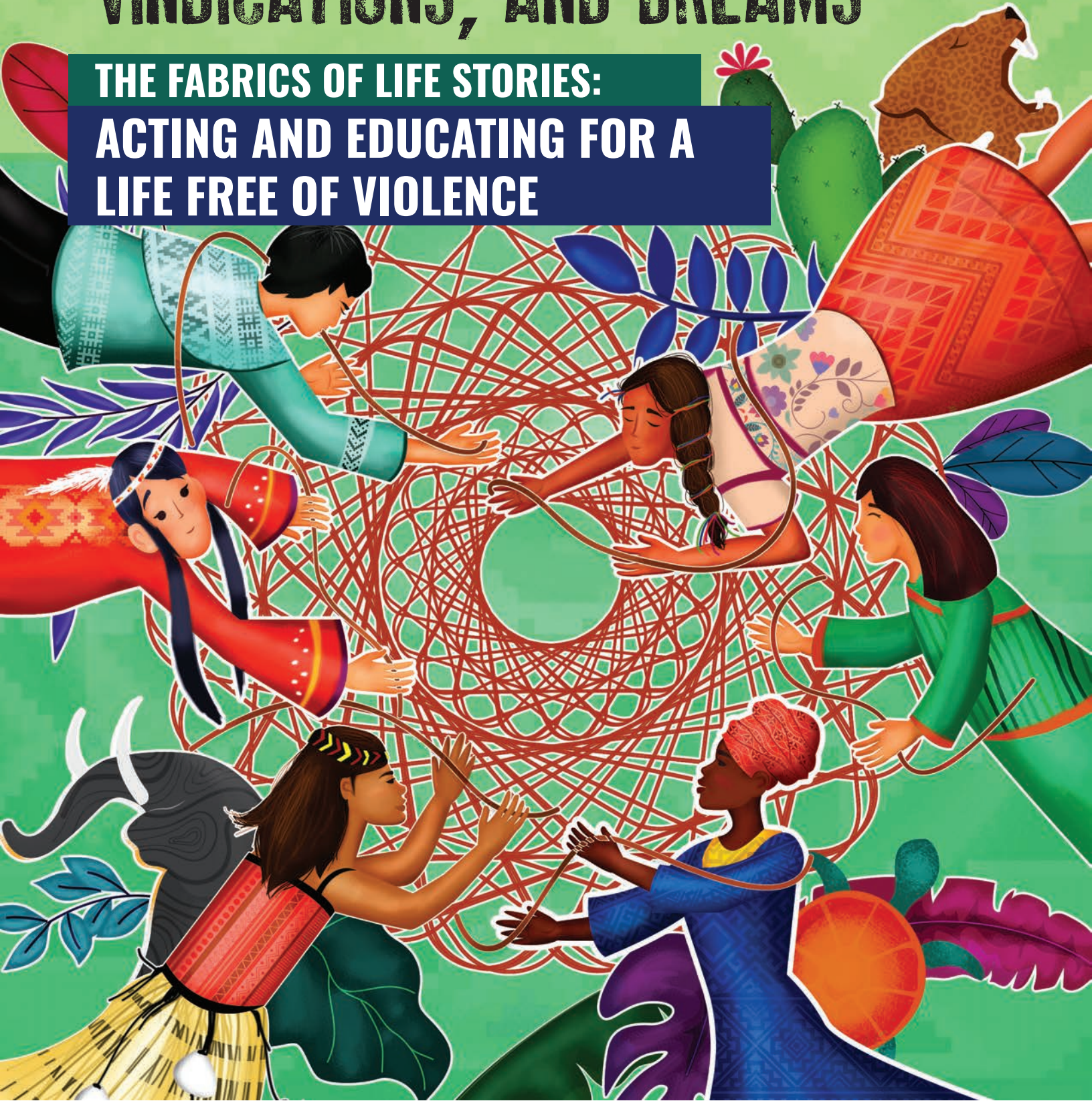




# A FABRIC OF KNOWLEDGE, VINDICATIONS, AND DREAMS

**THE FABRICS OF LIFE STORIES:  
ACTING AND EDUCATING FOR A  
LIFE FREE OF VIOLENCE**





**A FABRIC OF KNOWLEDGE,  
VINDICATIONS, AND DREAMS**

**THE FABRICS OF LIFE STORIES:**

**INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS**

**ACTING AND EDUCATING FOR A LIFE FREE OF VIOLENCE**

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## 2. ACRONYMS

## A

**AIWO:** Organization of Indigenous Women in Africa

**AWID:** Association for Women's Rights and Development

**AYNI:** FIMI Indigenous Women's Fund

## C

**CEDAW:** Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

**CRIMA:** Regional Indigenous Council of the Middle Amazon

**CSW:** Commission on the Status of Women

## F

**FAO:** Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

**FGM:** Female Genital Mutilation

**IFAD:** International Federation of Women Lawyers

## G

**GLSIW:** Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women

## H

**HIV:** Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Human Immunodeficiency Syndrome

**HIV/AIDS:** Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

## I

**IWIF:** International Indigenous Women's Forum

## N

**NGO:** Non-Governmental Organization

## O

**ODS:** Sustainable Development Goals

**OMIC:** Organization of the Indigenous Peasant Movement

**OHCHR:** Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

**ONIC:** National Indigenous Organization of Colombia

**OPIAC:** National Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon

# R

**RACEP:** Ramat Community Empowerment Programme

# U

**URACCAN:** University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast

**UN:** United Nations Organization

**UN WOMEN:** The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women



## 3. PROLOGUE



## Indigenous women are writing their own history.

*These four inspiring books published by the International Indigenous Women's Forum describe the trajectory of extraordinary Indigenous women throughout the world. The 43 stories are about how they built their strength, vision, organization and advocacy to become defenders of their peoples, lands and cultures and weavers of a more just and peaceful future.*


*As is evident from the life stories we read in these books, Indigenous women do not see themselves as passive spectators or victims. In numerous instances, Indigenous women have bravely taken up the roles of mediators and peace builders, defenders of their lands, of the environment, of their self-determination. They have been promoters, creators and teachers of their cultures. They have been defenders of individual and collective human rights. Indigenous women have sought to address these issues at the local, national and international levels. At the United Nations, they have been advocates and leaders since the very first year of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, in 1982 in Geneva. Indigenous women were active participants and major contributors during the more than two decades of negotiations regarding the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which was adopted by the General Assembly in 2007. They were major contributors at the World Conference on Indigenous Peoples in 2014. Through their advocacy they have impacted the work of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the follow up processes of the Beijing Global Conference on Women. Indigenous women are now clearly among the international actors that count. Their leadership is organic to the Indigenous Peoples movement, informed by it and informing it.*

*It is no surprise that a unique Indigenous women's organization, FIMI-the International Indigenous Women's Forum, sprang out of such a strong movement. As an umbrella organization of Indigenous women from around the world, FIMI has reached a level of visibility and respect that few enjoy. In its 2020 Global Study on the Situation of Indigenous Women and Girls FIMI also tells the story of how the Indigenous women's movements, inspired by the Indigenous women's struggles at local and national level, worked over the years to place their issues on the international agenda, in order to strengthen respect, galvanize action and achieve implementation of collective and individual rights.*

*The wise leadership and input of Indigenous women led to the realization that a space had to be created for reaffirming that empowerment and leadership can be acquired through a process of participation, capacity building, and organizational strengthening; through unlearning, knowledge sharing and learning. This gave birth, in 2013, to FIMI's training project, the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women (EGLMI, for its acronym in Spanish), and specifically, the International Program on Human Rights and Advocacy Strategies. The Institute for the Study of Human Rights at Columbia University had the honor to accompany the process from the beginning and to host Indigenous women leaders for an annual seminar.*

*The life trajectories of women described in these books demonstrate the strength, depth and validity of a strategic program such as the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women. The bonds, knowledge sharing, mutual encouragement and inspiration participants experience are unparalleled, so that Indigenous women can continue their multifaceted struggles with more vigor and determination.*

*The publication of these books is an occasion to pay tribute to all the Indigenous women, protagonists and survivors of these struggles and to express solidarity for the Indigenous human rights defenders who are prosecuted, imprisoned and even killed in various countries for defending the rights of their peoples.*



*We recognize Indigenous women's courage and leadership. They are not alone.*

*Five strong effective social movements in the last decades accompany their struggles: the human rights movement, the women's movement, the Indigenous Peoples' movement, the peace movement and the environmental movement. These movements have had a sustained relation with the UN over the decades and a global impact. Indigenous women symbolize the meeting point of these international social movements.*

*Let us not forget that advocacy at international level is an extension of our citizenship from the national to the international level. Since states and non-state actors also act internationally and take decisions that will affect our lives, we, as active citizens that want to shape our own lives, also follow these processes internationally. We become international actors and influence decisions as well. This is people's advocacy.*

**Resistance, persistence, resilience, vision for life:** *four words that embrace Indigenous women's struggles. Indigenous women are telling their own stories and creating more just societies with their many visible and invisible acts that sustain life every day. They continue to uphold a fundamental principle: DIGNITY*

*The words of the Guatemalan Indigenous leader, our sister Rigoberta Menchú, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992, resonate in the lives of many:*

*"What I treasure most in life is being able to dream. During my most difficult moments and complex situations I have been able to dream of a more beautiful future."*

*As our sister Myrna Cunningham, whose vision led to the creation of the Global School says: "this means being like an artisan who weaves, paints, and combines various materials to create a work of art", and that is how she understands facilitation, as the art of sharing, learning, and teaching.*

*The journey of FIMI's Global School has been inspirational and will continue being so as more Indigenous women join in.*

**Elsa Stamatopoulou**  
**Director Indigenous Peoples' Rights Program,**  
**Institute for the Study of Human Rights, Columbia University**





## 4. BACKGROUND

The International Indigenous Women's Forum (IIWF/FIMI) is a global network of indigenous women that articulates local, national, and regional organizations in Asia, Africa, the Arctic, the Pacific, and the Americas.



