

The importance of Indigenous Women's Resilience for post COVID-19 Recovery

Around the world, indigenous women's role in rural development is often overlooked, or taken for granted, increasing the already heavy workload carried by women. Nonetheless, indigenous women continue to make important contributions to the conservation of agrobiodiversity and biocultural heritage, climate resilience, and food sovereignty. They preserve and pass down cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge, language, farming techniques, cosmovision and history to their children.

Women in virtually every national and cultural context face gender-based inequalities and violence in some form, so this is an important consideration for development programs. Further, because these women have less access to formal education than their male counterparts, they have more limited economic and social mobility and are in turn more likely to stay in rural communities than the men who tend to migrate to work in cities. This, combined with their role as the primary child-rearers, results in a more vested interest in sustaining their local communities. In terms of development work, this means that working with women often produces better outcomes for children, families, ancestral lands, and biocultural heritage.



A community member at the 2021 celebration of Peru's National Potato Day in the Potato Park (May 31, 2021)

Photo credit: Enrique Granados, ANDES

Indigenous Women and COVID-19

Under the unprecedented circumstances brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, indigenous women have been more vulnerable to adverse impacts of the crisis, as they live at the intersection of ethnic, class, and gender oppression. While no two indigenous communities have the same cultures, histories, or political situations, they have nonetheless confronted

many similar challenges, and the same applies to this pandemic. Although discussing indigenous women in general terms may overlook some important differences between indigenous populations, it is also useful to consider the impact that the pandemic has had on women across the globe. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women ([UN Women](#)) has, in turn, outlined several ways in which indigenous women may be disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 crisis, both directly and indirectly.

In terms of vulnerability to the virus itself, indigenous women are less likely to have health insurance, and “are therefore more likely to be affected by pre-existing conditions which exacerbate COVID-19.” The presence of these pre-existing conditions is also linked to the history of environmental degradation that has polluted soil and water sources in indigenous territories for decades. Beyond direct risks to their health, the pandemic has also caused socio-economic challenges for indigenous women. For example, in most cultures, “indigenous women are at the centre of the care economy within their families and communities,” and with the closing of schools, among other factors, their role in domestic labor has become even more strenuous. Indigenous women also generally tend to have higher rates of unemployment, which is expected to have been exacerbated by the economic crisis incited by the pandemic, though high participation in informal economies makes this metric hard to track. Moreover, the lockdowns imposed to limit the spread of COVID-19, as well as consequent economic turmoil, have led to higher rates of domestic violence across the globe. Thus, UN Women has included in their report for post-COVID recovery a recommendation to “break the silence on violence against indigenous women and girls and enhance the evidence through longitudinal research, data collection and analysis by sex, race, disability, ethnicity and location.”

In the case of Peru, domestic violence is a persistent problem in both rural and urban areas that has indeed been exacerbated by the pandemic. Between March and July of 2020, calls to a national hotline for victims of domestic and sexual violence more than doubled, and nearly 1,500 women and girls were reported missing. It is important to keep in mind, however, that while this “[shadow pandemic](#)” is a dangerous result of the crisis, it is nothing new and will continue to impact the lives of numerous women well beyond the era of COVID-19. [In 2018](#), for instance, 63.2% of women in Peru were subject to physical, emotional, sexual, and/or economic violence by their husband or partner. In the Cusco region, which is home to the indigenous communities with which Asociación ANDES works, this rate was even higher at 80.6%, the second highest of Peru’s 25 regions. This issue is deeply rooted in the state’s insufficient efforts and capacities to effectively deal with the problem, as well as in Peruvian culture. Although there are policies in place that should theoretically protect women and girls from this violence, in practice they are far from effective. At the same time, in both the Catholic and indigenous cultures of Peru, there is a strong emphasis on marriage and traditional gender roles, in turn making it more difficult for women to access opportunities beyond the home and escape cycles of violence.



