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## Amazonian and Andean women in the VIII Pan-Amazonian Forum

### **How to make the sustainability of life the center of debate**

The VIII Pan-Amazonian Forum, held from April 28<sup>th</sup> to May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017 in Tarapoto in the Peruvian Amazon, aimed to bring together and coordinate social movements, indigenous peoples and traditional communities from the nine countries of the Amazon basin: Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, Cooperative Republic of Guyana, Suriname, Colombia, Peru and French Guyana. A construction process—which took place for a year and half prior to the Forum—made it possible to establish spaces for dialogue and debate with the objective of organizing collective, horizontal and intercultural discussions.

These spaces were tasked with deepening the Forum's thematic foci and contributing proposals and actions. They met for two days, and each participant was able to choose the group in which she participated. Each group analyzed the issue in question using an overarching lens: on the first day, *Territoriality and Amazonian-Andean Peoples*, and on the second day, *Stewardship of Natural Resources*. The discussion groups included the following: Pan-Amazonian-Andean Women: Diversity and Intercultural Dialogues; Climate Change and the Amazon; Food Sovereignty and Security; Megaprojects and Extraction; Intercultural Community Education; Pan-Amazonian-Andean Youth; Cities for life in the Pan-Amazonian Andes; Decoloniality of Power and Community Self-Governance; and Pan-Amazonian Communication for Life.

The dialogue process enabled these women, from diverse Amazonian and Andean groups of the region, to analyze how extraction and state-backed multinational mega investments impact their lives and bodies, and lead to dispossession of their territories and environmental contamination and depredation. Analyzing differential impacts on women's lives gives voice to social experiences silenced by patriarchy. Some areas of reflection included daily violence, religious fundamentalism, and the territories where communities live. It is their relationship with nature, and the defense of their territories, which give women the strength to resist companies and states who respond with repression and criminalization.

During discussions in the Amazonian and Andean women's dialogue space, women reiterated their understanding of territory as not just what is on the surface: "For us it is a holistic concept that includes all life within a territory. The capitalist system, in alliance with patriarchy, wants to control our bodies and territories to reproduce capital. We want to control them to generate life. We recognize nature's limits and want to strengthen relationships that ensure the sustainability of natural resources and of human life. (...) Our bodies and territories are contested by capitalism and patriarchy. Companies and the state violate us, and churches and fundamentalism promote a culture of subordination and control of women. Instead of protecting us, our governments are accomplices."

Aymara, Awajún and Quechua women, as well as others from several indigenous groups in Brazil, talked about how they care for the land, water and forests as part of their cultures and worldviews to protect natural resources. "Our relationship with nature and its resources is indispensable for life. We women are a part of it, and we need territorial sovereignty in order to sustain life," stressed another

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woman during the Dialogue.

Despite the rich dialogue and construction process, and the visibility of women's struggles in their territories, a broader articulation of women's perspectives on the thematic areas addressed in the Forum is still weak. Many ecological activists, environmentalists, and leaders of social movements continue to see extraction, climate change or decoloniality as gender-neutral issues. For this reason, the proposal to hold an Ethics Court for Women emerged, to symbolically bring to trial various situations that women suffer from and resist in the Pan-Amazonian Andes, and to make the role of women in resistance struggles visible.

The Court analyzed the repression and violence that indigenous and peasant communities experience, and also how “women are a central target in the state-business-media front's expansion strategies, since women are the center of gravity of the community structure.” (2)

The cases presented before the Court exist within the framework of a capitalist, colonialist and patriarchal system—which is both structural and structuring of inequalities and violence that affect the lives of Pan-Amazonian and Andean women.

Regional women's organizations established the Court and selected the following cases:

**Peruvian Case:** Amazonian leader Beatriz Caritimari testified, denouncing how the government and multinational companies pushed forward the Moybamba-Iquitos Transmission Line megaproject without consultation. The project would affect the territories of 14 districts and 6 states, damaging biodiversity, causing deforestation, and placing communities' food security at risk.

**Brazilian Case:** Daniela Silva of the Free Xingu Forever Movement presented the case of women's resistance to the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric project on the Xingú River, Altamira region, state of Pará. The project, which exposed corruption between construction companies and the government, and which was inaugurated in 2016, has displaced thousands of families from their territories; caused cultural genocide; destroyed ecosystems and traditional lifestyles; and increased violence against women—including through prostitution and sexual exploitation of girls and adolescents.

