



WOMEN, DRUG POLICY AND INCARCERATION POLICY BRIEFING SERIES

WOMEN COCA AND POPPY GROWERS MOBILIZING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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In Latin America, the lives of women who grow plants destined for illicit markets are marked by several forms of discrimination: because they are women, because they are rural farmers, and because their livelihood depends on an activity that has been declared illegal. The so-called “war on drugs” and the marginalization of rural life have erected walls behind which the role of women as agents of social transformation is hidden and rendered invisible. Beyond the numerous challenges they face, women growers of coca and opium poppy have played a critical role in sustaining and improving rural livelihoods, caring for families, in community organization, and in social movements. From their fight to assert the rights of coca-grower movements in Bolivia to their contribution to peace building in Colombia, women growers have been crucial agents of change in their communities. Their active participation—whether in farmer organizations, assemblies, agrarian unions, or other collectives—has given them new tools and knowledge for interacting with government entities and achieving important local objectives. Women coca or poppy growers not only build knowledge and capacities in their territories; they also contribute on a daily basis to the transformation and improvement of their realities, and that of their families and villages. Given the silence and dearth of information regarding the role of women in community life in areas where crops declared illicit are grown, this report explores who these women growers are, their socioeconomic contexts, their involvement in the production of crops destined for illicit markets, their organizing experiences, and their participation in decision-making processes—taking into account case studies from Bolivia and Colombia. Furthermore, the report presents recommendations focused on ensuring the participation of women growers in political and public life at all levels of decision-making.

Introduction

Rural women currently represent 25% of the global population.¹ They play a decisive role in sustaining and improving rural livelihoods and in strengthening communities by participating in tasks related to agriculture, food security and nutrition, land and natural

resource management, unpaid work, and domestic care. Rural women perform a crucial role in developing capacities and knowledge in their territories. In general terms, these women have three work-related roles: economically productive work, social and community work, and caregiver-related work in the home. However, on a global level,



and with few exceptions, rural women are in a worse situation than rural men and urban-dwelling men and women, based on all gender equality and development indicators for which data is available.² They are disproportionately affected by poverty and exclusion.

Women from the countryside face serious economic and social challenges as a result of gender stereotypes, discrimination, limited economic empowerment, informal employment conditions, reduced participation in political and public life, limited access to services, and the labor exploitation of female migrant workers. From an early age, women bear the brunt of unpaid work due to “traditional gender roles,” which includes their work caring for children and the elderly, as well as household management. In addition, they are more likely to be excluded from leadership and decision-making positions at all levels, and they are disproportionately affected by gender-based violence.

In Latin America, rural women who grow plants such as coca or poppy are made doubly invisible and stigmatized because they may get their income, directly or indirectly, from a criminalized activity. Although countries where coca and poppy crops are cultivated also produce cannabis, this report only focuses on the first two products. In Bolivia, coca production within the state-regulated system is not an “offense” that can lead to incarceration; however, in countries like Colombia, growers can be incarcerated for these activities. In some places, women are in situations of greater vulnerability because of the violence generated by armed groups. In addition, the “war on drugs” has exacerbated the social disadvantages that these women experience in their daily lives.

The international drug control system and its implementation by UN member states have

contributed to the lack of data and research on the role of women who grow crops for the illicit market, and the gender dimensions of alternative development programs and eradication strategies. In the case of crops designated as illicit, the data gathered only refers to the number of hectares cultivated, and there is almost no information on women’s involvement in the coca- or poppy-growing economy or on how it has transformed their lives.

Research that addresses the gender-differentiated impact of drug policies tends to ignore female producers. As the World Drug Report 2018 recognizes, there are difficulties for evaluating the degree of women’s participation in the cultivation and production of drugs.³ Currently, there is very little information about the risks and vulnerabilities that women face for participating in the production of coca or poppy crops, the stigmatization they suffer because of these activities, their contribution to family and community economies, their participation in alternative development programs, the effects of forced eradication on their lives and bodies, or their presence in spaces for participation and decision-making.