*The FIMI's mission is to bring together women leaders and human rights activists from different parts of the world to coordinate agendas, build capacities, and develop leadership roles. The IIWF encourages the participation of indigenous women in international decision-making processes, ensuring the consistent and substantive inclusion of the perspectives of indigenous women in debates that involve human rights."*

It has a work plan divided into four strategic programs:

1. *Political participation and advocacy,*
2. *Capacity building,*
3. *AYNI, the Indigenous Women's Forum; and*
4. *Research and emerging issues.*

The FIMI believes in learning by doing and in the cross-fertilization process between practice

and theory. Access to more information enables effective participation, and through such participation, capacity building is strengthened. Consequently, it reaffirms that empowerment and leadership can be acquired through the implementation of a process that combines participation, capacity building, and organizational strengthening.

Per its mandate for capacity building and leadership strengthening, in 2013 it launched its training project, the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women (IWGLS, for its acronym in English), specifically, the International Program on Human Rights and Advocacy Strategies.

The program has a duration of one year, with the objective of strengthening capacities, knowledge, and leadership of indigenous women activists and leaders from various regions of the world, so that women leaders may have the strength and wisdom to have an impact at different spaces around the world in favor of the lives of indigenous women.

The School was conceived of as space for training and learning by doing, in which women leaders begin to understand the meaning of global advocacy, which allows them to see how their recommendations and input turn into recommendations of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, so that they may provide important input on resolutions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), or the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

Likewise, one of the motivations for creating the leadership school, on the one hand, was to promote actions in favor of indigenous women after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which was during the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. On the other hand, it was also created to benefit the indigenous women of the communities as they are aware that they are bearers of ancestral knowledge,

are the main reproducers of their peoples' cultures, and contribute to their continuity and resistance; however, these women had no visibility. Therefore, it was believed that the School could help out in providing visibility to these contributions of indigenous women.

Participants in the initial experience were 21 women leaders from different socio-cultural regions: Africa, Asia, the Arctic, the Pacific, and the Americas. In summary, the program is developed in three phases. For the purposes hereof it is explained below:

### **Virtual:**

*This first phase consists of online learning through a virtual platform, with a duration of three to four months.*

### **Face-to-face:**

*The second phase consists of attending intensive seminars for*

*a week at the United Nations headquarters, as well as at Columbia University, through its Institute of Human Rights. Likewise, at this phase, women leaders participate effectively during the first week of sessions of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and meet with high-level United Nations officials.*

### **Implementation of advocacy plans:**

*the third phase consists of the execution of Advocacy Plans, created by the participants, at the local, national, and/or regional levels linked to the global agenda of the Indigenous Peoples' movements.*





©FIMI. Opening moment, participants of the 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City.

With improvements based on the results of the first experience, the following year in 2014 the FIMI implemented a second edition, wherein 25 indigenous women from various countries from the same regions mentioned above participated. Likewise, the corresponding training terms were included according to the designed methodology. In 2015, the School created mechanisms for the participation of 27 participants from different peoples of the world. Through the development of three training terms, the School was growing and expanding the great network of organizations that make up the FIMI.

Upon completion of each edition of the IWGLS, more new indigenous organizations and leaders were brought together by the FIMI as a global network. It strengthened alliances with Columbia University, United Nations agencies, cooperation entities, and other actors. Women graduates of the first editions joined together with other women activists, built alliances, and continued

influencing in other settings, being convinced to continue practicing complementarity, reciprocity, and ancestral knowledge. They also legally incorporated their organizations, speaking out in an organized and strategic manner. Additionally, they formulated projects, accessed other funds, and/or continued to search for various resources. They still had more dreams, but they were clear about the fact that no matter how local their struggle might be, there were still more women with the same cause in other parts of the world.

Furthermore, former participants took on technical tasks of the FIMI, which in turn grew and expanded its networks to other countries that were included for the first time, such as some Pacific islands: Micronesia, Guam, Papua New Guinea, and Vanuatu; even though long-distance coordination with some leaders for their in-person participation in the School was difficult. Regarding the technical team, they were greatly satisfied with the work carried out; at a distance, they witnessed the

projects carried out by the women leaders. Some former participants returned to the Permanent Forum on their own and met with the FIMI team in this and other settings. They were grateful for the changes they experienced after participating in the School. In this context, the FIMI held the fourth and the fifth edition, in 2016 and 2018 , respectively<sup>1</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that from 2015 to 2018, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations agreed with the FIMI to lead the IWGLS with the aim of strengthening the capacities and knowledge of indigenous women leaders regarding food security and human rights. At this time, during three editions, the School implemented national programs in: **Peru, Bolivia, India, Philippines, El Salvador, Panama, and Paraguay**. In the last edition, it led these programs in four socio-cultural regions: **Mesoamerica, South America, Africa. and Asia**. Wherein leaders from various Indigenous Peoples and countries took part. In the different training levels, a total of **230 indigenous women participated**.

At the end of the **2018 edition**, a total of **120 women leaders**, from 41 countries from various socio-cultural regions had participated in the School, resulting in a network of achievements and improved learning. The objectives had been widely achieved: providing visibility to indigenous women and helping them speak out at the international level due to the role they play in their cultures. So, it was necessary to tell about the fruits reaped by the School through a plan on how to compile the stories of the women leaders, focused on recording the voices, experiences, challenges, personal changes, and individual and collective hopes of their participation in the School. At the same time, it would be a good time to read in retrospect about the successes, improvements, and pending tasks of the work accomplished; and—why not? — to reinvent the most emblematic program of the FIMI.

In this work, former participants in the training process helped out with interviewing some of the women leaders. Subsequently, each story was put together to tell how dozens of indigenous women have joined hands to move forward towards worlds with less inequality, where cultural diversity may belong and each People may have continuity and develop themselves according to their own decisions.

*The collected stories will state— based on the leaders' words— what the training program represented for their work and collective purposes, as well as their journeys. They will also expound on their resistances, satisfactions, references, and utopias.*



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1. In 2017, the International Program did not take place

# Myrna Cunningham Kain



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*A wise, indigenous, Miskito woman, who has traveled along long flat and wide roads with strong and sure steps, in her tireless and committed struggle to defend, exercise, and demand the exercise of her rights, those of the women and Indigenous Peoples of the world, from a holistic and comprehensive point of view. She recognizes that the Miskito are a border people resulting from national governments, and due to the imposition of borders they have been divided between Honduras and Nicaragua.*

Myrna studied Public Health, is a physician by profession and a defender of rights by her own conviction. Throughout her life, she has assumed different responsibilities in her country, related to the process of building autonomy in the regions of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. She contributed enormously to the building of a multi-ethnic State that in 1987 acknowledged for the first time the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Afro-descendant population that inhabit half of Nicaragua as a country.

In recent years she has worked at the regional and international levels, promoting — from her vision about life and the world— the rights of Indigenous Peoples, especially concerning education, health, autonomy, and territorial rights. In this journey and work, women, Indigenous young women, and Indigenous people with disabilities have been an important focus due to their contribution to their work, experience, and knowledge towards a better quality of life for all.

During her childhood, an event marked her

life. Myrna lived in a banana monoculture area, which determined the diet and productive activities of the communities. Since they only had one production item, child malnutrition increased dramatically. During this period, boys and girls got used to eating only bananas, since they did not have other foods to complement the necessary nutrients to ensure a balanced diet.

Then, according to her, a people which had perhaps been engaged to fishing, hunting, and nomadism, began to settle around the churches and banana collection centers, which encouraged her interest and determination to be trained and educated on the issue of health. One of her objectives was to find answers to health conditions and consequently understand the situation that brought about poor health services. Additionally, she lived near what was the first hospital, a place where autonomous regions are now located, which was only 10 kilometers away from her home.

These events marked Myrna's life and made an impact on her leadership as a woman in the defense of life, the rights, and the territory of women and ancestral peoples.

## **A gathering of knowledge: the emergence of the Global Leadership School of indigenous women**

For Myrna, who already had a leadership trajectory and accumulated experiences and knowledge throughout her journey, it has been important to open new paths and build bridges so that women continue advancing their knowledge and their exercise of individual and collective rights.