**Ecuadorian Case:** Cristina Burneo Salazar, from the National Platform for Women's Rights, Ecuador, presented the case of police forces displacing Shuar indigenous women and girls from their community. She also underscored how the Amazon is being militarized to make way for extractive mega projects for open-pit mining by the San Carlos Panantza company, a subsidiary of the Chinese company Tongling Nonferrous Metal Groups and CRCC.

**Chilean Case:** The Chilean feminist organization, La Morada Corporation, presented the case of Lorenza Cayuhan Llebul, from the indigenous Mapuche community Ahuidanche. She was forced to give birth in a public health center with her ankles shackled and in the presence of two armed men. This act that violates Lorenza's dignity and integrity is part of an institutional political practice of persecution and alienation of Mapuche communities in Chile.

Two emblematic cases from the region were also presented:

- **Berta Isabel Cáceres Flores**, indigenous Lenca leader and Honduran feminist, murdered in March 2016 for defending natural resources and the rights of indigenous peoples. She was leading a movement to stop the Agua Zarca dam, which would affect the Gualcarque River—which is

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considered sacred by indigenous peoples. The movement is still pressuring to get foreign capital to withdraw from the project of the Desarrollos Energéticos SA company, which has been blamed for Cáceres' murder.

- **Máxima Acuña de Chaupe**, villager from Cajamarca in the northern Peruvian highlands. Since 2011 has been defending her land from the Yanacocha mining consortium, which constantly harasses her, trying to evict her and extract the gold underground. The company claims to own the Tragadero Grande property, located 4,000 meters above sea level; and it denounced Acuña de Chaupe for aggravated usurpation, a crime for which she was legally acquitted in May 2017.

The cases heard, as well as many others presented before official national and international courts, and those presented in courts of conscience that preceded the Forum and constitute ethical jurisprudence, allow us to verify the systemic way in which women's lives and bodies are a *strategic target* for aggression against the continent's indigenous peoples and traditional communities.

As the Court's verdict states: "That is why scholars on the subject agree that the current informal wars are 'feminized wars' and 'wars of desecration'. The physical and moral demolition [of women], and objects that represent them and symbolize their position and significance in communities, reaches the heart of collective life and rips up and destroys the community fabric. They are surgical actions similar to those that implode buildings, in which engineering, through precise calculations, identifies the center of gravity in order to install dynamite there. This is why we have heard in this court about: how Shuar women's pots were kicked and destroyed, an eminently profane and demoralizing gesture toward them and their role in the community; Lorenza's nudity in front of her captors in the Mapuche case, like showing off a war trophy; the threats toward Máxima Acuña in Cajamarca about harming her children, domestic animals and crops, and the attempt to delegitimize her struggle by slandering her moral reputation through rumors about her honesty, sex life and that of her lawyer.

"Men are frequently revealed to be more fragile and vulnerable to the seduction of the colonizing front, today the state-business-media front. As spokesperson for deliberations that take place within the home, and facing representatives of the outside world, a man is the *hinge piece*—split between loyalty to his people and subordination to the conquering front. Thus the intermediary subject of the chief emerges—both violated by and vulnerable to corruption by the white world. By community logic, this position is inaccessible to, and thus "preserved from" the feminine role.

"For this very reason, women are the *community subject* par excellence. The genetic marker of community life gets passed down through the feminine line. This is why communities', peoples' and movements' active action is required to defeat patriarchy and ensure the sustainability of life."

As an urban feminist, participating in this court was an intellectual, political and emotional challenge for me. Building a decolonizing and intercultural perspective comes after listening to and understanding the thousands of voices and resistance practices of indigenous and peasant women, from the most diverse lands. The experience allowed us to take a step further in understanding the sustainability of life as the central axis of our struggles. Now the challenge is to deepen these perspectives, and particularly our alliances among struggles.

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*Marcosur Feminist Articulation*

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1. Coloniality / Descoloniality is a perspective within Latin American critical thinking that has opened new spaces of production and reflection, where the question of power in modernity is reviewed.
  2. The Court's Verdict: <http://www.forosocialpanamazonico.com/hermosa-edicion-del-veredicto-del-tribunal-de-mujeres-del-viii-fospa/>