the oldest of six siblings, she took on the household chores, which did not allow her to go to school in due

time. At the age of eight, she was taken to a boarding school to study at the primary level. Later, in high school, at the age of 16, she led around 139 students as a student leader, an experience from which she learned a lot.

Leadership as an indigenous woman

Encontró dentro de su ser las habilidades Within her being she found skills to lead collective processes. So, once she completed her studies and arrived at the city of Phnom Penh, she joined in activities with women, which promoted her confidence in her



leadership as an indigenous woman.

She believes it was important to have people who supported the development of her leadership. For example, her mother, a role model, and an open-minded woman supported her by going against one tradition of her people: a rule that says women cannot go to school or receive higher education. On the contrary, her mother encouraged her to continue, thus becoming in her main ally. Her mother was a farmer, and despite her desire to receive education, her family did not want her to attend school. In this regard, she states:

*“My mother could not go to school and her family allowed her to send her brothers, so my mother did not want to do the same and **changed the course of history.**”*

Her leadership has been inspired by living examples of other indigenous leaders such as Yunmane leader from Cambodia and Ellen from the Philippines, with whom she identifies because of their convictions and identity, and because they have always created opportunities for other women, fighting to position the rights of indigenous women around the world.

Her leadership is linked to the sense of trust and collectivity, that is why she supports the Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Organization (CIPO) and the Cambodia Indigenous Youth Association (CIYA), both from Cambodia, strengthening the leadership of their members, along with other women and young girls. She holds the position of project officer, and is responsible for training women on issues of indigenous women’s rights, national law, and international law.

She asserts that the values of her Bunong culture are partly based on the recognition of feminine energy and of being a woman as a privilege, being the ones who protect the children, taking care of each other, valuing their capacity and strength. However, she believes it is still necessary to strengthen this principle both in women and men. She states:

*“There is a saying that says: ‘you can lose the father, but not the mother.’ **This is what the value of women in my culture means.**”*

This value is related to the power of leadership that contains the sense of guidance, protection, accompaniment, help, and strength, like the energy of women that always give strength to others and sustain the foundations of a family.

Participation in the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women

With energy and youth, Sreyngiang is always looking for spaces to strengthen her leadership and educate herself in order to help other young women to get ahead and take advantage of their abilities and skills. That is why she applied to the Leadership School, even though, at the beginning, she believed it was out of her league and she doubted about getting accepted.

At the Global school, she had important experiences and gained knowledge that marked her leadership, such as leaving her country to go to another continent, trusting only in her own abilities. With satisfaction, she states:

“In my country, people say that women cannot go very far, that they have to marry, cook, and take care of their children.”

The connection and encouragement transmitted by the leaders she met at the UN —who have worked in the field of human rights, especially for indigenous peoples for a long time— was a source of inspiration and strength to continue moving forward and continuing on the path she has traveled thus far.

Drafting the advocacy plan was a great milestone in her leadership as she was able to identify the importance of proposing actions for change and transformation in favor of women. Upon returning to her country after her training process with the FIMI, she shared the plan with her organization and the people she worked with, indigenous women from the working group and the organization of peoples in Cambodia. An important strategy has been to include men in the process, 60% women and 40% men, thus ensuring that women’s voices and opinions are accepted by men, trying to get them to cooperate in activities. She put these working methods into practice that she learned during her participation in the Global School.

Giving back what has been learned to those in need is a responsibility; that is why at the community and national levels she has promoted awareness-raising spaces with women and men, presenting messages so that women’s right to participation be recognized, providing visibility to the importance of their contributions. At the national level, she became president of the CIWWG, with more than 100 members in Cambodia. With satisfaction, she states:

*“In my community and my country, people think that women should stay at home with their husbands in my village, that they cannot go very far away. **With my work, I am changing that mentality.**”*

Her participation in the training process at the Leadership School represented opportunities for coordination and management. A few months after her return from the program, she obtained a fund from the FIMI to support the CIWWG, complementing it with another effort carried out with the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ).

Later on, she coordinated projects with the CIWWG to raise awareness about domestic violence, bringing to light cases of rape and murder. To this end, she was supported by four facilitators and members of the organization. Jointly with them, they tried to hold a press conference to present indigenous women’s rights. They held protests so that the cases presented could be followed up. They helped women to learn about their rights and promoted family gatherings to integrate the legal report of each case.

Sreyngiang asserts that knowledge is useful to the extent that it is transformed into wisdom and shared with other people. For her, it has been a privilege to pass on her leadership experiences and learn from other women leaders at an international level, which is why she values her knowledge gained at the Global School, where she had the opportunity to study in depth the rights of indigenous women and native peoples and learn about the international instruments for their defense.



Individual and collective dreams

Dreams have become a path through which she wants to walk along with sure steps. Her main dream is to become a lawyer, work and promote equal rights for indigenous women, promote mechanisms for the defense of their rights and justice systems that help them to live free from violence.

She is still studying to become a lawyer. Her responsibility is to follow up on rape and murder cases of indigenous women. Many of them have not been thoroughly investigated by the courts. There are still criminals who have not been arrested or gone to jail or have not even been arrested after having committed the crime. For this reason, she believes that

being trained on rights is important for seeking justice. She states:

“Indigenous Peoples need a lot of training before the court. In Cambodia, the number of women in court is not very high. I will be the first indigenous lawyer.”

Sreyning’s life has been a journey that helps us to understand her convictions and dreams, and her search for resources to empower indigenous women of her Bunong people with their individual and specific rights. This is

a challenge that she can face along with other women.

Throughout her leadership as a young woman, we recognize her commitment to strengthening women and young people with whom she works as part of the sense of collectivity and service that she learned at the local and national organizations in which she takes part and that she improved upon in the Global Leadership School.





©FIMI. Group activity, South American regional capacity building program of the GLSIW. Santiago City, Chile.

Life stories: INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS FROM LATIN AMERICA

Ana Ceto Chávez



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Ana Ceto Chávez.

I am an owner of a unique culture and a guardian of nature, a lover of nature, a bearer of cultural values and principles, of my own community and roots.

In the town of Nebaj, which in the Ixil language means: “a place where the water is born,” lives Ana Ceto, a Maya Ixil leader, a female authority and guide of the paths through which her grandmothers and grandfathers, like their ancestors, left behind knowledge and a legacy. Her life story invites us to become acquainted with her journey in the defense of her rights and the protection of her ancient culture.

Ana was born in the municipality of Santa María Nebaj, department of Quiché, located in the northwestern region of Guatemala, a territory violently hit by the internal armed conflict for more than 36 years, resulting in thousands of deaths, forced disappearances, torture, and internally displaced persons. Today its people have resisted with strength

and wisdom, sustained by their worldview and spirituality that give them light and energy to continue pressing forward.

Memories of her childhood come to her mind, placing her around the experience of the internal armed conflict, as a witness to the disappearance of many families, who were extrajudicially executed and tortured. Also, she was able to see how men and women from her town were forcibly displaced to prevent their murder, and, most importantly, learn about the rape experienced by thousands of Ixil women.

During that period, being a rural woman without access to a decent education, basic services in the community, and dealing with



a civil war awakened in her a spirit of effort to make the most of their few opportunities and get ahead together with her family to resist and stay on their land. These terrible events marked her childhood and youth. Since then, she has undertaken a struggle along with other women and men from her town to deal with the social, economic, and political impacts that this conflict left on their people's lives. Despite the adversity, she asserts that she was privileged and protected by the grandparents and spirits of all of her Maya Ixil siblings and humans murdered at that time, which gave her the certainty that this reality should change.

She is a member of the Asociación de Mujeres Sufridas del Área Ixil (Association of Suffered Women from the Ixil Area, MUIXIL), an organization that addresses indigenous women's rights, health, the economy, food sovereignty, and political advocacy, wherein she assumes the role of departmental coordinator. At 43 years of age, she is proud of having completed the degree program of Law and Social Sciences at the University of San Carlos; however, despite many efforts, she has not managed to graduate as a lawyer, which represents a challenge.

Leadership as a path towards peace and balance

In December 1996, the Peace Accords were signed in Guatemala, thus filling the lives of Ana and the Guatemalan population with strength and hope. For her, it meant a new dawn, a time in which the peoples could be reborn and consolidate the organizational struggles to ensure the compliance with the ideals raised in said agreements and force the State and civil society to work for unity and peace throughout the territory, especially to vindicate the victims of the armed conflict that

caused a collective violation of the people's rights, which was typified by her as genocide. She explains:

“My leadership began with my participation in social movements and civil organizations when the armed conflict ended and I reached the legal age. Since that time, due to my minimal academic preparation, I know that I have contributed with my grain of corn to society and have been accepted.”

Throughout the journey of her leadership, Ana knows that she can make mistakes, have successes, and be under circumstances where she must make important decisions. For that reason, having other women as role models and an example of how a leader should be has allowed her to learn; such as her mother, whom she admires for her fighting and working spirit, from whom she has received knowledge and advice; in addition to other great women, such as Myrna Cunningham, Rose Cunningham, Tarcila Rivera, and Rosalina Tuyuc, whom she admires for their work on behalf of other women in the world, for their historic struggles in their defense of their rights and those of their peoples.

In her life journey, actively participating in organizations, she has assumed commitments with her people, mainly in promoting actions that have favored their development. However, it would not have been possible without the support, backing, and accompaniment of female and male allies, who have become the mainstay of her leadership. In her own words,



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Ana Ceto Chávez

Ana states:

“My allies were mainly my parents. They allowed me to get involved in social issues in favor of vulnerable groups. I’ve also had the support of international cooperation.”

For Ana, leadership is synonymous with guidance, work, companionship, and

commitment, which gives meaning and strength. For this reason, her efforts have been focused on supporting groups of Maya Ixil women –surviving victims of the internal armed conflict– in her municipality, training them on their rights, promoting spaces for healing violence and identifying community and municipal spaces so that women are taken into account in the presentation of proposals for improving their quality of life.