One of her challenges has been promoting training and advocacy spaces for indigenous



©FIMI. Photograph provided by Dr. Myrna Cunningham.

women. It has been from this that she has proposed the idea of the creation of the Global Leadership School, which has been sponsored by the IIWF.

For her, the spirit of the school focuses on developing the capacities of indigenous women who are leaders in different parts of the world, so that they may have the strength and wisdom to influence in settings around the world. From her point of view, the idea of promoting a training space for and belonging to indigenous women arises from the identification of women who have already had experience as activists at a global level in their communities and countries, with a certain degree of knowledge and interest in specific issues, but mainly in understanding how these

issues affect the lives of indigenous women in their territories. In this regard, she says:

*“The school first puts these women in contact with each other because the first role of the school is to put them together on a virtual platform; but then, it offers them the opportunity to participate in one of the mechanisms that the United Nations has for Indigenous Peoples, such as the **Permanent Forum**”.*

Myrna came up with the idea of the Global School as a process of learning by doing, in which women leaders begin to understand what global advocacy means, which in turn allows them to see how their recommendations and input turn into recommendations of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, and later into recommendations of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, or even into important input for resolutions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). She says: ***“In short, the Global School empowers women to take the voice of their communities to the international level, to influence the creation of public policies, which are later brought back to their communities so that they can advance their work”.***

Among the main motivations for Myrna to propose the creation of the Global School was, first of all, the promotion of actions in favor of indigenous women. After analyzing the adoption of the women’s platform at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing she saw that indigenous women were not being reached.

*“Indigenous women realized that either they were the ones who had to promote that something be done in their favor at the global level or else nothing was going to get done”.*

She was also driven by the desire to benefit the indigenous women of the communities because they realize that they are carriers of ancestral knowledge, they are the main reproducers of their peoples’ cultures, with much to contribute in this regard; however, these facts still go widely unnoticed. Therefore, the school could provide visibility to these indigenous women’s contributions.

Based on her sense and expertise, the philosophy of the Global School contributes to providing indigenous women visibility in the creation of public policies from the international to the local level. In the promotion of a dialogue of information, that is, each one of them, from their own experience, could share their knowledge and insights in order to use a fundamental tool, such as advocacy, at different levels, making sure to emphasize the importance of understanding when one assumes the commitment to advocate since it is only achieved through dialogue. She points out:

*“One cannot advocate **solely through confrontation**”.*

Myrna afirma que, parte del espíritu de la Escuela, también es sistematizar y documentar las formas en que las mujeres han contribuido a la resolución de conflictos y de su rol en seguir apoyando esta acción. Un argumento



determinante, fue plantearse que, si bien se ha avanzado en el reconocimiento de Derechos Humanos colectivos de Pueblos Myrna affirms that part of the school's spirit also consists of the systematization and documentation of how women have contributed to conflict resolution and the importance of their role in continuing to support this action. A decisive argument was to consider that, although progress has been made in the recognition of collective Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples and those of women, there is still a huge gap between the acknowledged rights and their practical implementation, which, according to her, can only be achieved if these rights are translated into procedures, policies, programs, and a budget. So, the school seeks to contribute to all of this.

She also remembers the different things that happened to create the Global School. She states that once the IIFW was created, different meetings were held to define the programs that were going to prioritize from the perspective of indigenous women. For this reason, from the beginning, they decided that indeed it was obviously an organization created for political advocacy. It was important to achieve greater participation of women at the global and regional levels, with the ability to dialogue with various actors and influence them. Therefore, they considered the necessity of developing these capacities in women.

The first steps consisted of the creation of a first academic committee, for which the IIFW convened a meeting of more than 30 indigenous and non-indigenous women in Mexico. In that meeting, they analyzed and discussed the idea of the Global School, such as in what ways the school would be accredited, the courses that would be taught, and what their content and organization would be. The result of this meeting served to bring about the first curricular offer of the Global School.

During this phase, it was essential for her to



communicate to the attending women the spirit in which the Global School was thought to be promoted: a space for the training and advocacy of indigenous women, ensuring that everybody understood its importance for women leaders around the world.

After this, it was necessary to search for resources to start the school, so the IIFW approached different cooperation entities and international donors to obtain resources, which was successfully achieved. With this, the School was opened. In this phase, the necessity of a person for academic leadership was identified, so a coordinator was appointed and the group of women for academic advising was reduced, which from the beginning played an important role in the selection of students and the monitoring of what the graduates do when they return to their communities.

From the beginning, Myrna was aware of how important it has been **to have important contacts to become strategic allies in a politically important process for indigenous women as part of the IIFW**, such as Lea Mackenzie and Mónica Alemán, who in that period played a predominant role in the management of the School.

She also recalls the valuable advice and accompaniment of Ana María Enríquez, through Vivian Stromberg from UN Women, who supported the proposal from the beginning, because it allowed her to confirm her work in favor of indigenous women. Finally, the first donors, such as the Channel Foundation and other Dutch organizations which, in their role as cooperators, believed, agreed to, and contributed to the necessary resources to make this dream and project a reality.

From Myrna's perspective, the development and management of a process such as the Global School, for the strengthening of advocacy capacities of indigenous women, implied challenges, difficulties, and strengths, including the fact of having built strong alliances, for example, with Columbia University, which made a high-level academic endorsement possible, so the role of Elsa Stamatopoulou was fundamental; likewise,

the mechanism for selecting the participants, ensuring that they came from networks and responded to organizations and groups of women and young women of Indigenous Peoples; and the combination of the virtual stage, with the face-to-face stage in New York, as part of the teaching-learning process. For her, it has been valuable how the concept of learning by doing was applied, which has been fundamental for the participants; as well as the fact that it is a course offered in different languages, which is a great strength.

Also, she states that the greatest weakness in the process has been to ensure that the participants can enter the virtual platform, considering that the issue of virtual education continues to be a challenge for Indigenous Peoples since they have no conditions or resources to access the platform. This is something that still needs to be worked on so that both women and men have access and can make use of these tools.

## Experiences, challenges, and dreams in building leadership for indigenous women at a global level

Myrna, as a wise woman, has traveled various paths in the defense of women's and Indigenous Peoples' rights, as an interlayer of dreams and realities for herself and indigenous women, has made an effort throughout her life in encouraging the fulfillment of her goals. In this journey, she identified that women must strengthen their capacities. For this reason, she decided to promote the school for leadership training, in which she has been one of the main facilitators. It was also a rewarding experience because she would learn and relearn together with the leaders.

She is also satisfied to be a facilitator of an intercultural course with students from various parts of the world, which has been challenging, mainly because of the virtual

follow-up. Regarding the in-person part, the use of a methodology that facilitates the dialogue of information as a two-way process—due to the importance of recognizing a large amount of knowledge in women—has been a challenge. However, she managed it through facilitation, so that they can share their knowledge, systematize it, and present it in projects and truly learn how to use it on the international stage.

For her, this means being like an artisan who weaves, paints, and combines various materials to create a work of art, and that is how she understands facilitation, as the art of sharing, learning, and teaching.

A challenge, according to her, has to do with

the follow-up part that must be done with each one of the students from the school itself; that is, how to ensure that once they get back from the training process —after being selected as part of regional networks— they can contribute to strengthening these networks.

For her, if something is making progress, it is because it responds to changes, that is why she deems important to rethink some aspects of the school, such as trying to link training more with global processes —for example, since the SDGs will still be in force for the next 10 years, the students need to be clear on how to link them in specific processes in their regions— and ensuring that, upon their return to their countries they can take actions to achieve the progress of these objectives with an Indigenous focus.

For her, it is necessary to focus more energy on CEDAW, and obviously, on using Indigenous procedures and mechanisms, but also all of the existing ones as procedures, treaties, and United Nations bodies.

From her point of view, the school has great significance for indigenous women leaders as it represents a huge aspiration, mainly because they need to gain visibility; they want each of their processes, programs, and contributions to be recognized; as well as the fact that it opens up an opportunity for them to link them to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, placing them in networks with a huge number of important international contacts with whom they can advocate.

*“The students of the school highly value the possibility of connecting with other women leaders from other parts of the world from whom they can learn and share”.*



## Main lessons

During her leadership journey, Myrna has woven lessons adding different colored threads to her life to continue strengthening indigenous women and their peoples. Having promoted the Global Leadership School provided her with new learning experiences, including the courage of North American women leaders, who have a huge burden of pain as descendants of mothers who went to schools where they were strongly mistreated. The fact that they feel confident in making their accumulated pain of so many years known is a way of bonding with all of them. She also spent time with women leaders from other parts of the world, who dealt with situations of discrimination, perhaps not the same situations as the others, but they strongly affected their lives. Despite this, they stood up and moved forward with strength and power.

*“It seems to me that the school is a space to build a sisterhood and it has played a role of collective healing among them”.*

Another lesson has been to value how the school has managed to make known some of the collective processes promoted by women leaders in their countries, and pick up the energy and work of colleagues with different abilities, such as in the case of an Asian woman leader who has contributed to the disability network with her leadership, and the fact that she has participated in the School helped to bring the collective demands together, in addition to the individual demands submitted to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

As life lessons, she recognizes that they contribute with significant elements for her individual and collective growth, which she greatly appreciates.