In addition, narratives about the participation of growers in the drug trade lump everyone together in the same category, and reinforce



Credit: La Asunta Federation. Photo taken in Los Yungas, Bolivia.

stereotypes and discrimination against women who grow coca or poppy. Thus, incorporating a gender perspective into state policies not only entails reflecting on the terrible effects of stigmatization and criminalization of the women who get involved with substances that have been declared illicit (whether for their production, sale, or consumption); it also entails recognizing the agency of women as workers striving for decent living conditions and their relevance in decision-making processes in their territories. In this sense, it is necessary to consider the historical gender gaps seen in the countryside (as well as in cities), the particular challenges that women face, their invisible roles, and how these factors affect their work as organizers and decision makers.

In several Latin American countries, there are examples of farmer organizations that include the demands of women who grow coca or poppy, as well as rural organizations made up exclusively of women growers. Accompanying organizations make efforts to bring these women together, document the particular challenges they face, empower their organizations, and strengthen their role in community groups. This report explores who these women growers are, their socioeconomic contexts and the challenges they face, their involvement in the production of crops destined for illicit markets,



Credit: César Andrés Rodríguez. Photo taken in a coca field in Perla Amazónica, Puerto Asís, Putumayo, Colombia.

their organizing experiences, and their participation in decision-making processes, taking into account two case studies: that of Bolivia and Colombia. This analysis also offers recommendations with the aim of devising better public policies with a gender perspective.

The Characteristics of Women Engaged in Coca and Poppy Cultivation

The women who grow crops for illicit markets share characteristics and interests, but nonetheless make up a heterogeneous group. The diversity of these women—rural, indigenous, Afro-descendant women—is manifested in the activities they carry out, their ways of life and social organization, their age, their background in terms of participation, and their origins, among other factors. In countries like Colombia, Mexico, and Peru—where coca and/or poppy crops exist—the state has done little to learn about and document rural women’s living conditions, even though it is precisely the precariousness of life in the countryside, the high indices of poverty, and the lack of access to public services and lack of civilian state presence that drive them to take part in the drug economy.

The women who live in areas with coca or poppy crops see themselves as rural women who carry out various roles.⁴ These women often find themselves in situations of social and economic vulnerability. Traditionally, they are farmers in rural areas characterized by poverty, scarce labor opportunities, a lack of access to education, and unmet basic needs.

The women and men who live in areas where plants destined for illicit markets are cultivated are among the most marginalized and poorest people in society, and conflict or violence may

be an unavoidable reality in their daily lives. However, women face greater socioeconomic challenges than men and can also be victims of gender-based violence. Rural women have even less access than men to adequate education and health care.⁵ In part because of the discrimination these women face in patriarchal societies, they often lack property rights and access to credit or to productive resources, and they have less access to markets and hence have less income, which limits their mobility to a large extent.

Gender disparities can be seen in diverse areas, including the right to land titling, the economic activities that women and men engage in, and the pay they receive for their work. Generally speaking, women have fewer rights to land titling, and single women's households face greater challenges for providing sustenance to their families.⁶ In countries like Colombia, men have ownership of the land and possess the wealth, even though the law recognizes the possibility of women's proprietorship. In Bolivia, both men and women hold land titles, with around 45% of the land allocated

to women,⁷ though some women who hold land titles have plots that are too small to even provide subsistence. In this way, a clear relationship exists between limited access to land, or to alternative economic activities, and women's participation in coca and poppy cultivation.⁸

Limiting a woman's access to land means restricting her economic autonomy vis-à-vis her husband, father, or brother. Even though a woman participates in agricultural work, if her male partner owns the land, he tends to receive payment for the products cultivated. Such dependency means women cannot access credit or bank loans, or receive economic help or financing for production-related projects from state or municipal funds.

