Indigenous Women in the Andes of Ecuador: Marginalized Agents of Change

Caroline Martínez, 2016

This summer I spent two months in Ecuador conducting interviews for a project on the formation of female indigenous leaders in the Andean region of Ecuador. The following questions guided my research: how do indigenous women in the Andean region of Ecuador become political leaders? What obstacles do indigenous women who want to make change face and how do they overcome them? What is their role in politics and indigenous organizations?

During the two months that I was in Ecuador I mainly worked with women who were part of Ecuarunari (The Confederation of Kichwa People of Ecuador). These women belong to diverse indigenous communities such as the Saraguro, Puruha, Kayambi, Cañar, and Otavalo peoples. I interviewed ten prominent indigenous political female leaders including Carmen Lozano, currently the only female in a leadership position in Ecuarunari and Ana Maria Guacho, one of the co-founders of CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador). During my time in Ecuador, I was also given tasks by the Ecuarunari and was able to participate in events that the women I interviewed were a part of, taking notes on the comments and speeches they made at meetings.

The interviews conducted ranged from an hour and a half to two hours and had various questions about how these women initially became involved in politics, how they were received by the indigenous movement, the reactions their family members had to their involvement, and their political goals and relationships in their communities. I will be analyzing and coding these interviews during my senior year and hope that this research will turn into an honors project that I can present before I graduate.

Since returning to the US, I have been transcribing these interviews and although the data still needs to be analyzed and coded, there are some patterns that can already be observed. All of the women interviewed were from rural areas -- even the ones who currently live in Quito because of their job as leaders of Ecuador’s indigenous movement -- which means that they had less access to resources. More than half of the women interviewed did not finish high school -- one of them only went to school for a few days because of the discrimination she faced there. This demonstrates that these women had many disadvantages, so how were they able to empower themselves and promote change in their communities? This question can only be partially answered at this point, but each of them had a route they took and a mentor or mentors who helped them along the way. For some it was family members who were activists. For others their families hindered their involvement, but people from inside or outside their community saw their potential and encouraged them to attend meetings, to come to rallies, to be part of the indigenous movement.
Faculty mentor: Professor Ingrid Nelson

Funded by the Surdna Foundation Undergraduate Research Fellowship