Myrna’s life story is a lesson in itself, her inner being as a leader, and a woman who builds bridges, overcomes obstacles, and leads the way for other women. It allows us to understand the importance of her existence, her presence on this earthly plane, a space in which she has created an opportunity for many generations of indigenous women leaders in the world, sowing seeds to achieve different ways that that specific, individual, and collective rights as indigenous women and those of their original ancestral peoples are recognized, respected, and vindicated.

*She is an indigenous leader who, by her work, commitment, devotion, and dedication, has contributed to the respect and acknowledgment of the existence, history, and lives of the women and Indigenous Peoples of the world.*



Life stories:

# INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS FROM AFRICA

# Irene Serina Leshore



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*A strong woman who triumphs in the face of difficulties. As an indigenous woman, she is brave, a winner, and a warrior of life*

Irene is an indigenous woman who is proud of her Samburu identity. She is a builder of the good side of her culture, as well as a promoter of changes that favor balance and harmony in the lives of women and men of her People.

She is an assertive leader who works for the rights of women and their economic empowerment, as well as for the rights of children. She seeks to promote a society where everyone can enjoy their rights and good quality of life. She considers herself a simple and adaptive person, who tries to bring out the best in everyone and make the best of every situation.

She is from the indigenous transhumant shepherd community of Maasai, Laikipia, Kenya in Africa. She is 45 years old. She claims to be from the Samburu People because that is where she got married and currently lives, reclaiming their cultural values that are now part of her identity. She comes from a polygamous family, as this is part of the lifestyle in her culture. She feels satisfied with having established her own home, made up of two boys and girls, whom she loves and teaches the value of respect for life.

As the oldest of her siblings, she grew up taking care of the little ones and doing housework.

Later, after marrying at a very young age, she took on the role of leading her own household and caring for her children and in-laws. In this regard, she states:

*“I took on my role when I got married. I lived in a traditional society in the community of transhumant shepherds and I saw many things that women and children went through that were not right”.*

Having experienced these situations at an early age, it made her ask herself and think that she should do something to change that reality. So, she began to advocate against her People’s harmful practices that affect women and children. She remembers that she grew up in the 80s, and as a Maasai girl she was a victim of female genital mutilation, which has had a big impact on her life. From that moment on, she promised that if she ever had daughters, she would never allow them to go through the same thing. She says:

*“The practice of mutilation continued, and I saw friends and family going along with this practice without saying anything. It was accepted as something natural”.*

Other practices with which she did not agree are child labor, shepherding, the mistreatment of animals, coal trading, violence against women, and the wife’s inheritance. These things are very common and considered normal, and no one dares to say that they are bad. In addition to this, she is not allowed to

have properties, even though she is the one who does the work in the community, builds the house, brings firewood, water, takes care of the livestock, and takes care of the house. However, she does not have anything of her own, even the children do not belong to her, they belong to the man, and they consider it normal because it is part of their culture; therefore, it does not matter.

For her, it has been difficult to go through this situation, especially see how these practices are part of a People’s life, and women must abide by them as a rule of the community that cannot be questioned, even if they do not agree.

## **Leadership in the defense of the rights of Maasai women and girls**

Irene assumed an active leadership role, given the fact that women in her community were not subject to their specific political and economic rights, so they were not allowed to develop themselves with dignity. Consequently, she started working with her organization for women and children, who are also not considered rights-holders as they do not attend school and are forced to do heavy work. All this was a motivation to support actions that allow for minimizing injustices and reinforcing her leadership role. In her own words, she explains:





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*“Realizing that women’s rights are not recognized forced me to step out of my comfort zone and ask myself what I could do to improve their lives and make them more like my own, or like those of women living outside of our community. I think that leadership was something that I carried inside of me, like something willing to come out because it always bothered me to see women and children suffer”.*

For her leadership to take off it has been important to have female and male allies, those who have been present in important and difficult times. At the family level, her husband is her ally, who has given her money, a vehicle, and time since the organization started, while her daughter, who now goes to university, has always supported her at work as soon as she was old enough.

Also, she has been supported by leaders such as Agnes Leina, who shares information on the availability of resources to manage it, and Ole Kanunga, who encouraged her to create something to help women.

Several organizations and networks have also been her allies, such as the African Biodiversity Network, which gave her a first grant to carry out activities with women and girls when their organization started. Later on, the International Labor Organization, with whom they collaborated for three years by carrying out a project against child labor, has been one her the greatest contributors. She considers the International Indigenous Women’s Forum as a strategic ally, as it has opened up new possibilities for support and education.

During the development of her leadership, important indigenous women have been her role models, such as Dr. Naomi Kipuri. She admires the way she lives, conducts herself, and raises her family. She is someone who is always willing to act as a mentor to other women.

Another leader that she sees as an example is Naisula, a young deputy of Parliament who opposed to the conventional system and is now doing a lot of work to empower women and girls in the communities.

Irene’s leadership has focused to a great extent on supporting women and children, especially on their rights, including economic empowerment issues as a means to exercise



them. Another space is the indigenous movement through the collective work with other leaders for the Peoples' rights, recently contributing to processes on the environment and climate change.

She is supporting mechanisms for HIV/AIDS prevention and female political participation as a strategy to promote a decision-making space for women, given the need for funds that they still do not have access to because they are not sitting at the table where the money is allocated and decisions are made.

As part of the Samburu culture, she recognizes the importance of honoring symbols that represent authority and leadership, represented by the elders of her community as the guardians of her People's cultural elements, and those who make decisions and hold the community together in times of crisis, for which there is a sacred place where they meet called Naapo.

These principles have contributed throughout the history of her People and are bases that must be used by new generations to be put into practice as values that remain as part of the community and be modified so that women are also recognized as having authority.

Part of Irene's being is to search for what is new. She feels that she needs more information and knowledge. Therefore, when she learned about the training program offered by the IWF, she applied for the Leadership School. One of her motivations was to network and interact with leaders outside of her community, learn about what they were doing in favor of the rights of indigenous women, and identify a platform to provide visibility to the reality of women among her People.

## Global Leadership School: a training space.

This experience marked her leadership. Meeting other women and networking with them as sisters despite the difference in language, especially with women leaders from Latin America, made her realize that they had the same problems, thus awakening in her an interest in finding out how they approached their own problems and what strategies they used to solve them. Joyfully, she states:

After she participated in the School, she was able to reconnect with her organization working on sustainability mechanisms, taking advantage of the tools she learned in her training. She believes it is necessary to maintain communication with the leaders and the IWF team because there is still much that they can learn from and share with one another.

*“Meeting women leaders was an incredible, wonderful experience. I don't know how to describe it with words”.*

It was important to learn new tools such as the advocacy plan, as well as consulting and corrections for its preparation, which allowed her to design it, fit it into its context and make





it a reality. From the beginning, she was clear about the problem she wanted to address, prioritizing the issue of female participation in politics precisely in the period when the preparations for the 2017 elections were taking place, so it motivated women to compete for political office, encouraging them to register as voters and vote for candidates. Consequently, she carried out a civic education plan. In her words, she explains:

*"It was also good to see the perception of other Peoples' women leaders and be able to criticize my own work. I also learned to work with other people. Sometimes, we think that we have very good ideas and we are not prepared to hear negative comments about it".*

During the implementation, the result was greater than expected. She managed to organize a forum with the presence of 1,000 women who were convinced to vote for Naisula Lessuda, a deputy leader who won in the elections. Everything was achieved thanks to the support of the IWF, which provided resources to carry out this activity.

A challenge in this phase was the criticism of some people who said that participation was being radicalized and a rebellion against men was being promoted. However, for women, the perception was different as they were happy to be taken into account because no one had approached them to participate in politics before that. In electoral periods, candidates always focused on the men and older men, who told their wives who to vote for; however, it changed with the workshop process and made it easier to talk with women to support a female candidate. She states:

*“I come from a community where people used to think that women could never lead and men did not even vote for a female candidate. Thanks to the implementation of the advocacy plan, there is the confidence that women can be better leaders than men”.*

As a leader, Irene is committed to contributing by using her skills and knowledge in different areas. At the community level, she managed to make more women aware of thinking about running for different offices, such as governors or senators. Today there is a feeling of pride in having a woman leader at the decision-making table, who has been more accessible

and has supported them in their projects.

She is convinced of the importance of maintaining momentum among women so that the number of female candidates in elective positions increases, as well as in spaces such as livestock in a group, access to land where they do not want women to participate, in which they have neither voice, property rights, nor decision-making power.

Initially, she actively participated in international level spaces, presenting plans of her People’s indigenous women; however, she realized that it is getting more competitive and it is increasingly difficult to obtain funds to attend the different meetings and conferences.

In her mission to empower women, coordination and management of support opportunities have been the tools she has used and that she learned in the Leadership School.

It has also been valuable to have been awarded the Acumen scholarship, which has allowed her to meet incredible people from East Africa, promote networking, and experience personal growth. It is about holistic leadership that includes the individual, their community, the system, how to create networks, and other capacities.