These inequalities can also be seen with regard to the economic activities that women and men engage in and the pay they receive for their work. According to the National Survey on Time Use (*Encuesta Nacional de Uso del Tiempo, ENUT*), women in Colombia, on average, dedicate 7 hours and 23 minutes to

Table 1. Main vulnerabilities affecting women in Latin America

Vulnerabilities	Description
Unemployment and discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Informal jobs. ▪ Work overload. ▪ Difficulties accessing productive capital, irrigation systems, technology, and technical assistance (among others), due to gender discrimination.
Sexual education and access to health care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Limited access to sexual education and to contraceptives. ▪ Pregnancy in adolescence and sexually transmitted infections. ▪ Lack of knowledge of common diseases and poor access to quality health care.
Social participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Female population unaware of or cannot access ways to participate. ▪ Community disincentives to participation. ▪ Patriarchal family norms that limit women's decision-making.
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Large percentage of school drop-out rates due to early marriage and lack of family income that obliges them to seek employment. ▪ Limited access to higher education.

Source: Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2019.¹¹ Translation by WOLA.

unpaid care work each day, while men invest 3 hours and 10 minutes in those tasks.⁹ Similarly, in Mexico in 2014, indigenous women spent 58.8 hours a week on unpaid work, while non-indigenous women spent 50.9 hours per week; meanwhile, indigenous men spent 21.4 hours on unpaid work, and non-indigenous men 18.5 hours.¹⁰ In addition, some of these women are members of local social or political groups, activities that tend to be crucial for the proper functioning and well-being of their communities.¹²

Rural women usually perform invisible roles that include their participation in agricultural and community work—such as building schools—while caring for the home. This means caring for their children and/or elderly people, preparing food for the family and for agricultural workers, taking food to their places of work, cleaning and washing clothes, being housewives and wives—all of which leads to increasingly heavy workloads. They are also responsible for the livestock, for processing grains, producing dairy products, handling fruit and poultry, as well as for the coca and/or poppy crops.¹³ Some of these women face long days that start from the break of dawn and may include as much as 20 hours of work.¹⁴

“It is often said that women peasant farmers have a triple workday: agricultural work, household care work, and participation in social and political organizations.”¹⁵

Caregiving and domestic work as well as women’s community participation—tasks that are generally unpaid—have implications for the power relations and inequalities between men and women, as well as for the possibility of enjoying rights such as access to education, to free time or to paid work, and can negatively impact their health.

The Role of Women in Coca and Poppy Cultivation

Women get involved in growing coca or poppy for two main reasons. In countries like Bolivia and Peru, coca leaves have been cultivated for centuries for medicinal, religious, cultural, and nutritional purposes. The second reason is, above all, economic.

The cultivation of coca or poppy and other related activities are an option enabling women to meet their basic needs, and they sometimes are the main breadwinners for their families. In comparison with other agricultural products like corn, rice, and bananas, coca and poppy are products that have a more stable market, and not much infrastructure is needed for their transportation and sale.¹⁶ Therefore, it is more profitable to grow coca and poppy than other

agricultural items. However, while the crop provides enough income for subsistence, it does not make the women rich.

On some occasions, the only way that women can access paid work is by getting involved in coca or poppy crops. This has allowed them to obtain economic and credit-related resources that they would not have accessed before as rural workers.

In Andean countries, women are involved

“The income received in this work [cultivating coca or participating in its processing] has allowed us to access rights such as health, education for our children, and housing, and it has enabled our economic independence. However, and despite the responsibilities we take on in our homes and the coca fields, in the majority of cases, we do not participate on equal footing in the earnings or in the decisions about how to administer or invest the money coming from these activities.”¹⁷