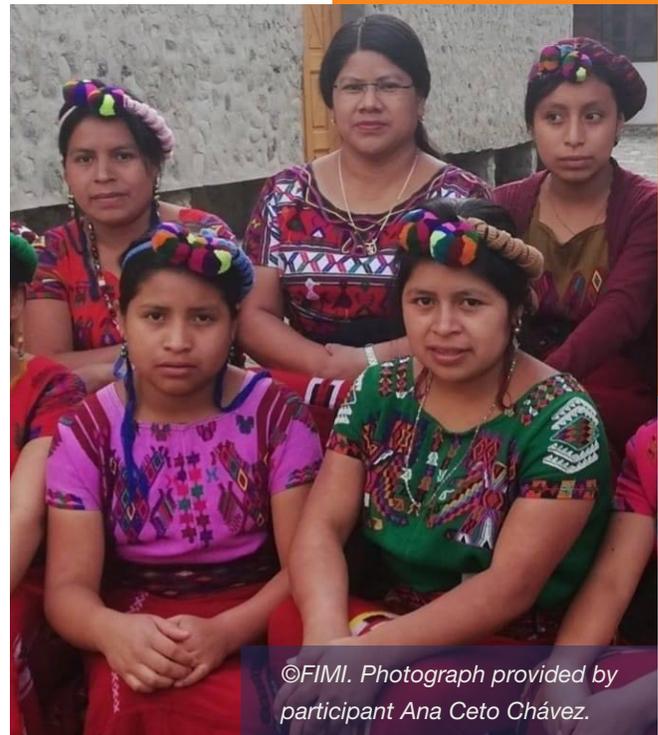
Ana states that the Ixil culture is based on spirituality, as a legacy of her Mayan ancestors who were timekeepers, researchers, artists, archaeologists, healers; protectors of the Ixim Ulueu (Mother Earth), water, animals,

forests, mountains, rivers; interpreters of the messages of the stars, moon, and sun. This is a worldview that is still present and has transcended time and space. One of the Ixil people's symbols that represents leadership and authority is the wooden rod, carried by ancestral authorities such as the councils of elders. It is a symbol that reaffirms an individual's service to the collectivity and community. In the case of women, the symbol is a napkin and a headband made by the women with cotton thread, woven on a backstrap loom, and includes representations of flora, fauna, and the stars. It is used to identify them when they hold a high-level leadership position.

The Leadership School: an opportunity to relearn

For Ana, applying to the Leadership School was an opportunity to relearn, or in other words, to get to know a different way of acquiring knowledge. She was admitted to the School, motivated to strengthen her abilities as a leader, and gain more education and experience. Being admitted to participate in the Global School meant a great experience. It was important to meet indigenous women leaders from around the world, discuss the difficulties and challenges in exercising their leadership, thus adding to her own experience different ways of developing an indigenous women's leadership.

As part of the training process, she drafted an advocacy plan. To this end, it was necessary to identify a problem that affected the women of their municipality, so she defined the topic of strengthening women's citizenship in the Ixil area, to implement it with the Asociación de Mujeres Sufridas del Área Ixil (Association of Suffered Women from the Ixil Area, MUIXIL). The objective of addressing this issue was to promote knowledge concerning rights and to exercise the participation of women who were



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Ana Ceto Chávez.

victims of the internal armed conflict. The plan was implemented with the financial support of the FIMI.

After her training at the Leadership School, she was partly committed to working in the women's organization, contributing to new insights, and passing on her experience and experiences. She believes that when you have knowledge and you are aware of your local and national contexts, you are able to have clear proposals and opinions to have an impact on the different spaces and processes. An important lesson during her training has been about tools to achieve advocacy in socio-political spaces, a key action that allows for clear mechanisms and methodology to be implemented for an advocacy action, essential for her leadership mission, mainly in decision-making spaces where women from their municipality have fewer opportunities. Ana explains:

“We indigenous women have the fewest opportunities in education, and do not occupy any positions in public and political decision-making spaces.”

Ana Ceto’s life experience is an opportunity to help us understand how leadership is developed, even when there is a history of pain and war. It teaches how one can bounce back, flourish again, and find a tool for life in education, which is confirmed by her experience at the Global Leadership School.

Dreams and challenges

As a leader, she asserts that thinking about a better present and future for herself and her municipality means being clear about where she wants to go, so having dreams and turning them into challenges is a way to make those changes.

At the national level, her municipality has the poorest health, educational, and developmental conditions. That is why access to education for Indigenous girls and adolescents through scholarships, programs, and university education is a great dream and challenge for her, which implies working hard at the organizational level jointly with other sectors to achieve it. She asserts that passing on her experiences to women, and especially Ixil young girls in general, is fundamental, so in each training activity she talks about the issue of education and advocacy in socio-political spaces.

She is betting on the generational hand-off, so she is ensuring that young people occupy spaces and develop leadership from now on, without losing knowledge and wisdom of their predecessors, grandmothers and grandparents, as a principle of learning from the Ixil people. She also promotes community and municipal spaces, addressing issues on leadership and Human Rights from the Mayan worldview, ensuring their focus on groups of women and young people as they are the most vulnerable population segments in their municipality.

Daniela Feliciana Benítez de Díaz

©FIMI. Participation of Daniela Benítez during side event; 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States.



Nivaclé woman, a protector and weaver of her knowledge since before, warrior of life, forger of my security, leadership, and empowerment for the deserving of justice and good living.

As an ancestral people, the indigenous Nivaclé people sustain the life of everything that exists in their worldview, which recognizes the existence of a deep bond between nature and humanity. They are people that have resisted the inequality and injustice committed by the State to this day. Land covered with forests and plains that feed the life of its people who inhabit it. In this land, appears the life of Daniela Benítez, an indigenous Nivaclé woman, whose colorful story invites us to take a tour to get to know her successes, struggles, joys, and challenges.

At 56 years of age, she firmly believes in the importance of organization by and for women,

that is why she values her studies as a Nursing Assistant and is proud to be an artisan. She currently participates in the organization of Coordination of indigenous women of Paraguay engaged in the development and training on issues of violence in its different manifestations; Human Rights and territory; a space where she is responsible for the training area as a facilitator.

The passages of her childhood come to her mind and she remembers her first time in a Catholic school, where primary education was only in Spanish. It was the first violation of her rights since she was a Nivaclé language speaker, which happened until she was 14

©FIMI. Participation of Daniela Benítez during side event; 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States.



years old when studied at the secondary level in the capital with the Sisters of the Teresian Congregation who prohibited the students from speaking their Indigenous language. Without a doubt, this strongly marked her life. For her it was difficult to understand why she was forced to adopt a culture different from her own and an education that did not recognize her values as a people.

With sadness and anger, she remembers that as a child she saw the violence experienced by her older sister, who was beaten by her husband. Since then, she has thought about how women do not deserve to be mistreated or abused by their partners. It was a reality that had to change. During her youth, she worked in a public hospital, a workplace where she felt discriminated against by her

co-workers for being an indigenous woman. She was vulnerable in the face of a system that institutionally promoted prejudices and racist stereotypes, which was reflected in the attitude of her co-workers and in the mistreatment and injustice towards Indigenous Peoples every time they came to obtain a public service.

She proudly mentions her father —a leader of the Nivaclé people and son of Cacique Samco, an important authority in his time—who fought for the defense and protection of the territory and was assassinated; a fact that devastated the family because they asserted that the policies of inequality and injustice that existed in their country, causing confrontations and death, were the culprits.

Leadership to strengthen the self-esteem and knowledge of indigenous Nivaclé women

Daniela believes that every struggle must respond to a demand, and that is why the beginning of her leadership is linked to the search for better conditions and treatment for the women of her town. In June 2000, together with two other women leaders, they led dialogues with groups at the community level, under the slogan of strengthening the self-esteem and knowledge of the indigenous Nivacchei women of the Nivaclé people. Also, it is the first organization self-organized and led by themselves. A political bet that meant a rebirth for her people. Breaking barriers and racist and gender stereotypes have been one of the main reasons for founding the women's organization, which motivated the origin of her leadership and is the basis that gives meaning to her being as a leader. She states:

“The idea was to break the silence and provide visibility to the important values, to the priceless roles of women both inside and outside home, which will strengthen us personally and help move forward.”

In this journey, as Daniela says, women and men who have been her main allies, supporting and encouraging her to stay in the organization and the peoples' movement, are those beings who are willing to support her demands, who do not question her but rather affirm the

meaning of her struggle. First, she recognizes her Great Spirit, which has always given her the strength and courage to move forward and fight; then, her children and husband, who support and accompany her from the space where they are, being consistent with the walk and talk in the demand for the rights of Nivaclé women; also, the community leaders who have seen her work; close friends of the organizations with whom they work together; and the support of an Italian anthropologist, who knows her trajectory and motivates her not to stop.

Daniela affirms with certainty that other women, who before her went ahead to clear away obstacles and open a path, have been predecessors of her leadership, which means that she had the strength to see them as role models. That is why she states:

“For me, a woman role model is my mother, because of her resistance, patience, and hope; also, Tarcila Rivera, because of her courage to be rooted in her cultural roots.”

From her point of view, being a leader includes service, support, contribution, and collective benefit, that is why she has focused on continuing working along with Indigenous women's and mixed organizations, training them on issues and processes about empowerment, human rights, political participation of indigenous women, as well as the strengthening of leadership; with special emphasis on mechanisms for the defense of the rights to production, to partisan political participation and in matters of agricultural diversification and solidarity economy.

Daniela, as part of her people and culture, is supported by a philosophy of life with a high cosmogonic content, which conceives smoky beings, plant and animal spaces as native or belonging to a specific place, and therefore of the earth that sustains them. That is why she relates her being as a leader with principles that respond to this way of assuming everything that surrounds her as being part of herself, recognizing the values of respect for the word, collectivity, solidarity, and trust as the basis that gives sustainability to her leadership.

Global Leadership School for empowerment and resistance in the struggles of Nivaclé women

From the beginning of her leadership, Daniela has assumed that her demands and efforts were focused on strengthening other women among her people, promoting new leaders, and developing positive actions that would improve their lives. Therefore, she has constantly sought spaces for their training, finding in the Leadership School for indigenous women promoted by the FIMI an enormous opportunity to achieve her purpose of gaining more tools and knowledge. In her own words, she explains:

*“My greatest motivation to apply to the Global School was **empowerment, security, resistance, strengthening fights, and the promotion of***



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Daniela Benitez.

our environmental resources as women and peoples.”