One lesson learned during her participation in the Global School has been to value diversity and its importance through her interaction with the leaders of Latin America, with whom, even though they did not speak the same language, they managed to maintain a sense of sisterhood because they are indigenous women who had the same problems and solutions. With satisfaction, she shares:

*“I had never experienced something like this because the processes I attended before were local or national. This time several continents gathered together and it was something extraordinary for me”.*

Getting to know other Peoples’ culture and not thinking that hers is the best allowed her to appreciate the values and symbols that represent the beauty of other Peoples. For example, the case of a Native American woman whose crafts had very similar elements to her own was significant, despite coming from two very different countries and continents.

In addition, her new knowledge changed her point of view on how to interact with people at the local level. Now when she meets someone from a different tribe, instead of looking for differences, she recognizes what unites them and what they have in common. Today, she focuses on appreciating other Peoples’ cultures and seeing what can be gained and learned from it.

*“The IIFW opened the door for a gathering among diverse cultures, I wish another organization could organize cultural exchange visits among communities to simply interact and learn from one other”.*

Also, she learned about how different

fundings operate, how to approach them, and how to address them in order to obtain resources.

## **Main individual and collective dreams**

As a leader, she carries the spirit of change within her being and believes it is necessary to improve, that is why she sets goals that are initially her dreams. Her participation at the school allowed her to change her perspective of reality. Also, her worldview of life broadened when she saw the world from another perspective and went to New York and interacted with others. She explains:

*“When you don’t travel, you think that the whole world is your village; but when you go out, you realize that there is more beyond your village in the world and you learn to use the world to help your village”.*

She dreams of guaranteeing a legacy that lasts after her departure so that her work continues to have an impact on the lives of women and girls. Whenever they look back, they can say that there was a woman named Irene, who did this for her community and became a role model for others. At the community level, she hopes that indigenous women change for the better, that they have a source of livelihood to feed their families, and that they put an end to gender violence and negative cultural practices. She believes in a world where men and women have the same participation in decision making, where no one is judged based on gender. She hopes to contribute to

eliminating the bias against women, and that girls can have the same opportunities as boys in education, business, and everything else.

Irene wants to leave a better world for her daughters. She does not want them to go through what she had to go through. She knows that to achieve this it is important to pass her experiences or knowledge on to other people, so today she passes it on to a leader who has been working with her for the last three years as a volunteer.

She is trying to pass on what she has learned to her daughter, who feels the same passion for what she does, and hopes that one day she will carry on her work. She desires to be a role model for girls in her community and to sow seeds in them so that they will become leaders who will be able to continue her work.

She believes that learning is a lifelong process, that is why training in fundraising, networking, sustainability, and movement building to generate support is important. She believes that it is essential to better understand how the United Nations operates to take advantage of support opportunities.

She affirms that it is necessary to open the current indigenous movement. She believes that there is a monopoly concerning the people who participate. There are leaders around the world that do not have the opportunity to participate and have a lot to share. She concerns herself with the world of donors becoming a group of people who know one another and contribute with resources. Some kinds of equal conditions and opportunities must be promoted for indigenous women at the local level so that their voices are heard.

She hopes that it will be possible to create a forum so that women share and exchange knowledge at the local, regional, and international levels with an emphasis on the community because that is where grassroots women who suffer the aforementioned



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problems live.

Irene's leadership is a commitment to make the voices of Masai and Samburu indigenous women be heard, to provide visibility to their thoughts, dreams, and needs so that they can be recognized as rights-holders as Indigenous persons and as a People. Her journey has consisted of sowing seeds of leadership so that decisions can be made from feminine energy to positively affect and favor their good living.

*As a brave and empowered woman, her story is an example of how to move forward with sure and firm steps, facing difficulties with sagacity and light, using knowledge and skills as tools to put them in the service of other women, with wisdom and equity.*

# Justine Nateku Leisiano



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Justine Leisiano

*Indigenous women follow and maintain their traditions and culture. They are women with an origin and there is nothing that has come to distort their lifestyle. They follow their traditional knowledge in their day-to-day life and pass it on to their offspring.*

Justine is a woman who carries within her being the Samburu identity that goes with her everywhere. She is proud of her culture that represents values and principles that sustain the lives of her people.

She was born in Tuum, Baragoi, Kenya in Africa, a territory where she laid the foundations to be a defender of life. Her mission is to fight against the system of her country that marginalizes and does not recognize her People and indigenous women as rights-holders. She is 49 years old and considers herself to have a privileged identity because she is interwoven on her father's side by the Samburu tribe and on her mother's side by the Rendille, which

is also an indigenous community in Marsabit, Kenya. In this regard, she explains:

*"In my family, as I grew up as an indigenous person, I have seen how tradition is followed and the culture is maintained. My father was a shepherd. He moved from one place to another in search of grass and water. My mother was and continues to be active in following the Samburu culture"*

She recognizes the importance of indigenous women passing their wisdom on to the youngest women in the community when she teaches them how to dress, as well as how to conduct themselves physically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually. She passes on the traditions and history of the ancestors who preceded her in a wholesome and transparent way.

Her first name of “Justine” is Christian because she was baptized on the day of Saint Justina. Her middle name “Nateku” is of traditional origin that means “the one who diverts the way,” because when her mother was pregnant she traveled from one place to another due to her transhumant life. During one of her trips, she had contractions. She had to stop somewhere in the mountains to give birth and that is why they took a detour. Such an event, according to her, marked part of her identity. She married at 18 years of age and has four children, three sons and one daughter, who give meaning to her life.

She remembers that as she was a girl born into a Samburu family, she experienced female genital mutilation and tooth extraction at a very young age, which caused her anger and deep pain in her being. Those situations encouraged her to fight for the defense of the life and dignity of girls and women.

She was the only one in her family who attended school because a group of missionaries helped her. Thanks to her education, she was empowered with knowledge and skills. Following what she learned from her mother, she soon became the leading girl in elementary and middle school. She was a representative at the university, and in this way, she broadened her role as a leader.

In her youth, she met with young people who were not able to go to school, and they studied together. They discussed reality and visited people in the village. She remembers that once a missionary came and picked her up from home and took her to Maralal. It was

difficult to get back home because she did not know where her family was. In her words, she states:

*“I was in a group of young people in Tuum, and after school, I always mobilized them to go out and help the elderly and others among the People”.*

## **Leadership: a mission of service and inspiration of life.**

Justine started her leadership under the inspiration of her mother, who was a leader in her own right. She learned by imitating her mother as her role model, who used to get up early and do housework and take care of the animals, teaching her the importance of taking the initiative, always under any circumstance. With emotion, she shares:

*“I learned a leadership role from my mother, who respected the land and took care of the house. I watched her doing her work every day when I was 10”.*

Her studies at Catholic primary and secondary schools and later at the school for teachers in Kilimambogo allowed her to perform duties as a teacher, working hard to be a role model for her students and other teachers. From this,

she developed a passion for working with disabled children and was trained in a special needs diploma course from the Kenya Institute of Special Education, and after a while, she was appointed director of the school where she worked for many years.

When she married, she committed herself to help women of the community to dare to raise their voices and express their thoughts, so she took the initiative to motivate them since they do not speak or make decisions in the family.

From the beginning of her leadership, women in the community have supported her work, have listened to her suggestions, and have recognized her ideas. They have passed the information on to her about their culture, reminding her about its value. Accompaniment and advice of the elderly have been important. They saw her as a leader who had already

grown up, so she could talk to them and listen to them.

For Justine, it is important to have role models. In primary school, she met Mekelina Lengiwa, a teacher. When she saw her teaching, she thought that one day she would be like her. She wanted to imitate her because of her leadership and abilities.

She also identifies Agnes Leina from the Il'laramatak community, with whom she grew up and got together to discuss what they should do to hold events and bring women together. She remembers that in 2008 she arrived in Maralal and stayed in the mountains for five months. She gathered with women, talking to them about the problems that affected them. In this regard, she states:

Her leadership has focused on working with indigenous women's groups, community



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*“Previously, I thought that we were the only indigenous people there. Agnes gave me space to go up the next step and I was able to meet **many other indigenous women**”.*

organizations, youth, self-help groups in the villages, and people with disabilities. She has also collaborated with the government, and by extension with the Ministry of Education, which designates her to speak at meetings. She has supported non-governmental organizations, civil society, the church, and the community.

Justine knows that part of the Samburu culture is made up of elements that sustain part of people’s lives, so she believes it is important to recognize some concepts that provide bases for authority and leadership, such as the honor and respect to a leader; that is, respecting their decisions and always giving priority to their proposals.

She tells about other symbols for men. When a leader arrives in a certain village, he is offered a three-legged stool to sit on and to give privilege to his presence. It is known that he is the leader because of his way of conducting himself and because he carries an object made of a cow’s tail and “sobwa” (a long stick and a smaller and thicker cane), which is an emblem to be recognized by people of different villages.

