

---

## Women and oil: The struggle for Sumak Kawsay

In October 2013, women from throughout the Amazon region marched to Quito, the capital of Ecuador, to protest outside the 11th oil licensing round, in which oil exploration concessions were to be granted over millions of hectares of indigenous territories in the eastern central-south area of the country. While this was happening, various male indigenous leaders were participating in the opening event of the auction, while others, outside the event, were somewhat hesitant to show open and determined support for the indigenous women.

On another occasion that same month, Alicia Caiuya, a Waorani indigenous woman, after taking the podium before the National Assembly of Ecuador, tossed aside the script that had been prepared for her and courageously delivered a speech of her own. In it, she spoke of how the seven oil companies operating in Waorani territory had brought no benefits for her people, but rather had increased poverty and pollution, and she added that the matter of Yasuní should be subjected to consultation. After she finished speaking, Alicia was reprimanded by the male Waorani leaders. Alicia's speech to the National Assembly came at a crucial time, when the Ecuadorian government was backing out of the Yasuní-ITT Initiative. Under this initiative, Ecuador had pledged to leave 900 million barrels of crude oil untapped in Yasuní National Park, the traditional territory of the Waorani and one of the areas of greatest biodiversity on the planet.

The struggle of the women in Ecuador has parallels on other continents. For instance, in July 2002, some 600 Itsekiri women occupied the ChevronTexaco oil terminal in Escravos, Nigeria. Among their demands was that they be taken into account in decision making about oil industry activities in the Niger Delta region. This action was followed by many others in Nigeria, a number of them headed up by youth and women.

These recent examples in Ecuador and those from Nigeria are just a sampling of how women, especially indigenous and peasant farmer women, are fighting back against patriarchal power, both in the public arena and in their communities. When it comes to the oil industry, quite often in Latin America it is women who are the first to defend their territory from the threat of drilling projects.

This is easy to explain when we see that, based on the Oilwatch network's experience in monitoring the impacts of oil and gas activities, it is women who are the most affected. That is why indigenous and peasant farmer women are fighting back against the continued extraction of oil and gas in their territories. Instead of being reprimanded or ridiculed, women like Alicia Caiuya should be recognized worldwide, because their resistance contributes not only to the defence of the rights of nature, but of all of humanity as well.

Indigenous and peasant farmer women do not need PhDs to know how oil extraction violates their rights and irreparably affects life. Women suffer more from oil industry pollution, because they are constantly in contact with water when they wash clothes, bathe their children in the rivers, or prepare food. They are also the ones who most often care for household members when they are sick. In Ecuador, for example, studies by Acción Ecológica reveal that the incidence of cancer in oil drilling

---

areas is three times greater than the national average, and it is women who are most affected.

Women in oil drilling areas are not only impoverished, but are also burdened with more work, since in many cases the men of the family leave their homes to work in the drilling operations. In the provinces of Ecuador where there is oil industry activity, for example, 65% of mothers are single mothers or heads of the household. In oil drilling regions there has also been an upsurge in alcoholism, violence and prostitution.

For these and other reasons, it is women who put up resistance against the arrival of oil companies. This reflects human history in general, because for thousands of years, it is women who have taken care of the welfare and well-being of their families and communities. It is women who save resources like energy or water, who have taken responsibility for keeping the environment healthy; they are the educators of children and the caretakers of their families and of nature.

Women are the carriers of a wealth of wisdom and knowledge that should be recognized, listened to and learned in order to build local sovereignty, and even to stop climate change.

This thinking is supported by various feminist academics, including German economist and activist Friederike Habermann, who says that in any debate on extractive activities, it is crucial to analyze the relationship that women have with their territories and the role they play in their defence.

We know that the reproduction of capitalism and its very functioning are dependent on continued extraction, land grabbing and the undermining of rights. Social forms of caring for the land and territories are primarily in the hands of women, and they will fight to defend them, which makes them an obstacle to the accumulation of capital. It therefore becomes imperative for the agents of capitalism to ensure that women lose their power as leaders and active rights defenders, and the best way to do this is to stress that a woman's place is in the home and community, while political and public affairs should be left to the men.

This is why indigenous women in Ecuador have become inconvenient for the expansion of the oil frontier, because they are precisely the ones who are trying to halt extractive activities, beyond the borders of their territories or within them. And this not only implies the protection of lands and territories, but in essence the construction of *sumak kawsay*.

### **The *Sumak kawsay***

*Sumak kawsay* or "living well" is the way of life of the Andean peoples and at the same time it is a proposal for the world that arises from the vision of people who have been marginalized for the last 500 years. It is put forward as an opportunity to construct another "world system" based on the recognition of the different cultural values that exist in the world and on respect for Nature. This conception lays bare the errors and limitations of different theories of so-called progress and development. From various different angles, not only from the Andean world, there are responses emerging for the demands not satisfied by traditional visions of modernity. (...) Living well, essentially, is the search for a life in which human beings live in harmony with themselves, with their fellow human beings, and with Nature, and ultimately understanding that we are all Nature and that we are interdependent, that our existence depends on the others. Seeking this harmony does not mean ignoring social conflicts or social and economic disparities, nor does it mean denying that we live in a system that is

---

above all predatory, as the capitalist system is. Therefore, unlike the world of consumerism and extreme competition, the aim is to construct societies in which the individual and the collective coexist and complement one another, and in harmony with Nature, where economic rationality is reconciled with ethics and common sense. The economy must reengage with Nature, to maintain it and not to destroy it, to emphasize its use-value and not its exchange-value.” (Alberto Acosta, January 30, 2014. <http://www.rebelion.org/noticias/2014/1/180034.pdf>).

But other and diverse spaces for women to join forces against extractive industries corporations, as concluded in the 2011 Latin American Meeting on Women and Mining held in Bogotá, Colombia in October 2011. Sumak kawsay is a complex concept, as it refers to a traditional Andean indigenous philosophy. It has emerged as a new paradigm that involves a different form of relationship between human beings and nature. Sumak kawsay can only be viable at a national or global level when the rights of nature are officially recognized and fully respected, and well along the way down a post-oil road away from capitalism. The women of the Amazon are giving us an example of how to move towards this reality.

Walking down this same road, although they don't know each other, are thousands of women around the world fighting back against the expansion of mining and oil drilling.

Ivonne Yañez, Oilwatch Sudamérica, e-mail: [sudamerica@oilwatch.org](mailto:sudamerica@oilwatch.org)