Demonstrators in front of the prosecutor's office in Lima, Peru, protest gender violence and femicide (June 20, 2021) Photo Credit: Carlos Garcia Granthon/Fotoholica Press/LightRocket via Getty Images

Women of The Potato Park

In the specific context of the [Potato Park](#) in Písaq, Cusco, a group of women from the women's medicinal plants collective and artisan women's collective were asked about their experiences with the pandemic and how COVID has affected their daily lives. Quechua women in Andean communities tend not to be formally employed; rather, they have full-time jobs tending to their fields and maintaining their households, and they make products for sale or barter, and carry out communal labour with neighbors. All of these livelihood activities were impacted by the pandemic. With schools continuously closed since the onset of the pandemic, women have had to spend much of their time supervising children at home and helping them with remote studies.

In addition to impacting women's ability to participate in the activities that sustain their households, the remote delivery of educational programming during the pandemic has also caused great concern for the wellbeing of their children. The women interviewed and their families have consistently been let down by the state, which has failed to prioritize reopening schools and has done little to make remote alternatives widely accessible and effective, especially for indigenous communities. For example, the Peruvian government has subsidized a cellular network that does not reach the communities of the Potato Park and promised tablets that have not been delivered. This leaves families to pay extra for cellular data so that their children can attend virtual lessons on smartphones. The phones are often shared between multiple family members. With such limited access to quality virtual learning and so much time without any in-person instruction, mothers are very worried about their children falling behind academically. They are also concerned about their children's physical health because

staying at home for schooling means children are far less active than they normally would be when they walk to and from school and play with peers.



Women from the Potato Park's women's artisans collective at their space in Pampallaqta producing textiles for sale as a way to contribute to their household incomes (May 24, 2019) Photo credit: ANDES

Beyond extra care for school-aged children, many women have also had more work to do as family members have returned to their villages to seek solace from even worse economic and public health conditions in the cities. While this has resulted in a bountiful harvest thanks to more people working the fields, it has also meant that women have needed to cook for and generally accommodate many more people. Overall, the women explained that their roles have not changed due to the pandemic, but have rather become more demanding. On the other hand, some noted that their roles have also been made more visible to and appreciated by their male counterparts who, prior to the pandemic, often worked away from the home and would take the work of their mothers, grandmothers, wives, sisters, and daughters for granted.

While the pandemic has been particularly challenging for indigenous women, it's important to remember that they are not mere victims of oppressive systems. On the contrary, many have shown great resilience throughout the crisis, often spearheading efforts to adapt to and overcome the difficulties faced by their communities. In the context of the Andean communities that Asociación ANDES works with, women have played a crucial role in adapting to the economic shortages brought on by the pandemic. For instance, when the communities of the Potato Park lost a significant source of income due to restrictions on ecotourism, the women's medicinal plants collective and the women's gastronomy collective learned to make new products, including as soaps, toothpaste, jam, and pickles. These innovations were for own use and for sale in order to make up for some of the lost revenue. The women themselves make decisions about the products they make, and the distribution of the benefits, empowering them financially and to make decisions in the household.

The women from the Potato Park were able to identify some positive impacts coming out of this unprecedented time. In particular, women from the medicinal plants and artisan's collectives expressed appreciation for the return of some of their family members from the cities, despite the contribution to their increased workload. They were happy to be able to spend so much more time with their loved ones and feel a stronger sense of unity within their families. The increase of people in the villages, as mentioned, also contributed to a bountiful harvest as fields that had been abandoned were once again being cultivated by returning community members. All of the women agreed that in spite of the economic hardship which resulted from the pandemic, there was certainly no shortage of food. Further, one woman shared that the pandemic has encouraged her to take better care of her own health, that of her family, as well as the environment.



Members of the communities of Ollantaytambo visiting the Potato Park's women's medicinal plants (Sipaswarimi) collective for an exchange to learn some of the biocultural product skills they'd developed (January 25, 2021) Photo credit: Cass Madden, ANDES

Climate Change

As in many parts of the world, the COVID-19 crisis has not really created new challenges for the women of the Peruvian Andes, but rather exacerbated and made visible existing ones. Looking forward to post-Covid19 recovery, the women recognize that there can be no return to 'normal', as we are still in a global crisis - that of climate change. Climate change has been directly impacting Andean indigenous farming communities for decades. The effects of rising global temperatures and subsequent increases in extreme weather events are dramatic. For example, many small glaciers have disappeared, removing important water sources. There used to only be a few frosts each year, but now there are around a dozen. Changes in seasonal patterns are affecting the ability of farmers to apply and pass down traditional ecological and agricultural knowledge. In the past, parents and grandparents would teach their children to

look at the moon to predict the weather, for instance, or to observe the amount of fish to know whether there would be a good harvest that year. But now the degradation of the natural balance due to climate change means that the knowledge which has been passed down for generations may no longer apply.