During her participation in this training space, she had several significant experiences, such as being a student of a collective and legitimate educational process with a basis and content that sustains the participation of indigenous women at the global level, based on their specific and collective rights; applying a clear, high-quality methodology, which facilitated the learning-by-doing process, a

novel teaching system for indigenous women. Daniela states:

“For me, it was a dream. I could not believe that I was a student of that School, because I learned to value myself and confirm my studies, meet leaders from other cultures, and contact the sisters responsible for those courses.”

Being part of the School awakened her courage to formulate the advocacy plan, understanding that this is a key tool for women. Defining its content, objectives, and understanding the strategy of establishing actions of change in the face of a problem experienced by her people was a great learning experience. She explained that drafting the plan was important because it was formed in conjunction with her organization, addressing the topic of “Fortifying Cultural Nutrition with a Focus on the School Diet” for its promotion to turn it into a public policy of the department.

This plan is being implemented in the Indigenous schools, which she considers an achievement and something new for the municipality. Its approach allowed her to affirm that all advocacy action must be linked to the transformation of problems experienced by the community and the people, which can change by getting all of the organized actors of the municipality involved and through advocacy so that the State assumes its role and changes this reality.

Today school lunch supplies are no longer processed foods; on the contrary, the agricultural production is purchased from

the indigenous people of the communities for their preparation, thus supporting their family economy, promoting consumption among themselves, and improving nutrition of school-age girls and boys while malnutrition is eradicated. According to her experience, she states:

“The plan is still being implemented, and even replicated in other schools. The enhanced evaluation team was formed that ensures the right to live well.”

At the community level, she promotes greater interest and responsibility to protect natural resources. For this reason, at the national level, her contribution is aimed at achieving spaces for women leaders’ participation, including the preparation, execution, and evaluation of processes developed for women and peoples. Also, together with her organization, they committed themselves to promote balanced nutrition with a cultural focus on school-age girls and boys in Indigenous schools, which represents progress and a challenge.

This aforementioned allowed her to coordinate with teachers from educational centers, parents, and community producers. To this end, she collected information about the amount of existing economic resources for Indigenous schools, and which or how many of these have been implemented, and what communities or towns were benefited and under what conditions. She explains:

“The coordination has been useful because it an opportunity to demand our participation for evaluating the finished work and see the quality of work.”

As part of her lessons learned at the Global School, she values the knowledge and defense of her rights as a Nivaclé woman, subject and protagonist, possessor and deserving of them, but, mainly, a bearer of knowledge that will allow her to demand and fulfill them, as well as reaffirm the essential of exercising leadership with and for women so that their demands are presented with their own voice.

Challenges and dreams: Indigenous leadership development

Daniela assumes that every learning process creates changes, which are evident individually and collectively. In other words, no change arises if first one does not go through with it. This is why she says:

“I feel that now I can be myself, be the guide of my family; as a couple, the change is that now there is more dialogue and harmony.”

For Daniela, dreams become goals when they are visualized and given shape, space, time, and spirit. One of them is to become a parliamentarian in her country to propose legal instruments in favor of indigenous women. Therefore, her challenge is to become a local authority of her department to develop local advocacy actions for the benefit of the demands and needs of women and Indigenous Peoples.

With enthusiasm and hope, she assures that sharing what she has learned is a life principle, a commitment that gives meaning to knowledge, so inheriting what she knows and learns to other people is a mission. One way to promote it was to get their children to join an Indigenous youth organization called “Uno Juvenil Indígena del Paraguay” (UJIP by its acronym in Spanish), a space for participation by young people and with youth to promote the involvement of young citizens. Currently, she is promoting the appointment of a Paraíso community women’s coordinator, with whom she will share everything she learned during her training and leadership process.

She believes it is important to continue participating, occupying decision-making spaces, promoting training processes for new leaders, and empowerment through strategies, such as generational dialogue among women, mechanisms of socialization and exchange; gain knowledge from older women and men, to share concerns, problems, joy, successes, and proposals for the development of the community and the municipality.

Daniela's fabric of life is an example of what leadership is and means for a Nivaclé woman, who represents the fighting spirit, strength, and value of her culture and worldview as an ancestral people. It is to discover the sense of perseverance in the search for the collective good, strengthening their knowledge and learning, joining training spaces such as the Leadership School, as an opportunity for empowerment and knowledge of tools that sustain and support the management and exercise of their leadership.



Fresia Paola Paineofil Calfuqueo

©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Fresia Paineofil.



“Mapuche Lafkenche woman, proud of my culture, apprentice and bearer of cultural knowledge, willing to continue soaking in my cultural knowledge and pass it on to future generations.”

The story of Fresia is a journey through a life of struggle and leadership, which is full of shades of different colors. She was born in Carahue, the ninth region of Araucania, located in northern Chile. She is the fifth in a family of seven members: her parents, four sisters and one brother. She has a little girl who was born in June 2019 and represents a beautiful gift of life.

At 31 years of age, she has managed to complete her studies as a Tourism Technician. She is part of her community organization in Llaguepulli, where she is a member of the management and mutual support

team, engaged in the sustainable ancestral economy, giving value to ancestral practices such as *trafkintu* (exchange of species and knowledge), working for a *kume mogen* (good living) for the people of her village.

For Fresia, her parents have been the main examples of her approach to community social work because her father has stood out as a community and territory leader. On the other hand, she considers her mother a fighter in maintaining balance and family support.

Fresia's work has focused mainly on making positive changes in her community,



collaborating in different areas, with emphasis on subsistence agroecology and the empowerment of indigenous women within the community organization.

She tells about her childhood, evoking it as a stage that shaped her being, in which her mother was a fundamental pillar for her growth, along with her two older sisters. With nostalgia, she recounts that in that period her father was absent because he began his leadership roles from at the very young age of 17, fulfilling different roles such as president, secretary, or treasurer within the leadership of the community organizations. In this regard, she states:

“We always knew that my father played an important role within the community, but as we were girls, we did not understand why we always had to be without him. He went out every day for help, even on weekends, to meetings and in search of help to improve the quality of life of families who were very vulnerable at that time.”

During that time, the majority of people in her community lived in extreme poverty. People did not know how to read or write, had no education, so they lacked the knowledge required by the Western system to access public services. Her father, on the other hand, had the opportunity to learn to read and write, which helped him to move forward with his community. She remembers:

“At first, I did not understand why my father cared about other people, but, as the years went by, I understood it and finally I saw that it also benefited us as a family.”

Leadership woven from the living example

Her leadership as an indigenous woman began as a result of the example of her father who motivated her to follow in his footsteps, contribute to the community, and the development of the territory. From her point of view, the transfer of leadership is when it becomes a life practice inherited from generation to generation, through example, learning to be a person who takes charge, a guide, and a leader. With satisfaction, she states:

“I started replacing my father in meetings and participating in the community. I also had the opportunity to access Western education where I developed other capacities and I said to myself: I have to go back to help my community.”

Leadership for Fresia is linked to the importance of knowing how to serve, learn, and share with the community for a better life. It is a commitment, a system of help, and mainly a service in favor of a group, a community, and a people so that being and belonging makes sense. She explains:



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Fresia Paineñil.

*“Today I am recognized as a female leader of my community, and the older leaders and cultural authorities, amid jokes and truth, tell me that I am **the ambassador of Llaguepulli.**”*

Aware of the development of her leadership, she knows that she has female and male allies, who have accompanied and supported her to be able to exercise it, such as her family;

without their support she would not have been able to assume the responsibilities and commitments she has now. She also has the support of traditional leaders and authorities who have placed their trust in her as a woman and leader.

She recognizes her mother as her main example of leadership. She taught her values, such as respect, responsibility, fighting for her dreams, family, and looking out for the well-being of those around them and the community. Consequently, the exercise of her leadership can be achieved to the extent that other actors provide accompaniment, legitimacy, and support to her work. With emotion, she explains:

“My mother always instilled in me that I had to love, value, accept, and respect myself as a woman, above all and everyone else, as the basis of life and of being a woman and a leader.”

From her experience, leadership does not make sense if she is not a leader in the service of others. For that reason, her main contribution to the community from the beginning has been for the benefit of families, and now of the territory where everyone lives through motivational talks to other indigenous peoples in Chile, under the principle of sharing what she has learned in her journey, and focusing mainly on the work of organizational strengthening and project execution for the empowerment of women.

For the Mapuche people, a symbol that sustains and marks their leadership is authority and power, based on their creators and protectors as an intangible but present spiritual aspect, that coexists daily among



©FIMI. During the delivery of diplomas to the participants of the regional capacity building program South America of the GLSIW. Santiago City, Chile.

them and allows them to maintain balance with nature and the human body. The previously mentioned shows how in ancient cultures there is a strong presence of spiritual elements that represent strength, respect, and principles of life that give legitimacy and support to the exercise of leadership, which is transferred through the elders, women and men of the community who represent wisdom, experience, and loyalty to their worldview of Indigenous People.

Those are principles of the subculture that she recognizes, assumes, respects, and practices, being sure that they are transferred and maintained over the years despite the system of racism that affects the Indigenous People.

The Leadership School: a space for learning and knowledge.

As part of her life experience as a leader in her community and Mapuche people, she identified in the Global Leadership School an opportunity to learn, progress, and socialize experiences, as well as a space to unlearn and relearn from the perspective of women of Indigenous Peoples. Her main motivation for participating was to learn about the international mechanisms that are in favor of and ensure the well-being of Indigenous Peoples, as well as to share experiences with other indigenous peoples, but, especially, her personal growth in order to apply the

knowledge to her work in her community.

Her participation in the Leadership School has been significant, especially because it has allowed her to acquire new knowledge, validate organizational mechanisms, and reveal the importance and need to know and understand about her rights as an indigenous woman, as a people, and as a territory. In this regard, she states:

“I was able to meet and share experiences with sisters from other peoples, about international organizations, also spaces for advocacy, mainly for us as women.”