Credit: Andean Information Network. Photo taken in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

mainly in the initial stages of the coca economy, meaning cultivating, fertilizing, harvesting, and transporting coca leaves, while a smaller number of women is involved in more specialized activities, such as chemical processing.¹⁸ In the case of opium poppy, women participate in the entire process, which includes preparation of the seedbed and the land, selection of the seeds, sowing, fumigation tasks to a lesser extent—due to the physical effort involved in hauling the pump with the pesticides—the scraping or slicing of seedpods at the time of harvest, and the collecting of seeds. Some women participate in the production of morphine and heroin.¹⁹

Meanwhile, in countries like Colombia and Mexico, coca and poppy cultivation has put women in the midst of the violence caused by the product's illegality and exposed them to vulnerabilities associated with the militarization of their territories. Other negative consequences for their families, communities, and the environment include the rupture of family ties, the disproportionate incarceration of women, their stigmatization as “drug traffickers,” the contamination of

water sources with residual waste from coca processing, and deforestation in the territories, among others.²⁰

At the same time, in Colombia the areas where such crops are grown have attracted armed actors. The community is often at their mercy, which has caused a great number of victims of different kinds of violence. In many cases, women and the general population end up in the crossfire between military and police forces and illegal armed groups, and they are victimized from all sides.²¹ Programs for forced eradication and aerial spraying of crops have deepened poverty and harmed the environment, limiting even further affected families' access to sustainable livelihoods.

In the case of Colombia, female and male growers can be incarcerated for the offenses of maintaining (cultivating) or financing cultivation (Penal Code, Art. 375). In general, data from the National Penitentiary and Prison Institute (*Instituto Nacional Penitenciario y Carcelario*) does not allow for identifying the number of small-scale producers being criminalized, because in some cases the offense of cultivation is combined with others, such as processing, drug trafficking, or using private property to cultivate crops for the illicit market.²² The penalties imposed for these offenses are disproportionate and reflect prohibitionist drug policies based on irrational punishments for crimes that are neither violent nor high impact.²³ When women, their partners, or relatives are incarcerated for cultivating crops declared to be illicit, such criminalization has negative consequences for them, their families, and their communities.

Silences to be Remedied: Women Growers as Agents of Change in their Communities

The participation of women growers in

political and social movements varies depending on their personal history, age, place of origin, and on how strong or weak community and farmer mobilization is where they live. Despite the challenges they face, female coca and poppy cultivators have performed a critical role in community organizing, in assemblies, associations, social or farmer organizations, agrarian unions, social movements related to these crops, or other collectives, especially in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru.

The so-called war on drugs, structural gender inequalities, and the marginalization of the rural sector have erected walls that hide and render invisible the role of women in political mobilization, in sustaining community life, and in improving living conditions. Labeling them simply as “coca growers,” or seeing them exclusively as people who engage in an activity declared to be illicit, obscures their standing as political actors. Under the logic of stigmatization, the trajectories of women growers are diminished.

In the case of Colombia, the state’s absence in the Andes-Amazon junction²⁴ allowed for the building of a social order characterized in part by community organization and rural citizenship that is asserted in social mobilizations.²⁵ The coca growers’ marches of the mid-1990s and women’s experiences with civil resistance, mobilization, and organization at different levels have contributed to forging leadership and the political positioning of women’s roles in these communities. Social, cultural, and economic vindications are at the root of their demands directed at the state. These women’s organizational and social mobilization processes—whether in female-only organizations or mixed ones—are focused on recognition of the rural identity, the defense of human rights, access to citizenship, the problems for attaining well-

being and accessing public services, access to land ownership, and resistance to the negative effects of the “war on drugs,” among other issues.²⁶ This is broadly described as the demand to be citizens, as María Clemencia Ramírez put it in her book *Between the Guerrillas and the State: The Cocalero Movement, Citizenship, and Identity in the Colombian Amazon*.²⁷ If drug policies in Colombia stripped coca farmers of their citizenship in the eyes of the state, it was the coca growers themselves—men and women—who have reminded the state that they have a right to full citizenship.