If a woman is a leader in the village, she is identified by her life practices, such as order and organization in her housework. Her bills are up to date and when she speaks; people listen to her. Unlike men, their authority is represented by intangible elements. For her,

these values practiced among her People have allowed the role of leadership and authority to prevail. However, she hopes that from now on the use of tangible objects that provide visibility and recognition to women’s leadership will be promoted. This is something that needs to be worked on from now on.

## **Global School: a space to strengthen women’s leadership.**

Justine obtained information about the Global School and applied in order to participate. She was admitted, which meant a great commitment. She knew that accessing the Leadership School was a challenge. She hoped to obtain knowledge, strengthen her skills, gain resources, establish contacts with other organizations, and learn from other people in order to better serve and continue contributing to women among her people. With satisfaction, she states:

*“I truly wanted to attend, not because the program was abroad, but because of the knowledge it offered and **the opportunity to strengthen leadership for more women**”.*

She had significant experiences, such as leaving her country for the first time, realizing that there are similar problems in other countries, and living with women leaders from Latin America and Canada; as well as understanding the value of culture in each one of them as indigenous persons, of its representative wealth for all, the need to preserve it, keep it alive and present. She



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also managed the online portal with different people, a mechanism through which she was able to share her points of view and learn from others. In this regard, she explains:

*“You know, I used to believe that white people had no problems and that there were no indigenous people in other places, The IIWF opened my mind. I would never have imagined that this could happen to me”.*

Upon her return, she had a lot to share. She created three new women’s groups, conducted trainings, and from there she started her own organization. She founded the Ramat

Community Empowerment Program (RACEP), registered it, and created a website with all of the information. The county’s government is aware of her organization and that she is part of it, so the gender sector always invites her to discussion meetings, a space that she takes advantage of to raise awareness about the situation of women.

With what she had learned, she worked for 10 months writing two proposals: one about the special needs in schools and the other one about the empowerment of women. For her, having used a virtual platform allowed her to go from the analog era to the digital one, by using a computer, a flash drive, and a modem. It was an experience she never imagined, but it contributed a lot to her leadership.

It was not easy for her to formulate the Advocacy Plan. She had feedback from the IIWF team through the support of Cecilia Ramírez, who continually advised and

guided her, thus allowing her to feel capable of developing it. The result was a Plan that integrated actions for women's benefit based on their reality. She learned to design and organize ideas about a specific problem. It gave them the guidelines to understand that advocacy is a process that can contribute to achieving objectives and changes.

The implementation of her Plan was extraordinary for Justine as it allowed her to go from one point to another, carry out various trainings, mobilize, and raise awareness in the community. It also allowed her to identify the need to reach all women, the management of means of transportation to ensure that no one is left without the possibility to learn.

She ensured that issues on human rights, girls, and women's empowerment would be addressed. She promoted an economic empowerment project for women that led to the creation of community groups.

In that period there was a gap due to the lack of continuous funding to finish the activities.

Even though she had shared the proposal with several organizations, she did not have success. This difficulty became a strength because her organization had the opportunity to grow, not in terms of resources, but rather improved in terms of performance.

As a leader, she feels committed to continuing contributing with her knowledge, skills, and with her work, which has reached many women in association with other organizations in North and East Samburu. In this regard, she explains:

*“My knowledge has traveled the counties of Samburu and Laikipia, and different institutions in Doldol. At the community level, I have become a role model because I have trained groups of women inside and outside the community”.*

She has been a legal assistant in her community due to the growing gender violence, which resulted in many women suffering from the appropriation of their belongings by men. She defends the cases and makes recommendations through the female head of the community. Furthermore, she has facilitated the support of another organization in the complaint of cases and has also connected them with the International Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA), which provides them with lawyers who sue and fight for their rights as women in the court.

She has also contributed to the rescue of children with special educational needs, who are hidden or killed because they are considered a curse in the community. Higher education in the field of special needs, which she learned in Kroto, allowed her to manage resources with the government, thus obtaining funds to build dormitories, one for boys and one for girls, which are being used by more than 100 children. For the families she represents, she has been taking a load off them and they are grateful for the assistance with feeding, care for their children, and for trying to rehabilitate them so that they no longer use their arms to walk and be given wheelchairs.

She formed a group of parents for the group of children with disabilities in the Kroto primary school. At that time, she was the director. With this experience, other organizations and the national government have spread it nationwide.

She has managed to rescue girls who were threatened to get married or undergo genital mutilation. They could tell her or the female head in the community about their threat to help them. With this, she took many girls to the Kroto primary school and put up resistance, together with the organization, against these harmful cultural practices of female genital mutilation and early marriage. She took the girls to a rescue center owned by a woman she had met during a national forum. In that period, Justine was persecuted by the families of these girls and by the men who were going to marry them. She could not go out freely; she lived in fear. At that time, she had to change her phone number because people kept calling to ask where she was taking their daughters and if she was really saving their lives. With satisfaction, she shares:

*“I rescued four girls who were in a bad situation, using my own resources to get them out of there. I continued following up on their status and tracking their progress”.*

Today, she continues rescuing girls. She has partnered with the Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Board, participating in forums on gender violence. It is in these spaces that she has focused her contribution as a leader and put her experience and knowledge into practice.

She acknowledges that after she participated in the Global School, it was possible to promote coordination at other levels. She

has managed to participate in different spaces such as the International Federation of Women Lawyers (IFWL), the Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Board (FGM), the conference of the Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID) in Brazil and now in Canada, making a program to fight for their own rights, those of girls, women, and children with disabilities, being a voice for their People.

Due to her abilities and experience, she was the director of a primary school in her community, taking advantage of her administrative role to promote coordination among children, parents, teachers, the community, and the government. She was responsible for funding, managing several funds from the national government to organize the special needs program. She drew up the budget, organized a board of directors, implemented the activities, prepared a quarterly audit report, and a monthly report for the government; which she was able to do successfully thanks to the knowledge gained at the Global School.

In other women’s organizations, she promoted the implementation of table banking, a mechanism for making loans, investing the money, and returning it in divided amounts, every month.

Justine values what she learned during her participation in the Global School. For example, she asserts that indigenous women are great leaders; they can speak and have the right to be heard; they are capable of changing the world, doing things for the collective benefit. It was meaningful to learn about human rights, the rights of women, Indigenous Peoples, and people with disabilities because she had never heard of them; also to learn about the articles and conventions of the UN and the different forums for women at the national and international levels that are relevant for influencing positive changes in their favor. In her own words, she explains:

*“I discovered that **female leadership is the best**, We dedicate ourselves to it knowing that we can do it, so long as we have a dream, a vision, an objective, and a goal toward where we want to go”.*

## **Main individual and collective dreams**

Justine has dreams which have become her passion and that she hopes to fulfill. The first one is to create a school for children with disabilities in Samburu, although the community does not accept it. The second one is to create the women’s empowerment center to teach them about collective and specific rights and economic activities since women have not received an education. She hopes to support them so that they are economically stable and independent. The third one is to fight for girls, sign them up in school, keep them safe, and get them to avoid genital mutilation.

For her, it is important to pass on her experiences and insights, something that she has always been doing closely with her daughter, who today is at risk due to genital mutilation. She wants to help her daughter so that she has the knowledge, skills, and courage to open paths and be part of youth groups in the community. She hopes that her daughter can take her place and continue to fight for girls and have a passion for the Indigenous Samburu People.

Today, Justine is a woman who assumes her leadership from her own voice, fighting for the rights of women, girls, and children with disabilities. From her perspective and experience, she has found ways in which collective work, training, and knowledge are the main tools to achieve her objectives and purposes. As a leader of the Samburu People, she has learned how to deal with many challenges, moving forward with courage, power, and freedom, so as to empower herself and other women to be and live with dignity a life free of violence.



# Aehshatou Manu



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*An indigenous woman who preserves with her way of life and traditions. She is willing to defend and protect her culture, territory, resources, and self-identification.*

Aehshatou a visionary woman, who within her being has the fighting spirit as an Indigenous People, a legacy left to her by her mother, father, and grandparents who gave her roots and origin.

She is from the Indigenous Mbororo Transhumant People. She was born in Mbiame, to the northwest of Cameroon, Africa, in a community of shepherds, a people with limited access to education, justice, land, and social services; and where the rights to identity, housing, and culture are constantly violated.

She comes from a family of five, with two

sisters and two brothers. Having received an education has been a privilege since her father, fortunately, managed to finish his university studies and was aware of the importance of his daughters and sons studying. Today they are professionals. For her, it means being part of a family with relative privileges compared to others in the same community, who have not even managed to finish primary school. Therefore, she feels committed to serving.