The Global School represented building management bridges to generate networks of knowledge and resources, which allowed her and still allow her to improve the quality of life of families in her community through projects. Therefore, she values the support of the FIMI, which encourages and invites her to participate in advocacy spaces in different areas.

Part of the training process at the Leadership School is the formulation of an advocacy plan, a learning methodology that represented a very big step for her managing her leadership and supporting other women and her community. Her plan focuses on agroecology for a healthier diet. Fortunately, she obtained international support, and a first project related to the same topic was implemented. Currently, they are implementing the second stage and applying for another project with another foundation. With satisfaction, she



©FIMI. During the delivery of diplomas to the participants of the regional capacity building program South America of the GLSIW. Santiago City, Chile.

states:

“I have been able to obtain all of these funds with the help and opportunity provided by the FIMI.”

As a tool for change, implementing the advocacy plan became a successful experience for her because she promoted family participation in her community, who appreciated her support and used the implements that were acquired. She has also been able to see a feeling of satisfaction and pride in women about what they have accomplished, which demonstrates that advocacy is understood through practice of collective and organized work with the community and with Fresia's committed leadership.

Advocacy is now synonymous with working together and close to her people; it is about understanding everybody's needs, it is about transforming problems into proposals and actions toward change for good living.

For her, training is useful when it brings about contributions, when opportunities and challenges are reflected insofar as they allow for generating trust, legitimacy, and recognition for the service of the community. For this reason, on several occasions, she has given motivational talks, mainly in her territory, supporting other communities. Thanks to her experience, she contributes with her technical knowledge, developing and managing projects to the community, according to the needs and opportunities, recognizing the contribution of allies such as the FIMI.

Thanks to her experience in the implementation of the advocacy plan, she has developed the ability to identify opportunities for coordination and fund management. Coincidentally, at the time of its execution, the community had been

assigned a small project on the same subject, thus managing to supplement funds and diversify the resources. Some people took advantage of the purchase of water storage tanks, and with the other fund they bought supplies and the rainwater catchment system was implemented. Currently, families, mainly women, have water to irrigate their gardens. With satisfaction, she explains:

“We continue working and we won another project with the help of the FIMI where the PAWANKA fund financed us with 40,000 dollars. We are currently applying for another international fund to continue promoting community work with women.”

Individual and collective dreams for change

Throughout her participation in the Leadership School, she asserts that there were changes in her relationship with her partner, family, and her job that marked her life, that made her turn around in her ways of doing things and existing, in her way of seeing life, as an event in space and time. She states:

“Today I see positive changes since I have grown in intellectual knowledge. I have been able to become familiar with experiences in different countries. In one way or another, I am a representative of my community at an international level.”

©FIMI. During the delivery of diplomas to the participants of the regional capacity building program South America of the GLSIW. Santiago City, Chile.



Today, her community's leadership has placed their trust in her, which represents a great responsibility.

She dreams of creating a training school where both types of knowledge are taught, the Mapuche ancestral knowledge and the international instruments, that exist and that protect indigenous peoples; knowledge-focused mainly on young people and children who are the future generations, who can bring about big changes and contribute to this society. In this regard, she states:

"My main dream is to be able to create a team of leaders in my community, and with this team, help the communities in the territory and later on include those who need it."

According to her, a lesson is not useful if it is not shared and passed on. She hopes to share and pass on her experience and insights to her daughter, a small newborn, who she would like to be a future leader to support her people, with technical and cultural knowledge.

Her experience in the Leadership School led her to identify other training needs and strategies, due to the fact that in the communities it is necessary to work on the knowledge of collective rights, which, although they are exercised within the localities, they need to be recognized by the State and mestizo society. Therefore, she values the importance of being trained and informed on different issues and of participating in advocacy spaces, so that her voice and those of other women may be heard. She explains:

“Unfortunately, in Chile, the indigenous peoples, especially the Mapuche people, are classified as terrorists. They talk about the badly called Mapuche conflict, which is nothing but the people’s struggle to defend their rights, mainly about territory, health, and education, for the improvement of our quality of life.”

For her, one strategy should be to prepare more leaders, participate in spaces where they can advocate, putting forward problems accompanied by solution proposals, being critical of the current system but also being proactive; and most importantly, never forget that everything that their actions are based on our cultural principles as Indigenous Peoples.

The story of this Mapuche woman allows us to take a journey through her life, learn about the efforts and relevance of her leadership, which is recognized by her community because it transmits strength, commitment, and hope among the young people. Knowing her walk is a mirror through which other women can meet and identify her as a role model and example.

Realizing how her training process at the Global Leadership School left a mark on her life opened a new window of opportunities to know herself and assume her role as a leader, with capabilities, new knowledge, and know-how that she is willing to share. Today she is not the same. This experience changed part of her life because it allowed her to see new paths and feel useful, with tools to confront the racist and exclusive system in which she lives, to serve more women and her People.





Marbelina Oller Campos



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Marbelina Oller.

The indigenous woman is an accumulation of traditional knowledge, cultural identity, values, collective work, always in defense of our families and the development of the community.

In the region of Guna Yala, the life thread of Marbelina begins, a Guna woman who, in her ancestral roots bears the history of her people, culture, and essence of her leadership, as an experience that begins individually and is transformed collectively.

She was born in Niadub, a small community of the 365 islands Guna Yala region in Panama, of which she recognizes the importance of the Great House of Congress, a political institution that operates in each community and constitutes a consultative, deliberative, civic, and ceremonial center. For her, it is

significant that in this decision-making space there is currently a great demand for greater political participation of women, which has been assumed as a struggle of organized women.

At 41 years old, she considers herself a leader of the Guna People, in which, from a very young age, she has been working with women's organizations, gradually contributing to the recognition of their rights from organizational spaces. For her, indigenous women have their own history, cultural values, and an identity which is evidenced in their traditional clothing

and the accumulation of traditional knowledge, based on the principle of collectivity, defense of the family, community, and earth.

Since she was little, she remembers witnessing the roles that each person had to fulfill in her community. During that period, girls were always taken to the House of Congress, the sacred house where social problems were debated, looking for alternative solutions for any type of situation that arose in the community. In addition, the internal rules of coexistence were discussed, but only with the participation of men and very few women. For this reason, from her childhood, she looked for a way to continue attending to understand how the decision-making system worked and how to begin her leadership.

During her youth, she experienced a very difficult event, due to the fact that the community did not grant her permission to continue studying. In that period, young women were not allowed to study because they believed that they should look for a husband. For her, it was very hard because when she finished elementary school she had to stay in the community, thus losing 7 years to get to university. Despite this, her family supported and defended her; however, they did not comply with the payment of a fine established in the community as they were not able to afford it. From that moment, she decided to support young women so that they could access study opportunities and prepare academically without leaving aside part of their culture.



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Marbelina Oller.

Leadership as a song of the soul for the defense of indigenous women's rights

With a glad face, Marbelina tells about the beginnings of her leadership, which has a particular feature: it began when she was a member of a choir of girls, who, with her voice from the soul sang songs in defense of their territory, the rights of women and their people. It meant a lot because through music she, as a child, began to be aware of the inequalities of her Indigenous People, and at the same time of the fighting force in each leader, which motivated her to continue growing, and get involved to understand more about her

culture. Another event that she remembers is that she accompanied her mother to the Great House as she was a member of the women's cooperative, participating in organized groups. According to her experience, she states:

“Through the song we sang, leadership emerged. As a child, I sang to Abiyala with messages in defense of Indigenous Peoples.”

When she arrived at the capital in her youth, she was a member of the National Coordination of Indigenous Women of Panama (CONAMUIP for its acronym in Spanish). Finding a group of organized indigenous women who were fighting in the city for the defense and demand of their rights in a place full of racism and

discrimination was of great value, especially because she came from a community. She used to feel lonely and at times lost, that is why meeting the leaders was a joy, and from that moment she started working for that organization.

Throughout the years, interweaving her leadership, she understood the importance of passing on traditional knowledge and cultural values as a legacy of the grandmothers who are bearers of traditions and principles that give life to the Guna people. Based on this experience, she joined the national platform of the coordinator, bringing about organized work from the community and common convictions to work on the rights of indigenous women, children, and youth.

Marbelina believes that everything that is collective becomes a people's action for everyone's benefit, that is why it is important



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Marbelina Oller.



©FIMI. Group activity during the GLSIW Mesoamerica regional capacity building program. Guatemala City, Guatemala.

to have the support and company of other people who believe in the actions taken; they become female and male allies. She considers her mother an ally who gave her surety, confidence, strength to continue, and the motivation to move forward and get ahead. She tells about the support of the Episcopal Church of Panama, which provided resources for her work with women; and finally, all the empowerment from CONAMUIP, which gave her the opportunity to continue contributing with her leadership to the struggle of women at a national level.

Having leadership role models is important. One of her role models is Ms. Sonia Henríquez, an indigenous woman from whom she has received her knowledge, ancestral wisdom, and cultural values. She believes that leadership, as she moves forward, is reconstructed, it gets stronger and more committed, so she must continue promoting actions with the sectors in which she has

worked.

Clothed with her Guna identity, she feels that every act done from the personal level to the collective level makes sense to the extent that she puts it into practice and provides visibility to the ancestral principles she has inherited from her grandparents, whose worldview is based on the meaning of life expressed in the form of father and mother, in the representation of nature, plants, and animals from whom the energies of the feminine and masculine flow in an integral and simultaneous way.

Taking back that life perspective is related to the sense of authority by the being and doing of leadership. She states that among the Guna people the highest authority is represented with the symbol of the cane, a tangible, sociopolitical element that indicates the voice of strength and authority. This authority is given to the chiefs, who in their language are called “Sailadumagan” in the

hierarchy of authority. She also points out that other values that sustain leadership, such as solidarity and collectivity, also remain.