Whereas in Bolivia there is a longer history of women coca growers organizing and participating in community decisions, in Colombia this is a more recent phenomenon. That participation has given them new tools and knowledge for interacting with government entities and achieving important local objectives. Women have acquired knowledge in areas such as human rights, women’s rights, victim reparations, and crop substitution, among others. With regard to initiatives that benefit their communities, women’s participation in certain organizations has been key to obtaining resources and building schools, or to improving community infrastructure, implementing literacy programs, and obtaining land titles for women, particularly in Bolivia.²⁸

Given the silence and dearth of information regarding the role of women in community life in areas where crops designated as illicit are grown, little is known about their contributions to the development of their communities. However, in regions with a high incidence of precariousness and poverty, the role of women in distributing and investing resources has enabled improvements in living conditions at a family and community level, and even in social mobility. It can be seen,

then, that these women contribute daily to overcoming poverty, and that, in part, is why their experiences should be documented and shared.

The Women Coca Growers' Movement in Bolivia

The history of women in the Bolivian coca growers' movement demonstrates that they have been the architects of everyday resistance to the "war on drugs," while at the same time carrying out cultivation-related activities, caring for their children, and engaging in activism at roadblocks and marches. In Bolivia, there is a long history of organizing by women coca growers that includes large guilds such as the National Federation of Rural Women (*Federación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas*) and the Federation of Women of the Cochabamba Tropics (*Federación de Mujeres del Trópico de Cochabamba*). According to the 2012 Census, coca-producing areas in the La Paz and Cochabamba departments are home to more than 576,000 people, of whom 46.8% are women; and the projections for 2020 show the population growing to 584,000 inhabitants.²⁹

One of the milestones in this history took place in December 1995, when coca-growing Bolivian women organized a march for peace and human rights, which included demands for halting the forced eradication of coca fields, respect for life, human rights, and the release of various men who had been detained by the government.³⁰ The women walked more than 390 kilometers (about 242 miles) from cities in Cochabamba to La Paz with the objective of talking to the wives of the president and vice president, raising their husbands' awareness, and putting a stop to the violence in the Cochabamba Tropics (commonly known as the Chapare).

Generally speaking, the government of former President Evo Morales³¹ made progress on advancing women's rights in the last decade.³² Although most of the gains were related to gender-based violence, there was also support for women's access to the means of production, both through access to land as well as financial resources. The Morales' government: 1) promoted women's incorporation into the labor force and guaranteed the same pay that men receive for similar work, both in public and private spheres; 2) developed training and leadership programs for women in decision-making within social organizations; and 3) gave women's access to administrative and political posts at both a local and national level, which also complied with the Gender Parity Law (*Ley de Paridad de Género*).



Credit: Segundina Orellana. Photo taken in the Cochabamba Tropics, Bolivia.

In rural areas, the most important women's rights issues continue to be gender-based violence, political harassment, and a disproportionate burden for women with

regards to economic responsibility and family care. Although there have been improvements in these areas, gender inequality continues to exist with regard to access to public services and participation in decision-making.

Women play an important role in the agricultural sector in general, and above all in the production of coca. In the Chapare, women lead several organizations, which are strong, legally established, and have full participation in union decision-making and in the gender parity policy formally adopted by the main coca grower union, the Six Federations of the Cochabamba Tropics (*las Seis Federaciones del Trópico de Cochabamba*). However, they still face some challenges. For example, in the Yungas region of La Paz, empowerment and awareness-raising is needed for the implementation of gender parity. Few of the women's organizations in that region have statutes or legal recognition, and women's representation in municipal jobs and leadership positions remains limited. In this area of the country, women continue demanding greater participation in decision-making in their communities and federations, as well as more training on how to develop production-related projects.

Meanwhile, the Coordinating Body of the Six Federations of Rural Women of the Cochabamba Tropics (*Coordinadora de las Seis Federaciones de Mujeres Campesinas del Trópico de Cochabamba*, COCAMTROP) groups female producers affiliated with the federations in the five municipalities of the Chapare. This kind of structure allows women's organizations to work out their own agenda and plan its implementation, while also facilitating work on shared demands for the benefit of all producers in the Chapare.