As a child, she saw how her community suffered injustices. She remembers that members of the dominant communities constantly referred to their People in derogatory terms. Since that period, she has witnessed

problems related to land grabbing, lack of access to justice, inequality in the provision of resources, increasing unemployment and poverty, forced marriages for girls, and the high illiteracy rate for women. All this made her realize that her people deal with political oppression, economic discrimination, and social marginalization. She states:

*“I was outraged by the reality that my People were going through. I decided to study law to fight for the rights of my People and especially for the rights of women and girls, who are at a double disadvantage”.*

She was the first Mbororo girl in the area to go to school. Girls did not go to school in her community, not only because of racism but also because of patriarchy. They dedicated themselves to helping their mother and their future was marked by early and forced marriages. To attend school, she had to obtain a letter of authorization from the regional governor and not to cut her hair, because in her culture women should not cut it. It was a challenge, in addition to the stigma she had to deal with and endure for being indigenous. In this regard, she explains:

*“When I was in class, the principal called me and made me feel uncomfortable. When I returned home, my father encouraged me and told me not to give importance to the treatment I received because I had a bigger goal that I wanted to achieve”.*

From the beginning, her father was her inspiration to complete her studies, to be able to return to her community, and try to correct the wrong things that were occurring. Now she is satisfied because she can speak on behalf of girls who, just like her, deal with the challenge of giving voice to the demands of the Mbororo People in Cameroon and raising awareness about the importance and struggle for their political, economic, legal, and social rights, to no longer be strangers in their own territory.

## **Leadership as an indigenous woman: a conviction to promote change**

According to Aehshatou, leadership is a conviction in life to lead a People to change their conditions of inequality and discrimination, and correct the lives of women and men in a community. All of this based on the experience she lived through in her childhood and that forged her leadership.

During school break, she used to go to her grandparents' people, get together with female cousins and friends, and share ideas



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about the importance of education because she felt that she should not be the only one with the privilege of going to school, but more girls and young people could do it as well. It was a space where they raised their voices together and talked about their problems.

She realized that women received the wrong medications when they went to the hospital and were not able to write their names or speak the language to request what they needed. It encouraged her to continued encouraging parents about the importance of education, using her father's attitude as an example to convince others. For her, the fact that he was a human rights activist, working in the community for many years, allowed her to join their struggle from a young age. They both organized talks, bringing people together, and emphasizing the importance of education. In her own words, she states:

*“Through education, we were going to change the narrative in my community. I can already see the changes because now there are many more girls going to school, so I feel happy when I work in the field and serve my community so that we can see that we have the same rights as everyone else”.*

The beginning of her leadership and what she has achieved so far would not have been possible without the support and encouragement from other people whom he considers her main allies and she sees as her support; such as her father, brother, and colleagues, at the national and regional levels, together with those who have promoted her



ideas and struggles, and encouraged her to continue.

For Aehshatou, leadership as a life practice must fuel you with examples of other women. One of them is her mother, who began her studies, but did not finish them. She married her father and stayed at home. She was tireless and always knew how to solve everything. She also mentions Hawe Buba, whom she has seen working in the community helping to empower the Mbororo women and girls. With satisfaction, she states:

*“It is said that our mothers are always wise when it comes to getting things done. She has supported me and continues supporting me to this day”.*

With this experience, her leadership has focused mainly on the human rights sector, especially those of girls and women and their economic empowerment, leadership, political participation, and governance; as well as on conflict prevention, negotiation, and mediation for peace; mitigation actions against climate change; aiming at strengthening their capacities to better advocate and exert pressure in favor of a positive change in their country, in the face of the existing poverty and inequality, in which women and girls are the most affected. She participated in the inclusive national dialogue that took place in her country, which allowed her to bring to light women’s and girls’ reality, as well as the need to be recognized as rights-holders. As a result, her recommendations were included in important documents.

Her grandparents passed down cultural values, some practices, and the use of their language on to her. Through them, she learned the principle of Pulaaku, which sustains

leadership. It is a main socio-cultural code of the Mbororo-Fulani group, which is based on its history of nomadic herding and good cattle ranching. It contains four main points, such as Munyal which is the strength in the face of adversity and the ability to accept misfortune; Hakkiilo, common sense and good manners; Semteende, reserve, and modesty in personal relationships and Neddaku, dignity in front of everyone and everything.

She recognizes the meaning of each one of these principles, which she respects, recognizes, and applies, ensuring its practice as an example for girls, women, and youth. These are a foundation that sustains her being as a leader and gives her strength and wisdom to keep moving forward.

## **Global Leadership School: weaving networks and alliances**

With the vision of continuing to develop her skills as a leader, she participated in the Leadership School. She needed to improve her leadership skills and exchange experiences with people from all over the world, from different origins and communities. She also wanted to understand how to network and build partnerships with people who do the same type of work. In this regard, she explains:

*“I came back with much more energy and capabilities that helped me improve my professional career and understand the complexities of the rule of law at the local, regional, and international levels”.*



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She asserts that her participation in the School has been quite an experience, including the online classes with Cecilia Ramírez, during which they were required to read texts and ask questions. It was an interesting phase. Later in New York, she met with different women from different countries and origins who were doing amazing things in their community, it made her realize that they were dealing with the same problems as Indigenous Peoples.

It was a revelation for her. She understood that she was not dealing with inequality problems because of her African origins, but that it was an intersecting issue that the Peoples of Latin

America, North America, and Asia were facing too.

She was amazed by participating in the meetings of the Permanent Forum and seeing all the Indigenous Peoples dressed in their traditional clothes enter the United Nations and make statements. It was a wonderful experience seeing their strong presence before the forum as Peoples. Having attended Columbia University and taking classes on different topics helped her better understand how the United Nations system, the Permanent Forum, and other bodies work, and how to address issues using these platforms. With satisfaction, she states:

*“I wish that all indigenous young women could go to the Leadership School to benefit from it and become better leaders”.*

Formulating an advocacy plan, something she was not aware of, was a rewarding experience because it was a personal project. Unlike her work for other organizations, it helped her develop her skills to design projects based on issues dealt with by her people. Her proposal focused on climate change and leadership in order to create capacities for Indigenous Peoples and deal with its impacts and effects. She values the accompaniment of the IIWF in such a stage through Cecilia Ramírez, who helped her understand how to integrate the plan and organize herself better. It contributed to her training, and the consulting allowed her to focus and learn from mistakes, practicing what she learned. She affirms:



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*“In the end, I will never forget the guidance I received. It was a great experience and I would encourage other programs to do the same”.*

Strengthening her knowledge represents a commitment to their people concerning the gaps in legislative reform at the national level. She helped to improve the situation of indigenous women, who could not come face to face with the people and speak. Today they are the ones who give their opinion and their rights. They speak out on what they think about their problems.

At the international level, she has been able to make the voices of indigenous transient shepherds be heard, attending different spaces and settings to talk about their issues. She is the contact point for indigenous issues of the Cameroon Network of Human Rights

Organizations, made up of civil society organizations and Indigenous Peoples working on human rights issues. Her contribution to these structures has been very positive, and through these programs, she has gained trust in other sectors. With satisfaction, she states:

*“All the skills and training I received were an opportunity to share what I had learned from the IIWF, I am still grateful for the tools they provided me at the Global School”.*

After the implementation of her advocacy plan, she was assigned with more coordination responsibilities to carry out activities through the IIWF. She was able to attend the Human Rights Advocates Program in 2016 at Columbia University. According to her work experience, she has worked for four organizations, where her advocacy and coordination skills obtained

in the Leadership School expanded her role in these spaces. She has also worked as an advocacy officer and national coordinator for Mboscuda women for four years, and now as a national secretary in the AIWO national and regional chapters of Cameroon, a space that she created together with other women leaders to continue contributing to women and girls.

A significant lesson has been about trading techniques, an essential skill for managing funds. Through this, she has contributed to her organization by writing proposals and obtaining resources to implement the activities. She explains:

*“I learned that leadership in itself is like someone that can create a positive impact within their society. It has helped me to change the narrative in my community and gain recognition in Cameroon”.*

Today she values the work of the older women leaders, who have made it possible for other generations to be in the UN and to become familiar with the existing international instruments for dealing with problems as Peoples. She also reinforced her knowledge about Indigenous Peoples and especially about women and the different instruments to be able to influence policies using the arguments of these instruments, inside and outside her country.

The Leadership School has had a positive impact on her life. Today she continues applying what she learned in her day-to-day work activities. She asserts that having been trained by the IWF was a valuable contribution as it marked a before and after in her leadership trajectory.

## **Moving towards individual and collective dreams.**

Her main dream is to replace fear with freedom by empowering girls about their right to education and giving them access to opportunities to achieve their dreams; in other words, changing dependency for self-reliance by continuously training Mbororo women in income-generating activities, fostering entrepreneurial skills, and developing civic leadership skills; replacing silence with a collective voice that recalls Nelson Mandela’s quote: “Education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world.” She states:

*“If you educate a woman, then you are educating society. Doing what I do is a passion, and I just hope that 10-20 years from now the Mbororo community will be able to change the narrative and create positive change. What I do today is thanks to the knowledge I acquired in that program”.*

For her, these may be ideals, but with the practice of leadership, they will turn into challenges that she can surely overcome through collective work. She believes that it is important to share her experiences or insights, so she is doing it with young people from the Mbororo community, with whom she meets after each trip, to share what she learned and the experiences she had. She also promotes capacities, especially in girls, as sources of learning and multipliers of knowledge. Also, she hopes to support training on capacity building and leadership skills for women within the community through the production of documentaries.