An example of the aforementioned is when a house is built with the collective work of men and women from the community. This action has a meaning because the pole is placed in the center of the house, then the beams go at the top together with the mooring, and all this represents solidarity, brotherhood, and unity, as the bases for a person and his family to live with joy. It is also represented in the House of Congress where the leaders of the people gather together to debate on territorial and communal conflicts, and also seek a solution to the problems that the community deals with; values that she expects will last over time.

Global Leadership School for Advocacy

Finding a training space that would provide her with the knowledge to support her work from a perspective of rights and toward advocacy mechanisms was a great opportunity. Having been supported by CONAMUIP for her to become a student of the Global Leadership School was a great achievement, since not all women among her people can access primary and basic education, and much less a high-level political training process, such as the one offered by the FIMI.

Her participation became a challenge for her as her organization entrusted her with the representation of indigenous Panamanian women, due to her capacity and her handling of the work in the communities with indigenous women and the traditional leaders of the different territories. Her primary motivation was to continue with political advocacy for decision making in the communities, as well as pass knowledge on to other women and

youth, and learn not only for herself, but rather in order to become an agent of change.

For her, the Global School was a gathering of knowledge, a space for learning, and an opportunity to share. The whole process was a valuable experience. Meeting other Indigenous sisters at an international level with the goals of struggle, created mechanisms of coordination and joint work synergy. By sharing her own experiences, she felt free to express her thoughts and ideas as a young indigenous woman and was able to relearn and unlearn as a path to new knowledge.

One priceless tool for her was drafting the advocacy plan. She understood how to set objectives that will seek a good result in the communities, as well as identify allies through a map of actors for the analysis of their movements to know how much they can or cannot benefit the process in which changes are expected.

The plan addressed the issue of improving family food and nutrition through the promotion of sustainable agriculture and food security with gender equity in the community of Gardi Sugdub, Guna Yala region. Its objective was increasing agricultural production and improving family alimentation for better habitat, environmental, and health conditions. This is due to the food crisis and malnutrition experienced by Indigenous Peoples. She recognizes that even though not everyone owns a plot of land, they have managed to diversify their plots with products necessary for the family diet.

This proposal was submitted to government institutions for managing resources that allowed the implementation of the advocacy plan and organized work with women in the communities. The idea was to get women leaders involved so that they could promote the plan actions to insert them into the community. With the participation of the authorities, as well as their approval, the

plan was referred to the local congresses of the general communities in search of allies to do collective work in the identification of resources.

The advocacy plan was implemented through coordination with FAO, which provided financial resources to work in the communities and grassroots organizations. It represented a great joint effort that lasted 1 year in different areas and an opportunity to get closer to the Vice Ministry of Indigenous Affairs of Panama's Government Ministry. In addition, her support to the traditional authorities of different indigenous organizations, as a link between the Guna peoples of four territories, allowed her to strengthen her leadership.

At the community level, she has contributed with her participation in the general congress, a space where the voice and proposals of Guna women have been expressed, putting forward the reality and demands of their people. Consequently, she has been taken into consideration to be a speaker, facilitator, and lecturer in the communities on the topic of indigenous women's rights. With satisfaction, she states:

“At the national level, I contribute to the talks organized by women in the country. I participate in press conferences, dialogues, and forums, positioning the demands —our demands— as indigenous women.”

For Marbelina, speaking with moral authority and conviction about indigenous women's rights, the United Nations' (UN) and the Organization of American States' (OAS) declarations and the Sustainable Development Goals is a valuable contribution because, at

the community level, women and youth are unaware of their existence and importance. Her involvement in the constitutional reforms of Panama, making proposals based on these international instruments that protect the existence and demand of the collective and individual rights of indigenous women and their people, have been fundamental. In Marbelina's words, she states:

“Important spaces at an international level, such as the FIMI, which in turn link us to others where we participate in the empowerment of indigenous Panamanian women, provides us visibility and strength at the same time.”

For her, learning is a commitment and an instrument that allows change and personal growth that must be shared. Now her experience allows her to define an advocacy plan as a strategy to propose actions to change the problems affecting her people. Another lesson learned is the clear methodology which can be replicated, as well as the knowledge about work tools and techniques from the women's perspective and with cultural relevance that make it possible to work locally in the communities with other women. Finally, she believes that being able to handle different issues such as international agreements and political foundations in the defense of the rights of indigenous women and their people is the result of what she has learned in the Leadership School.

Challenges and dreams to continue accompanying new leaderships

For her, a dream is an ideal and a challenge is a bridge to make it come true. With this philosophy of life, she asserts that personal changes are part of the way to move toward her challenges and dreams. Being stronger, she identifies herself as an indigenous woman and is proud of that identity that makes her pass her values and principles on her family, thus spending more time with them, which is a crucial change in her journey.

One of her dreams is to continue studying, learning, and educating herself in order to continue supporting her people. A challenge she has set herself is to continue advocating to build a just and equitable society. To this end, she must continue strengthening the women's organization to which she belongs, looking for female and male allies, strengthening the solidarity networks among women's organizations at the level national, without disengaging from those at the local and community level in order to deal with the challenges of living in the middle of a colonial and racist system.

Marbelina has as a principle of life to pass on her lessons learned, knowledge, and experiences because this allows for the continuity of the knowledge and experiences she has accumulated throughout the journey of her leadership. This is why she has shared with the women of different territories of the Guna people and with leaders of the Indigenous Congress about the tools, instruments, and content learned during her training at the Global School, as well as what she experienced with indigenous leaders from other regions of the world.

An important strategic point to continue strengthening leadership is training in systematization processes to record women's stories among their people; that is, writing down their achievements and progress made so far; as well as creating work methodologies for didactic material developed from the Guna people's worldview that is easy to understand, and that at the same time allows for analyzing reality from the experience of women, children, girls, grandparents, and youth, thus promoting the exchange of experiences to collectively strengthen knowledge.

The fabric of Marbelina's life is a journey through her identity to learn how the leadership of a Guna woman represents the sense of collectivity, struggle, and dedication to vindicate with her example the challenges of thousands of women from her people who have bet on community work to defend their rights.

Passing through her history allows us to identify how political training comes to life when testimonies and experiences are shared, socialized, and expressed to those who need support, help, and company. Today, with her spirit of strength and power, she humbly recognizes that one learns every day and in all the stages of life, which she confirmed during her participation in the Leadership School. Marbelina is now a benchmark of empowerment for girls, youth, and women who will remember her testimony as part of their life-long learning.

Norma Isabel Sactic Suque



©FIMI. photograph provided by participant Norma Sactic.

An indigenous woman means: native to a territory, with an identity, with her native language, rooted in the values, principles of a millennia-old culture that practices the Mayan worldview and spirituality.

From her Mayan Poqomam identity, Norma is a woman who, from her birth, bears the practical conception of the values and principles of her Mayan culture. As a manifestation of the cosmos, she feels into her being the nahual energy, which is her star and light that gives meaning to her being as a leader.

She is native to Palin, Escuintla, an indigenous municipality located in the southern region of Guatemala. At 43 years of age, she claims to be a defender of the Mayan peoples' and women's rights. At the community level, she has promoted the defense of territory from her place and space, convinced that vindications are first for the defense of her feminine being as

her first territory. As a result of many efforts, she studied Legal and Social Sciences at the Rafael Landívar University and completed a Postgraduate Degree in Cooperation for Development, an education that gave her opportunities to contribute as a Mayan professional in organizations and entities of the central government in Guatemala.

She is a partner and founder of several indigenous women's organizations. At the local level, she participates in the Poqomam Ixq'anil Women's Organization; at the national level, in the Political Association of Mayan Women - MOLOJ and the Mayan, Garífuna, and Xinka Women's National Coordination (CONMAGAXI, for its acronyms in Spanish);

and at the regional level, in the Alliance of Indigenous Women of Central America and Mexico (AMICAM, for its acronyms in Spanish). These are organizational spaces that promote women's political participation, as well as the defense and demand of their specific and collective rights through training, advocacy, research, and alternative communication actions.

Within her nuclear family, as an only child, a woman, and the first granddaughter, she was not very welcomed by her mother's family, who expected her mother to have a male child as she was the oldest daughter. Norma asserts that it resulted from the influence of Western culture in her town. For that reason, she recognizes her mother's effort to deal with this situation and help her take her position as the first granddaughter despite being a woman. Since she was born, her mother has passed the essence of Poqomam culture on to her, and since her childhood has taught her to speak their language with the support and insistence of her father. Her mother made sure that she wore her Mayan clothing from a very young age, which she does to this day. It means to be dressed with the worldview of her people, as they are garments woven on a pedal-loom with cotton threads representing in shapes and colors —with greater presence of red and purple, as well as the Kabaguil—the double-headed bird that represents duality, feminine and masculine, light and dark, morning and night, that women and men bear inside themselves as part of their Mayan being.

She remembers that during her childhood she grew up in an environment with mestizo classmates who discriminated against her at school. Her schooling was always in Spanish, so she got confused because her first language was Poqomam. She states:



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Norma Sactic.

“I truly value family environments. I remember that on weekends I could speak the Poqomam language with them, and my grandfather used to give his grandchildren pseudonyms related to animals or some element of nature, which represented a characteristic in us. He used to call me Imul which means rabbit, because I was restless, innovative, and moving from one place to another.”

Leadership as a strategy to promote the indigenous women's movement

Her leadership began as a member of the Qawinaqel Association, a mixed cultural organization. At 20 years of age, she became the first female president elected to the board of directors, a period in which the Guatemala Peace Accords had just been signed.

For her, the peace process allowed for a more recognized participation of Indigenous Peoples and the creation of governance mechanisms that, in some way, promoted compliance with the Indigenous Peoples identity agreement, such as the Indigenous Women's Ombudsman, which came about at the request of the indigenous women's movement and where she became a member of the Coordinating Board. In this regard, she explains:

“Being part of the Coordinating Board was a learning process because it implied positioning indigenous women in Round Tables for compliance with the peace agreements, addressing discrimination and racism issues and the subject matter of enquiry.”