The country's innovative "coca yes, cocaine no" policy formalized a cultivation program that allowed registered farmers in established

areas to grow coca on a limited amount of land for the legal market, to ensure a subsistence income. (A cato plot ranges from 1,600–2,500 square meters or about 17,000–30,000 square feet). Bolivian law allows for legally growing coca on 22,000 hectares in these "traditional cultivation areas" and for its sale in legally authorized markets. Through this system, the Chapare achieved a degree of stability and relative prosperity.³³

Likewise, the program has played a significant role in empowering female coca growers. In this region, between 2010 and 2013 a major land-titling campaign was carried out in conjunction with the registration of catos as part of the Program to Support Community Coca Control (*Programa de Apoyo al Control Social*, PACS). As a result, 48% of the land titles in the Cochabamba Tropics—the province in which the largest share of legal coca cultivation takes place—belong to women.³⁴ In 2018, women held the titles to 35% of the catos, which offers them a source of stable income and access to credit with low interest rates.³⁵ Since 2016, the National Fund for Comprehensive Development (*Fondo Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral*) has trained hundreds of female coca growers to produce a variety of products, including honey, bananas, and pineapple, which has allowed women to diversify their income. However, rural women continue facing challenges with regard to access to health and education services, housing, and low earnings.³⁶

The model developed by the Morales government over the last 14 years could have continued into 2020 and beyond, for both gender equity and the community coca control program, with an emphasis on decent work for women in both rural and urban areas. However, under the transitional government established in Bolivia in late 2019, there is uncertainty about whether work on gender

equality will continue. To date, the transitional government has violated the rights of women growers, increased inflammatory rhetoric against coca growers, conducted racist attacks on indigenous people, and has heightened repression, leading to nine deaths and more than 115 people wounded at the time of this writing. In addition, on various occasions, Interior Minister Arturo Murillo has labeled people living in the Chapare as “drug traffickers,” and in many press interviews he has branded Bolivia as a “narco state,” prompting the re-criminalization of the women and men who produce coca.³⁷

Women Growers Building Peace in Colombia

In Colombia, the disconnect between efforts to reduce crops with illicit uses and rural development policies in the municipalities with the most coca production results in violations of the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to health of the populations that inhabit these territories or that plant, harvest, or transform coca leaves. This lack of articulation means that public policies regarding the cultivation of plants declared to be illicit do not address the structural causes, often producing more harm through repression. Many coca-growing communities are characterized by their high degree of community organization, since they have had to address the basic needs that the state does not meet. Women have a predominant role in this sense, mobilizing community resources for teachers’ salaries, the construction of paths or roads between communities, and school infrastructure, among other items. In addition, these women have been protagonists in strikes, marches, roadblocks, and protest actions, and in creating committees or participating in elections that became the mechanisms of a resistance demanding attention to their



Credit: César Andrés Rodríguez. Photo taken in a coca field in Perla Amazónica, Puerto Asís Putumayo, Colombia.

territories, the recognition of citizenship, and the rights of the settler, farmer, indigenous, and/or Afro-descendant populations.³⁸

It is important to highlight women coca growers’ capacity for agency; many of them participate in community boards and in committees advocating for aqueducts and roads, among others.³⁹ Without the management and work done by women leaders, their communities would have worse living conditions, since they are the ones who guarantee access to basic goods that the state does not provide (such as roads, health, and education) via mobilizations and social organization.