Beyond the Andes, it is understood on a global level that a truly healthy, sustainable, and just environment cannot be restored without simultaneous work toward equality and empowerment for women and girls. Despite their essential contributions to local food systems, indigenous women are often excluded from decision-making processes, as well as from relevant data and dominant narratives about this work, thus rendering them largely invisible. A 2009 training manual on “[Gender and Climate Change](#)” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and affiliated organizations noted that, “for [The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples] to be fully implemented will require the recognition of the role of women in climate change adaptation and mitigation initiatives and policies. Since women will be (and are) affected by climate change, their needs and interests need to be reflected at the community, national and international level. Women shall also have the right to participate equally in decision-making bodies related to climate change fora,” (48-49). Thus, the [United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals](#) include “[Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment](#)” as the fifth goal, a significant acknowledgement of women’s invaluable contributions to the preservation of biodiversity, natural landscapes, and humankind across the globe.



Left: a medicinal plants workshop in the Potato Park with visitors from the communities of Ollantaytambo (January 25, 2021) Photo credit: Cass Madden

Right: A local farmer in the Lares valley harvesting potatoes (April 24, 2021) Photo credit: ANDES

Gender in Andean Culture

Considerations of gender matters must always be sensitive to cultural context while still acknowledging the real-life impacts of patriarchy and misogyny, such as the exclusion of

women from decision-making processes and the undervaluing of their hard work both in the field and in the home. While it is important to remember that differentiated gender roles are not inherently synonymous with oppression, one must also bear in mind that old or traditional culture is never a justification for inequality or violence.

In the Andean cosmovision, the core principle of *Sumaq Kausay*, or wellbeing, is rooted in duality, reciprocity, and equilibrium, values that can easily be seen in the manifestations of gender in the Quechua culture. *Yanantin*, meaning duality, “can be seen in the division of labour between men and women, which, while differentiated, does not denote superiority or subservience, but mutual interdependence,” (Biocultural Heritage and Gender, ANDES - unpublished). The gendered roots of *Ayninakuy*, meaning reciprocity, are reflected in the two most sacred divine entities, the feminine *Pacha Mama* (Mother Earth) and the masculine *apus* (mountain deities). *Chaninchay*, equilibrium, refers to the “equitable distribution of benefits, contributions according to needs, abilities, responsibilities and effort.”

Within Quechua families, these fundamental cultural values are ultimately manifested in the form of complementary gender roles. Beyond their role in household and care work, women work alongside men in the fields, but they often don’t fulfill the same tasks. Women are traditionally the ones to put the seed in the ground when it is time to plant, reflecting their deep connection to the Earth, *Pacha Mama*. Both men and women are responsible for selecting seeds to be planted or preserved, but they tend to have different criteria for the selection process based on different knowledge. While men often prioritize size and yield when selecting seeds, women consider more nuanced factors such as ease of storage, culinary uses, and nutritious value. Women also typically care for the livestock and manage the sale or barter of produce with neighbors.

In the 2019 documentary [*Sembradoras de Vida*](#), Brizaida Sicus, a member of the Sacaca community of the Potato Park explains that “women generally pay more attention to the crops and we feel deeply connected to the piece of land we are working. For us it is part of our family. We also teach our children to love our fields and our land.” This role of women as the “keepers of culture” is essential to the preservation of Andean language, traditions, and knowledge of the land. These in turn maintain the resilience of Quechua women and their communities in the face of global crises. They represent alternative visions for the future, based on generations of learning guided by a vision of *Sumaq Kausay*, harmony among people and all the elements of the natural world, and based on principles of equity, balance and complementarity.



Men and women working together to harvest potatoes in the Lares Valley (April 24, 2021) Photo credit: ANDES