She asserts that the beginnings of her leadership were marked by very important

events, among them, the creation of an Indigenous organizations' broad front as a collective platform, engaged in advocacy with governments, as well as the establishment of the first Court of Conscience along with the Widows' Coordinator of Guatemala (CONAVIGUA, for its acronym in Spanish), as part of women's organizations to provide visibility to cases of discrimination and racism against indigenous women.

Norma asserts that leadership becomes a means to contribute, share, and guide processes of change, not individually or responding to personal interests, but rather in conjunction with other women. However, with concern, she states that they are still demanding the government to promote an agenda in which Indigenous Peoples are recognized as being subject to rights with benefits through public policies.

She states that amid difficult circumstances it is necessary not to forget the great contribution of women through community work, consisting of reaffirming the identity of young people and supporting women to get out of the oppressive and violent system. For example, the important role of midwives, woman weavers, and woman artisans who promote local economy.

Throughout the 20 years in which she has been weaving her leadership, she asserts that in this journey of contributions to indigenous peoples and women she has had a network of people who have woven her loom of progress, whom she defines, according to the circumstances she was going through at the time, as allies, advisers, guides, companions, accomplices, and sisters. In her own words, she explains:



©FIMI. Activity during the GLSIW Mesoamerica regional capacity building program. Guatemala City, Guatemala.

“I must admit that life has made me cross paths with people who are still on par and have transcended my life, such as my mother, because she plays an important role, so that I have participated in this whole process; she assumes many responsibilities of the family; she is my support and strength.”

Norma identifies other women such as Teresa Zapeta, Isabel Cipriano, and Alma López,

whom she calls companions, friends, and sisters on the same path who, along with her, have contributed with their collective, institutional, and organizational work efforts. She mentions Marcelino Nicolás, a community leader who showed a lot of ability, passing on his ideas and thoughts on how to lead the Maya Poqomam culture and planting in her heart the continuity of the values of his culture.

At the international level, she recognizes Myrna Cunningham, who represents one of the first experiences of sharing with women leaders from other countries. She also identifies the Quichua leader Leonel Caruto.

She recognizes that her steps as a leader were taken based on the example and guidance of

other indigenous women, who have been her role models of struggle and strength, including older leaders who walked before her such as Julia Sum, Manuela Alvarado, Rosalina Tuyuc and Rigoberta Menchú, as well as Tarcila Rivera in whom she has observed good critical thinking skills.

She has focused her contribution on the internal aspect of indigenous peoples and women at the national and regional levels, as well as in the Poqomam linguistic community. However, she needed to be present with those who are not convinced of the importance of vindicating the Maya people's rights, for which she has advocated and interacted with public officials to promote the incorporation of an intercultural and multilingual approach

from a public institution. Another space has been the international cooperation, where she has managed projects and coordination initiatives to promote activities in favor of the indigenous people and women, as well as academic organizations to analyze the current situation of peoples' violation of identity.

In recent years, she has promoted women's organizations at the community level, such as the Indigenous Women's Association of Palinecas (AMIP, for its acronym in Spanish), training women from other departments, sowing seeds in Maya Pocomam youth and children. Despite their racist and patriarchal structure, she has participated in political parties as a strategic actor in electoral processes, in order to advocate a municipal



©FIMI. Delivery of diplomas, Mesoamerica regional capacity building program of the GLSIW. Guatemala City, Guatemala.

government plan.

In her essence of being a woman and Poqomam leader, Norma bears the practice of the Mayan worldview as a principle of life, which is represented in the depths of her people's spirituality, contained in the meaning of the Nahual, the divine energy that governs the being and doing of each person. Her leadership is supported by the vision of her grandparents that is related to the authority figure regularly symbolized in the sacred rod, which identifies the level of representation of each leader, including community authority, which grants responsibility, commitment, respect, and the value of one's word as principles of ancestral justice for peace, harmony, and balance in the community. Another symbolic element is the use of a Sute or cloth woven with cotton thread, which is placed on the shoulders of the elderly women and men who represent the community to give counsel based on their ancestral wisdom.

For her, these elements give a cosmogonic meaning to the leadership that cannot be sustainable if it is not contained in the sacred fire, in the gratitude for everything that is received and given as a token of gratitude to the heart of heaven, land, water, sun, and wind. In this regard, she states:

*“Spirituality sustains me. It is to be grateful to grandmothers and grandfathers, lighting my candle, using my pom (incense), and **thanking mother earth and heaven for everything received.**”*

Global Leadership School: a training space for indigenous women in defense of their collective rights

She applied to the Global School as a space that educates indigenous women from a rights perspective based on international instruments, motivated to develop and replicate the methodological tools and content at the community level; learn about the United Nations' system and the behavior of member states; understand how the participation of Indigenous Peoples is and what they have to achieve in the discussion of the Indigenous Peoples' declaration.

As an opportunity to learn by doing, the School represented a new path for her. One significant experience in this process was the statement at the United Nations within the framework of the Permanent Forum to position the ideas, voices, feelings, and thoughts of indigenous women, a privileged space to speak out before that international assembly. Reading that document was key to positioning the demands of indigenous women.

Having the opportunity to exchange with women leaders from other parts of the world allowed her to realize that their problems as Indigenous people are similar. Although the State actors change, the oppressive and discriminatory system is the same. For her, it was rewarding to exchange diverse cultural elements, such as spirituality that have different symbols and meanings, but it was possible to share them in that space.

In addition to learning about the mechanisms that have been the basis for some cases for the violation of these rights at the international level, which have been won, drafting the

advocacy plan allowed her to carry out a deeper analysis of women's reality and see the different levels of advocacy that can be promoted.

The plan promoted by Norma was based on the importance of Mayan women's influence on women's public policy in Guatemala, to develop a process that ensures the involvement of Mayan women's organizations to promote compliance with the axis of Mayan, Garífuna, and Xinka Women's Cultural Identity contained in the National Policy for Promotion and Integral Development of Women in Guatemala.

As part of the process, she was able to implement the plan, raising women's and public institutions' awareness about the need to take up strategies to comply with the actions established in the women's public policy. With satisfaction, she states:

“The Global School empowers us so that we may then pay it forward to women's organizations at the local level and provide them with tools to develop political advocacy processes at the local level.”

Today, she is still committed to being the head of the Monitoring Committee of the Alliance of Indigenous Women of Central America and Mexico, a space that has provided her with more elements and information on processes at the international level on the agenda of Indigenous Peoples and indigenous women, thus identifying strategies and international bodies such as the FIMI and their work in favor of women worldwide. She explains: After she

“Getting back to work as an alliance of women in Guatemala is an opportunity to continue positioning the proposals of Mayan women on the national agenda”.

participated in the Global School, she worked collectively on a proposal for an alternative report concerning the progress of the SDGs that Guatemala submitted in 2019, in which the contributions of indigenous women were provided visibility regarding the fulfillment of said goals.

After the Global School, she coordinated with the FIMI to develop the food security process, a strategic issue in a country like Guatemala where the problem of malnutrition is increasingly growing. Work proposals have been prepared to apply to some funds such as AYNI, which can generate contributions for Mayan women. Also, it was possible to apply for training scholarships in other processes that have been put out for bidding by members of the alliance network.

According to Norma, learning makes sense when it leads to changing an attitude or to renewing what was considered past. One lesson learned was the different international mechanisms regarding the rights of indigenous women and peoples, which she is applying in her work space as part of the Gender Unit team on the Commission Against Racism and Discrimination at the governmental level.

She learned through a different methodology, in which women's voices and feelings were the basis of the whole training. She greatly appreciated the exchange of experiences among young and adult leaders of such diverse cultures, and with the same fighting spirit.

Some other valuable knowledge has also been studying in depth about how communication builds networks of mutual support, solidarity, and advocacy at the local, regional, and international levels, as a strategic platform among women, which facilitates the generation of collective positions in decisions that may be positively or negatively affecting the defense of the rights of indigenous women. In this regard, she states:

“When a country or an organization is going through difficult situations, as has occurred many times, then communication would help us to support each other.”

Learning deeply about the structure of the United Nations’ system and practicing in the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has been a schooling process that has allowed her to realize what the positions of each country are, and the need to promote parallel events in order to become familiar with the contributions of other bodies and international networks of indigenous women.

Challenges and dreams for indigenous women’s leadership in decision making

For Norma, her changes are key to promoting the challenges and dreams she has set for herself. In the after-school process, she reaffirmed her mission to accompany indigenous women, strengthen organizations at the local level, strengthen her relationship with her family, which implies responsibility, time, and dedication. A challenge for her is to participate in political processes at the national level to be able to occupy decision-making spaces, and with it she can support and stimulate processes of Indigenous Peoples from the very structures of the State, and from there promote plans, policies, and legislation in favor of peoples and indigenous women.

She dreams of learning about the management of public policies in favor of Indigenous Peoples, in which women, youth, children, and grandparents can be included with their collective and specific rights from their own worldview as Mayans, without forgetting the existence of other peoples who are also rights-holders.

She is aware that it is important to pass on her experiences and insights, which have been shared in different coordination spaces with mestizo, Mayan, Garífuna, and Xinka people.

Norma believes that there is still work to be done in processes of accompaniment so that they can break the cycle of violence, in reaffirming their identity so that they can generate their income; through the exchange of skills and art that they produce making the most of the resources they have in the communities; on issues of food security,

protection and care of natural resources, and the right to enquiry of Indigenous Peoples from the perspective of women.

Today Norma has allowed us to walk through the journey of her story, of her leadership as a Maya Poqomam woman, as a timekeeper, who has left behind part of her dreams by opening up opportunities for other women, who like them are brave and powerful. She has been able to confront racism, inequality, and exclusion by the Guatemalan Government. Her leadership is a life example that allows us to know how new knowledge becomes alive to the extent that it is shared, and her lessons learned at the Global Leadership School are given back to other women, as an encounter of collective knowledge that become tools through her contributions made so far with her participation from her identity, empowered by her ancestral wisdom, from the energy of light and the harmony that she inherited from the Ixim Uleu (Mother Earth).



Cecilia Ramírez Pérez



©FIMI. GLSIW coordinator, during the Africa regional capacity building program. City of Nairobi, Kenya.