One of the first examples of women’s organization and mobilization in the Andes-Amazon junction, as well as in other regions of the country, is the Pacific Route (*La Ruta Pacífica*), a movement that emerged in 1996 as a response to the grave situation of violence faced by women in both rural and urban conflict zones. The Route—made up of female representatives from more than 300 organizations that reach nearly 10,000 women—works to strengthen women’s acts of resistance and non-violent, anti-war feminist proposals for a negotiated political solution to the country’s armed internal conflict, demilitarization and the recuperation of civilian life, and for the institutional

framework of a rights-based social democratic state.⁴⁰

Another of the experiences related to women's organizing in the Putumayo department is the Women Weavers of Life Departmental Alliance (*Alianza Departamental de Mujeres "Tejedoras de Vida"*), created in 2005 by a group of female leaders who decided to join forces to support and manage humanitarian aid for Putumayo communities during a one month armed strike promoted by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, FARC). In this context, women from 40 organizations and 65 development initiatives in 13 municipalities organized around three core themes: 1) human rights and peace building; 2) women's history and political participation; and 3) women and socioeconomic development.⁴¹ In one way or another, the social organizations in this part of the country have become the amplifier of women's concerns and an everyday support to them, enabling important progress on expanding their role in politics.

The peace process—in the stages of negotiation, signing, and preparation for implementation—enabled a more open social dialogue on all the issues contained in the peace agenda, which included crops with illicit uses and the mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the peace process. According to surveys⁴² of the coca-growing families that are part of implementing the Peace Agreement, women represent 46.9% of the family members engaged in coca cultivation, and 29% of them are heads of household.⁴³ In this context, regional gatherings of women coca growers took place, with the aim of establishing joint positions on implementation of point 4 of the Peace Agreement that is focused on crops with illicit uses.

One such meeting was the Gathering of

Women Coca Growers of Southern Colombia (*Encuentro de Mujeres CocALERAS del Sur de Colombia*), held on March 17-18, 2017 in Puerto Asís. There, more than 80 women discussed their situation with regard to points 1 and 4 of the Final Agreement, particularly in relation to comprehensive rural development, crop substitution, and differentiated criminal treatment for small-scale growers.⁴⁴ Their main demands include, among others, release of women in prison due to their involvement in the coca economy, spaces for participation in implementing the Peace Agreement, guarantees for the right to territory, the promotion of a territorial economy, and land titling. A declaration emerged from this gathering that reflects the women's positions on these issues, along with their demands vis-à-vis the national government.⁴⁵ Corporación Humanas Colombia and the Women Weavers of Life Departmental Alliance of Putumayo organized the event, in collaboration with more than ten women's organizations throughout the country.

Another gathering took place on April 28, 2019, also in Puerto Asís, convening 40 women from organizations like the National Unified Agricultural Trade Union Federation (*Federación Nacional Sindical Unitaria Agropecuaria*, FENSUAGRO) and the National Coordinator of Coca, Poppy, and Marijuana Cultivators (*Coordinadora de Cultivadores de Coca, Amapola y Marihuana*, COCCAM), joined by the Center for the Study of the Law, Justice and Society (*Dejusticia*). Among other matters, they discussed their concerns regarding Immediate Assistance Plans (*Planes de Atención Inmediata*, PAI), which are economic aid programs offered by the national government, and regarding differentiated criminal treatment for small-scale growers and the commitments they would be required to adopt.⁴⁶

Remaining Challenges and Risks

In these participation processes—both in Bolivia and Colombia—women have faced difficulties or barriers related to age, limited recognition of their leadership and participation, or insufficient resources of their

“The historical obstacles to accessing representative spaces in public and political spheres are related to our status as women and to the roles that have been imposed on us and with which they seek to keep sexist, patriarchal, and racist power relations intact.”⁴⁷

own to get to meeting places. On the one hand, a collective, community, and family focus often characterizes rural communities, while on the other hand, in the patriarchal structure, women occupy positions that are undervalued vis-à-vis those occupied by men. On occasion, women’s participation

and leadership have affected their security. For example, in countries with high indices of violence, such as Colombia and Mexico, some women have suffered threats and have been the victims of kidnapping, murder, and forced displacement.⁴⁸

It is also important to highlight that, in contrast to men, women’s increased participation in certain spaces, along with the bolstering of their leadership, has social, family-related, and emotional costs. Women’s leadership is not always viewed positively by their partners or by the community due to gender stereotypes that women should only take care of their families and homes, and should not have a say and make decisions.⁴⁹

Despite the strength of women’s peace initiatives in their territories, difficulties remain for women’s organizations to articulate with actors in other social movements and in spaces for political-electoral representation.