Cecilia's story begins with the strength of her umbilical cord, which connected her existence to this earth and after her birth, it was planted under an agave plant known as "maguey". According to the Mixtec worldview, this rite means the physical and spiritual connection of a person with the earth, where they always return.

She spent the first years of her life in a community located in the Mixtec region of Oaxaca, in the municipality of San Miguel el Grande, district of Tlaxiaco. When facing the fact that the Mixtec people have a long history of migration to the main cities, including the United States, it made her question the conditions that motivate people to migrate from their place of origin to a completely different one.

Within her nuclear family, Cecilia has two older sisters and two younger sisters. Since childhood, they all have stayed together until the present, supporting each other. For her

part, her mother always was interested in them to pursue their studies, despite the difficulties. Therefore, each one of them assumed the responsibility of working and studying to have a career. She believes that her mother has been the main influence in her life decisions.

Some memories come to mind that she shares about her grandparents, who did not have the opportunity to attend school, although during her childhood there was a time in Mexico in which extensive literacy campaigns were created nationwide. They were peasants and also migrated seasonally to different places to cultivate or trade, but they always returned.

Her mother was the only woman among several male siblings, who also had the privilege and access to study. However, due to her condition as a woman, her parents only provided her with elementary school, despite her wishes to continue studying. This fact was not fortuitous at that time, since those who did not take their children to elementary school had to be fined by the community authorities in case they did not fulfill their duty to provide elementary school education for all their children.

During her youth, she collaborated in an intercultural and bilingual program for Indigenous migrant children in Mexico City. An experience that allowed her to strengthen her identity as a Mixtec, as well as having the opportunity to share with many children, who are now young. As a result, they learned the different languages existing in Mexico and how to call them by name, because whenever they heard the elderly speak in other languages,

according to their region, they referred to them as English. This as a consequence of the education system, which maintains a structure of colonial and racist content, which still prevails today. Later on, she had the opportunity to study and obtain a degree in Political Science and Public Administration at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She is grateful and proud of that education because the public university was a space that gave her opportunities to learn and understand new challenges.



©FIMI. Closing of face-to-face activities of the 6th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States.

Being part of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women: an opportunity to learn and unlearn

Cecilia, as a woman who believes in bettering herself, continued strengthening her capacities and knowledge, which is why she was invited to participate in the Diploma Program for Strengthening Indigenous Women's Leadership, promoted by the Alliance of Indigenous Women of Central America and Mexico. There she met Dr. Mirna Cunningham, who invited her to do an internship at the FIMI and thus help out for a few months performing some tasks entrusted to her. As a result of her good work, she was asked to continue contributing to the FIMI mission in the training program. Currently, she is the coordinator of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women. She gladly shares:

“This had been a dream I've wanted to achieve to strengthen the knowledge of indigenous women leaders.”

It has been a great achievement that allowed her to be part of a training process, accompanying women leaders around the world, who contribute effectively in global spaces, which have been maintained with much effort and struggle, such as the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

In the same way, the implementation of the first edition of the school implied a lot of learning, observing, and listening to those who had coordinated these processes during that phase. The orientation and instruction of Mariana López, who coordinated the FIMI programs at that time were also important. Under her guidance and with the participation of various allies, indigenous and non-indigenous leaders, they developed the different training contents, designed for women leaders from different peoples of the world. From her point of view, the school is not only a virtual training space with a presence at Columbia University for women leaders, but it has also made it possible to expand and articulate the FIMI



©FIMI. Delivery of Diplomas, 2nd edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States.



to more organizations with local and national advocacy. It has been a meeting space for various women with different backgrounds, in which training is a point of intersection that has united them, providing mechanisms to build bridges of solidarity among them.

For the participants, it is a one-of-a-kind meeting space, and for many of them it has been a watershed in their lives, marking a before and after, allowing them to understand their leadership in a broader dimension of space and to realize that their battles are not isolated, since they share things in common concerning the lack of recognition of their rights and the constant violation of them.

Cecilia acknowledges that the implementation of five editions of the School has made it easier for the FIMI to identify indigenous women leaders that have contributed with technical tasks within other processes as

part of its mission, allowing them to put their abilities, knowledge, and experiences to the service of others, as well as be in contact with other leaders in international and regional spaces, in which they have brought the voice of indigenous women with proposals and demands for the fulfillment of their specific and collective rights.

She also recognizes that one of the challenges is to work remotely, link, and connect women leaders from various parts of the world to meet and share during two intense weeks in New York, which means a greater effort in terms of logistics, communication, and response to conditions according to the different contexts to which they belong. Actions from which they have learned, as well as other circumstances they have overcome such as language or internet access.

In addition, she believes that the school has contributed minimally in providing them with tools that strengthen the indigenous leaders' mission, from their communities, in their countries, and at a global level in their tireless struggle to position their rights to land, territory, health, education, peace and justice; the right to the continuity of their language and against discrimination, racism, and climate change in the first line of defense; and supporting them to continue working to build improvements from the local to the global level and vice versa, ensuring a good standard of living for their peoples. In her own words she says:

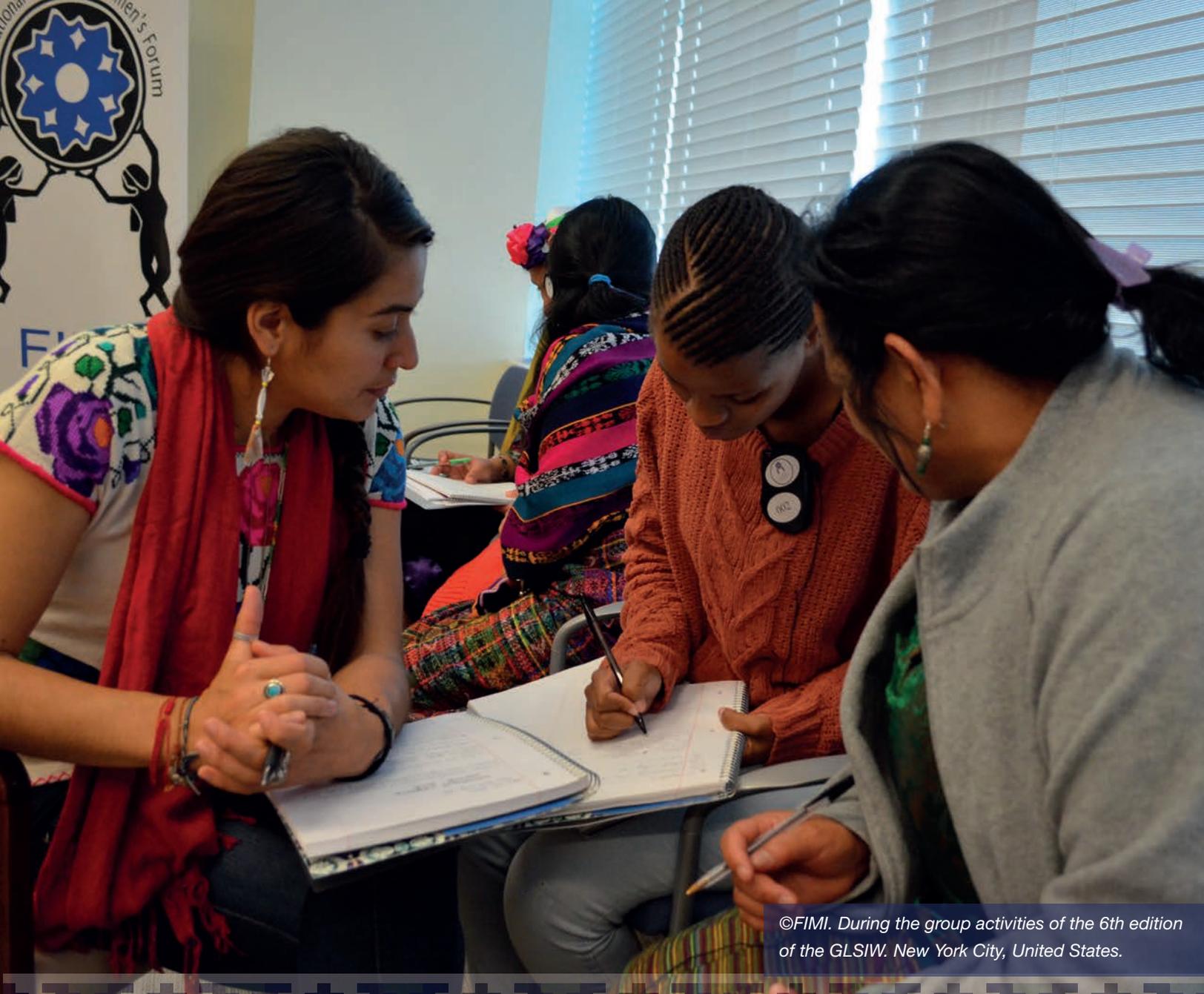
“In a world of broad inequalities, I am inspired by all the women leaders who have participated in the FIMI’s School. Without a doubt, after 5 editions I trust and believe in what I do.”

Today, for her, it is gratifying to have 40 life stories of indigenous women and leaders, in which it is possible to understand how the School strengthened, united, and gave them tools to continue effecting immediate and long-term changes. They are dealing with challenges to lead the progress of their Indigenous Peoples at a global level, from the community and national levels in their countries. From her experience, the Global Leadership School has always renewed its processes in each edition to improve its content and methodology, and thus respond to the conditions, interests, and identity of the participating leaders.

Cecilia’s life story has made it possible to understand, from the inside, a woman’s conviction of assuming a different identity, marked by shades of different colors, which

add strength, empowerment, and wisdom to her leadership. It is a journey where she has met many indigenous women, who have shared lessons and insights with her through their own experience, and have strengthened their conviction to work with and for indigenous women in the demand of their specific and collective rights.

Now, as the coordinator of the Global Leadership School, she is aware of her mission in this process: to provide women with new learning opportunities from the International Indigenous Women’s Forum, a space for organization and advocacy at a global level, which makes it possible to plant seeds of additional knowledge and wisdom in each participating leader, who in turn will sow seeds in the lives of other women in their communities, provinces, and countries. Cecilia is an example of an indigenous leader and professional woman, who, from her Mixtec being, integrates and balances her various roles with dedication, commitment, and determination.