In addition, within their own families and communities, and by virtue of gender-based arrangements, women face a variety of obstacles to participating in public life. However, through negotiation and diverse strategies for daily resistance, women coca growers have been earning their place in social organizations and strengthening their role as leaders in their families and communities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Public policy design and implementation must take into account the reality of the people for whom the policies are intended to benefit. In crafting drug policies, the lack of information and knowledge about the experience of women growers has limited their incorporation as active, productive, and political agents. In fact, this process has fostered the reproduction of gender stereotypes, while maintaining the triple discrimination they face—for being women, for being farmers, and for being involved in the production of crops declared illicit. In light of the huge vacuum of information, countries should urgently incorporate a gender perspective into data-gathering on the situation of crops designated as illicit, with an eye toward gaining clarity regarding the role of women involved in this activity. Even more important, women are the experts who should design public policies that impact them and their families.

Beyond the vulnerabilities and numerous challenges faced by these women, they must be recognized as agents of changes who have great impact on their communities. Any public policy intervention—whether related to security, rural development, or participation—must take into account the gains women have made, based on their agency, and ensure that proposed development models do not entail losses for their autonomy or resources. Rural women have the right and should participate

in decision-making at all levels; however, currently, they are not adequately represented as elected officials, public officials, or on a community level. With the goal of guaranteeing the active, free, effective, significant, and informed participation of women growers in political and public life, and at all levels of decision-making, we recommend adopting and implementing the following measures:

- Ensure that women growers and their organizations can influence and participate in all public policies, their formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation at all levels and in all the areas affecting them. Governments must design and implement tools for monitoring the participation of women growers in all public entities.
- Create spaces to learn about the reality of women growers who live in areas where coca and/or poppy are cultivated. Such opportunities will allow women to recognize and expand their potential and capacities as economic agents and as guarantors of food security and of the well-being of their families and communities.
- Foster women's access to land titles and ensure access to credit; without this, their agricultural productivity is hampered.
- Address the unequal power relations between women and men, and eliminate barriers to rural women's participation in community life by promoting effective, gender-sensitive structures for rural decision-making. States should implement campaigns to raise awareness of the importance of rural women's participation in community decision-making.
- Strengthen grassroots organizations

already in existence and support training and exchanges with other women's organizations that would ensure the transfer of organizational experiences and tools for political advocacy, and for election to public office.

- Identify and strengthen women's leadership in areas where coca or poppy are cultivated and actively involve them in the design and implementation of alternative or rural development programs and policies. It is important to recognize these women's capacities, knowledge, and expertise.
- Ensure that rural development projects be implemented only after participatory evaluations on the environmental impact and on gender have been carried out, with rural women's full participation.
- Organize workshops and trainings related to topics such as leadership, human rights, women's rights, and rural development, including men, women and their children.
- Promote actions aimed at democratizing productive work in the home and in communities, addressing the larger unpaid care workload that rural women tend to take on. Special assistance should be given to women involved in the drug trade due to their situation of economic precariousness.
- Design educational programs and activities aimed at deconstructing the narratives of "traditional gender roles," to address discrimination against women and gender-based violence.
- Identify, design, and implement innovative forms of protection networks among women so they can inform each other and share knowledge about situations of risk in the area.

- Make the situation of female coca growers visible, along with the mechanisms through which they have sought to have their rights guaranteed and protected, and ensure that victims of violence and human rights abuses have access to justice.

Key Resources

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