©FIMI. During the group activities of the 6th edition of the GLSIW. New York City, United States.

5. CONCLUSIONS



Through the stories told by indigenous leaders from different parts of the world, it was possible to learn about their struggles, insights, experiences, examples, conquests, successes, mistakes, and dreams. Figuratively, the threads of their lives weave a fabric of stories that describe a journey in the defense of their rights as women and ancestral peoples, allowing us to see how the project of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women strengthened their leadership personally and collectively. The main conclusions about the 40 stories told are set forth below.

Identity and origin, determining factors in the being of women leaders

Their stories tell about the lives of women who assume different identities from the recognition of their being, integrality of values, principles, symbols, and elements that are part of the history, culture, knowledge, and ancestral practices of their peoples. They are creators, carriers, transmitters, protectors, and supporters of this set of values and life systems, based on worldview and spirituality, linked to divinity as something intangible but visible in people, the universe, and natural goods, which gives strength, power, and wisdom to the being of each person and their original Peoples.

The female being with whom each leader arrived on the earth plane is deeply intertwined with the earth, water, and natural resources; as givers of life, providers of everything that inhabits the universe; that is why, from their identity as women from different Peoples, they conceive an intimate connection with everything that gives and nourishes the

meaning of life in the universe, which has its origin in the ancestral roots that for centuries and generations have been transferred and inherited to them and their peoples, by their ancestors, grandmothers and grandfathers, wise men and women. From the transmission of cosmogony, science, philosophy, spirituality, knowledge, values, and practices, of which they are now part and that they also pass on to the new generations based on the culture of life.

The place of birth of each leader was based in territories and Peoples from Africa, Asia, the Arctic, Latin America, North America, and the Pacific, regions of the world inhabited by ancestral Peoples, with diverse cultures, languages, knowledge, and rich biodiversity, which have given sustenance to their existence; territories with history and realities that have directed the life of each one of them, and today are being strongly threatened by the impacts of climate change.



Decisive relevant events in the lives of those women leaders

The stories and lives of women leaders have been influenced by events that intersect the impacts of racism, discrimination, exploitation, patriarchy, and exclusion; historical and current oppressions determined by the existence of monocultural and oppressive governments, which did not recognize (to date, in some countries, they are not yet recognized) the rights and identity of indigenous peoples and women. As a result of these systems, they have been victims of wars, repression, displacement, historical and current dispossession; facts and history that they have to go through due to constant violence. They have survived in conditions

of poverty, illiteracy, lack of basic public services, food insecurity, and poor health conditions. They have dealt with conflicts such as persecution and criminalization, human trafficking, exploitation of natural resources, and the dispossession and depredation of their territories.

These stories told about the strength, wisdom, and resilience of indigenous women dealing with these colonization actions from the spirituality and knowledge of their ancestors, families, and peoples. They showed how over the last 70 years, the number of women trained spiritually, energetically, humanly, politically, and academically, in social and legal disciplines, has grown. With these tools, they have gained greater strength to care for, defend, and demand their rights as women and as Indigenous Peoples.

Indigenous women's leadership: a banner of struggle and defense for life and rights

The women leaders' stories told about how leadership is understood and developed from the perspective of indigenous women, understood as a mission and a principle of life, which is transformed from individual actions to collective movements, which makes it possible to revitalize and contribute knowledge, capacities, abilities, and experiences in an intergenerational way, so that they can influence in an organized way in different areas against the situation of inequality and historical and current oppressions that women and peoples are facing. Therefore, based on their experience, being a woman leader is a banner of struggle, power, and resistance in favor of life and the defense of her specific rights, such as the right to a life free of violence; the rights to political participation, education, comprehensive and integrative health; ownership and control of their own resources, so that their voices and proposals are heard and taken into account in public policies, plans, programs, projects, and budgets of the States.

Furthermore, in their leadership roles, they speak out about the demand for their collective rights, such as the right to own land, water; the right to live in their territories as owners and protectors of mother earth, and of all the natural assets that belong to it. To a large extent, the main demand of women leaders is their right to self-determination. It is that Peoples and communities choose and protect their territories and learn how to use the natural assets that derive from it. Their leadership proposes other alternatives, contrary to the invasion and exploitation of transnational companies. It is a life action turned into a

political demand for the transformation of the reality that the States have imposed and forced them to maintain. However, with the strength and wisdom of their ancestral cultures, they have resisted and are willing to continue moving forward along wide, flat, and clean paths.

Today, leaders are contributing to the compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the enforcement of actions contained in the Beijing Platform for Action, including recommendations of these international mechanisms that governments have committed to implement, but have failed to do so. Indigenous women leaders, as politically active subjects, are following up with these governments, promoting the inclusion of their approaches in the laws and government policies, in particular those referring to women and Indigenous Peoples.



©FIMI. During seminars, regional training program
Africa. Nairobi City, Kenya.

Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women: a gathering of knowledge

Women leaders have found that strengthening and building collective knowledge is synonymous with weaving learning and capacities, which provide their leadership with new tools and skills that they put at the service of other indigenous sisters and their Peoples. In their stories, they stated that having participated in the training process at the Global Leadership School represented an opportunity to grow, a place for a gathering of knowledge, learning, and wisdom. Fellowship through virtual and in-person sessions with sisters from different peoples of the world allowed them to understand and reaffirm the importance of their struggles and resistance in demanding a dignified life.

A training, learning, and unlearning process from and for indigenous women contains a deep meaning that strengthened their identity as indigenous women and leaders, which fortified their sense of collectivity, joint work, and coordinated support with other organizations and networks. This space also provided them with knowledge and management of international instruments, and the importance of their application for the defense and demand of their individual, specific, and collective rights as women and indigenous peoples.

They asserted that every advocacy action must be linked to the transformation of problematic issues experienced by indigenous women, their communities, and peoples on the assumption that this is a strategic tool to establish actions that respond to needs

according to people's current circumstances, knowledge, and resources. For women, advocacy is synonymous with working together, making alliances, and building bridges of support: it means transforming issues into proposals and actions into the change towards a better standard of living.



©FIMI. Participant of the 6th edition of the GLSIW.
New York City, United States.

Challenges and dreams: a new cycle in the development of leadership

Today each woman leader who participated in the 5 editions of the Global School of Leadership asserts herself as a promoter and defender of individual, specific, and collective human rights. They continue demanding the fulfillment of their rights, but mainly, they suggest and carry out actions to exercise them from their different identities, latitudes, cultures, and contexts.

Dealing with the State is still a challenge, as well as strengthening their participation in political processes at the national, regional, and international levels to occupy positions of decision-making, in which they can advocate by promoting plans, public policies, and legislation in favor of indigenous peoples and women; contribute to the building of peace in their countries so that they may have a good quality of life as peoples; and continue encouraging generations of young leaders who have the strength, power, and wisdom to go keep fighting and not allow themselves to continue losing their identity.

They dream of being free from violence in societies in which they can speak without being discriminated against for being indigenous women, as subjects and holders of collective and individual rights; living as autonomous Indigenous Peoples and with dignified treatment in all their areas of life; replacing fear with freedom, exchanging dependency for empowerment, replacing silence with a collective voice; achieving a world free of discrimination, where skin, gender, and any other form of discrimination is eradicated.

They are indigenous women leaders who designate themselves as multipliers of changes and transformations in order to dignify the lives of women and ancestral peoples. They are weavers of dreams and realities, transmitters of knowledge, know-how, vindications and struggles, from their being and actions with strength and determination.



©FIMI. Group activity during the GLSIW Africa regional capacity building program. City of Nairobi, Kenya.

6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to give a special and affectionate thanks those who have done the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women for five editions.

Our deep thanks to:

✧ *Tamal Pais for your full trust and collaboration.*

✧ *Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University for always opening the doors.*

✧ *The Secretariat of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for its contribution to the implementation of each edition of the IWGLS.*

✧ *The Regional Networks that articulate for the existence of FIMI.*

✧ *The organizations of indigenous women from the six sociocultural regions of the world for your persistence in the struggle of our rights.*

Thanks to all the participants for your cooperation, efforts, perseverance, endurance, wisdom, reciprocity, constancy, teachings, responsibility, commitment and conviction. For creating and recreating better worlds. Thank you for sharing your stories, for telling us your dreams, learning and entwining your hands among diverse cultures, invested with symbols and ancestral principles, that as leaders make alive with your implementation and by transmitting them to the current and new generations.

Thank you, ancestors. Thank you for your centuries of resistance. These stories are your harvest and also seeds for those who come.



“The Global School empowers women to take the voice of their communities to the international level, to influence the creation of public policies, which are later brought back to their communities so that they can advance their work.”

Dr. Myrna Cunningham, ideologist and advisor of the IWGLS

“I feel stronger knowing that I am not alone, that there are many (women) in the world fighting for the same goals”.

Rani Yan Yan, Marma, Bangladesh

“My leadership began with my participation in social movements and civil organizations when the armed conflict ended and I reached the legal age. Since that time, due to my minimal academic preparation, I know that I contributed with my grain of corn to society and have been accepted.”

Ana Ceto, Pueblo Ixil, Guatemala

“Being part of the School motivated me to share experiences and learn good practices among ourselves as indigenous women.”

Aeisatu Bouba, Mbororo, Camerún

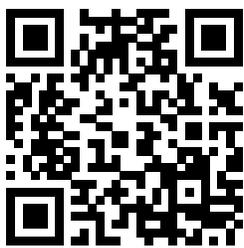
“My mother could not go to school and her family allowed her to send her brothers, so my mother did not want to do the same and changed the course of history.”

Sreyngiang Loek, Bunong, Cambodia

“Today I am recognized as a female leader of my community, and the older leaders and culture authorities, amid jokes and truth, tell me that I am the ambassador of Llaguepulli.”

Fresia Paineñil, Mapuche, Chile.

Global Leadership School of
Indigenous Women eBooks



Use an application or install the
QR reader of your choice to read
the code.