Aehshatou's life story has been about how leadership is woven from the spirit of a woman warrior of the Mbororo People, turning itself into a life option, which takes shape from her own experience and proves that no change occurs if it does not pass through her own being.

*Her experience inspires recognizing how collective work and the acquisition of knowledge in training spaces with and from indigenous women, such as the Leadership School, is a sum of lessons learned to reaffirm the conviction in defending their People, protecting and promoting the rights of women with passion, from their feminine energy, with strength, courage, and wisdom.*



# Aminatu Gambo



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*Being a woman is promoting our rights. It is to fight to defend and demand them from the energy and strength of leadership.*

Aminatu is an indigenous Mbororo woman whose identity is woven by recognizing the spirit that vindicates those values of her People that promote the rights of girls and women.

She was born and grew up in Bamenda, Cameroon, in Africa. This place formed part of her identity as an indigenous person. She feels fortunate in life because she had the privilege of studying, unlike her sisters and other women in her community. After all, they were forced to marry at an early age. As a result, she has a Bachelor's Degree in Customary Law and a Master's Degree in Humanitarian

Law. Her conviction is to focus on indigenous girls and women to promote the exercise of their rights.

She is the middle daughter of a total of nine children, four older sisters, and four younger brothers. As a result of the cultural practices of her People, she is a member of a polygamous household. Her father has three wives and he is a traditional veterinarian since most men in her culture own and raise cattle, while women take care of the house.

She remembers when she finished primary school at the age of 11, they told her that she would not go to secondary school because

only boys could continue their studies due to their customs and tradition. According to the culture of her people, the majority of women married at an early age and with someone old enough to be her father. In her own words, she states:

*“I was lucky and my destiny took a different course because I won a scholarship through an organization called the Cameroonian Association of University Women. I was able to move forward and get an education”.*

She was convinced that her situation should be different and that she had to do something to help other women to change their destiny. Today she asserts with certainty that she has not been a victim of harmful practices of her culture and her circumstances, but rather she has learned how to take advantage of her experience to help girls in the same circumstances when she was 11 years old.

## **Leadership, a way to defend indigenous women’s rights**

She moved to Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, to study law at the university. She then joined an NGO to work for Indigenous Peoples’ rights, where she specialized in indigenous women’s rights. Such experience was part of the beginning of her leadership as an indigenous woman; her potential was there, after being able to escape from her forced marriage at an early age.

Later, she was hired by the Lelewal Foundation, based in Yaoundé, for an internship as coordinator of the women’s area, a space that implied great responsibility and that allowed her to learn about Human Rights as a personal interest, which later became a collective interest.

She is aware that her steps have been supported by various people whom she considers her allies. At the family level, she identifies the support of her older sisters, as well as that of her friends, whom she met in training courses and meetings and for the defense of Indigenous Peoples and especially of the indigenous women’s rights. She has also set common goals and joint alliances; for



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example, with Ibrahim Njobdi, who opened the door to the field of advocacy to her and motivated her to believe in her capacity, although she had no experience.

In this journey, she has met indigenous women who are leadership mentors, such as Lucy Molenkei, an executive director of the Indigenous Information Network in Nairobi, who has been her mentor and teaching example and allowed her to participate in different platforms as a young advocate for the indigenous women's rights.

Her leadership has been focused on Indigenous Peoples organizations, and recently on indigenous women's organizations, with whom she has linked to prioritize actions that help them know their rights, strengthen their identity, and work in an organized way to defend and demand their rights.

Aminatu is aware that her culture, as part of the Mbororo People, is made up of values with which she does not agree and has been able to confront since she was a child. However, she is aware of other values that she recognizes and respects, and are the basis of authority and leadership. For example, Pulaaku is practiced in her community. It is a code of conduct that governs all collective acts, and it is composed of the following elements: Semteende, shame; Munyal, patience and tolerance; Enaam, affection; Ngorgu, courage and Neaaku, self-esteem. Based on this philosophy of life, the being of each woman or man of their People determines whether they have the role of a leader. She affirms:

*“As leaders, we are guided and live by the Pulaaku. It is our basis to act and lead our People. They are the values of my Mbororo identity that I choose to assume and practice”*

## **Global Leadership School for advocacy in defense of rights as indigenous women**

Upon finishing her university studies, she claimed to be able to improve her abilities to put them toward the service of girls and women. So, she applied to the Global Leadership School, based on information provided by a Kenyan leader who was promoting the leadership of indigenous girls and young women. Her main motivation for participating was to learn about the Human Rights instruments available to Indigenous Peoples and the processes that indigenous women can use to defend their rights and strengthen their advocacy capacities, which she deems vital in her work as an advocate. Therefore, the school was an important space to achieve her purpose.

The learning process at the Leadership School was a significant experience. Her knowledge gained allowed her to continue with her work as an advocate of indigenous women's rights. It was important to find women leaders with whom she had a good friendship and from whom she learned other ways of exercising leadership.





Due to the skills gained at the School, her relationship with the IWF evolved and her professional career within the Permanent Forum allowed her to become the coordinator of political participation and advocacy. All of this strengthened her commitment to work for indigenous women.

For Aminatu, formulating the advocacy plan was a great challenge due to the approach of her proposal, which addressed the economic empowerment of indigenous Mbororo women through a two-day workshop organized by the Indigenous Women's Forum of Cameroon on capacity building for indigenous traditional, religious, and community leaders, to eliminate harmful traditional and cultural practices (e.g. child marriage) and improve access to education for girls.

She wanted to implement this plan in her community. However, as she had refused to marry in order to go to university, community members did not accept her decision and rejected it. Her proposal to implement the plan was not welcomed by them, and they saw her as a negative influence on girls since she did not follow the norm of marrying at an early age. For this reason, she had to implement it in the community where her mother comes from. In this regard, she explains:



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*“Our community is patriarchal, so we belong to our father’s community. My first intention was to implement the plan there, but since I was not welcomed I chose to go to my mother’s village, as both places were dealing with similar problems and challenges”.*

Finally, the implementation of her project was a success. They managed to financially support girls who had dropped out of school, so they learned tailoring and how to make other crafts. This training allowed them to start their small businesses, manage them by themselves, thus becoming independent women.

The information obtained from the Global School was useful. She applied the recommendations of the UN international

mechanisms, which recognize indigenous women and girls with the right to access school and economic empowerment, as arguments to justify the objective of her plan. She states:

*“I used the tools, instruments, and mechanisms that I learned in the Global Leadership School as a guide; they helped me to argue my approaches”.*

At the community level, she has empowered girls through her advocacy plan. For her, it is gratifying to see them going to school and showing interest in doing different things, which means that she managed to raise awareness among the people of the community and the women, who are now aware of their rights including education and

participation in activities outside of the home.

At the international level, her work has contributed to decision-making and recommendations required in other spaces, and has advocated on recommendations regarding indigenous women at the global level. At the national level, she promotes the participation of indigenous women as opportunities to position their demands. She has mobilized indigenous women and girls to attend public events, nominating others to participate in training programs, workshops, and conferences. With emotion, she says:

*“I don’t have statistics, but whenever we learn about regional or international processes, we try to lobby to ensure the participation of indigenous women”.*

Today, she knows global advocacy strategies, which she puts into practice in her work. These tools have helped her defend and promote indigenous women’s rights and launch recommendations on the different international platforms to which she has worldwide access.

## Individual and collective dreams

One of her dreams is to work at a philanthropic level to provide funds to indigenous women. This is a collective dream that will help finance and provide resources for Indigenous Peoples so that they can work in the exercise of their rights. She aspires to graduate from the Indigenous Peoples Law and Policy Program at the University of Arizona, to strengthen her capacity in defending indigenous women’s rights.

For her, it is important to share her knowledge. At present, she is supporting a young indigenous woman in her country and another in her community, whom she tries to involve in the defense of women’s rights. She is working with a group of girls, providing community funds, and assuming the role of mentor. She states:

*“Hopefully some of the girls will be interested in this field and the processes of Indigenous Peoples”.*

She believes that many women leaders still need information on the existing mechanisms and tools regarding their rights. For this, it is necessary to bring education to the community and get women and men involved, so that they understand the importance of equal rights.





©FIMI. Group photograph with Ms. Victoria Tauli Corpuz, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; 6th edition of GLSIW

Aminatu has been a woman who challenged part of her culture, facing the community from the moment she decided to take a different path from that of most girls among her people. Her leadership has been a political choice that has been woven like the threads of a loom that began thanks to her determination and strength.

As a role model of perseverance, she has demonstrated how training is a strategic tool to maintain her struggle. She knows that knowledge and learning are essential to promote greater awareness in herself and other women in order to deal with challenges. Having been part of the Leadership School marked her path. Today she believes in the need for young women and girls to be clear from now on about their rights and develop

their leadership, which is a commitment she has gladly assumed as part of her life, commitment and from her own experience.

# Winnie Kodi



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*A strong and resilient indigenous woman who faces difficulties with composure. Able to survive in adverse situations because she responsibly preserves the traditions and cultural practices that her mother and grandmothers passed on to her.*

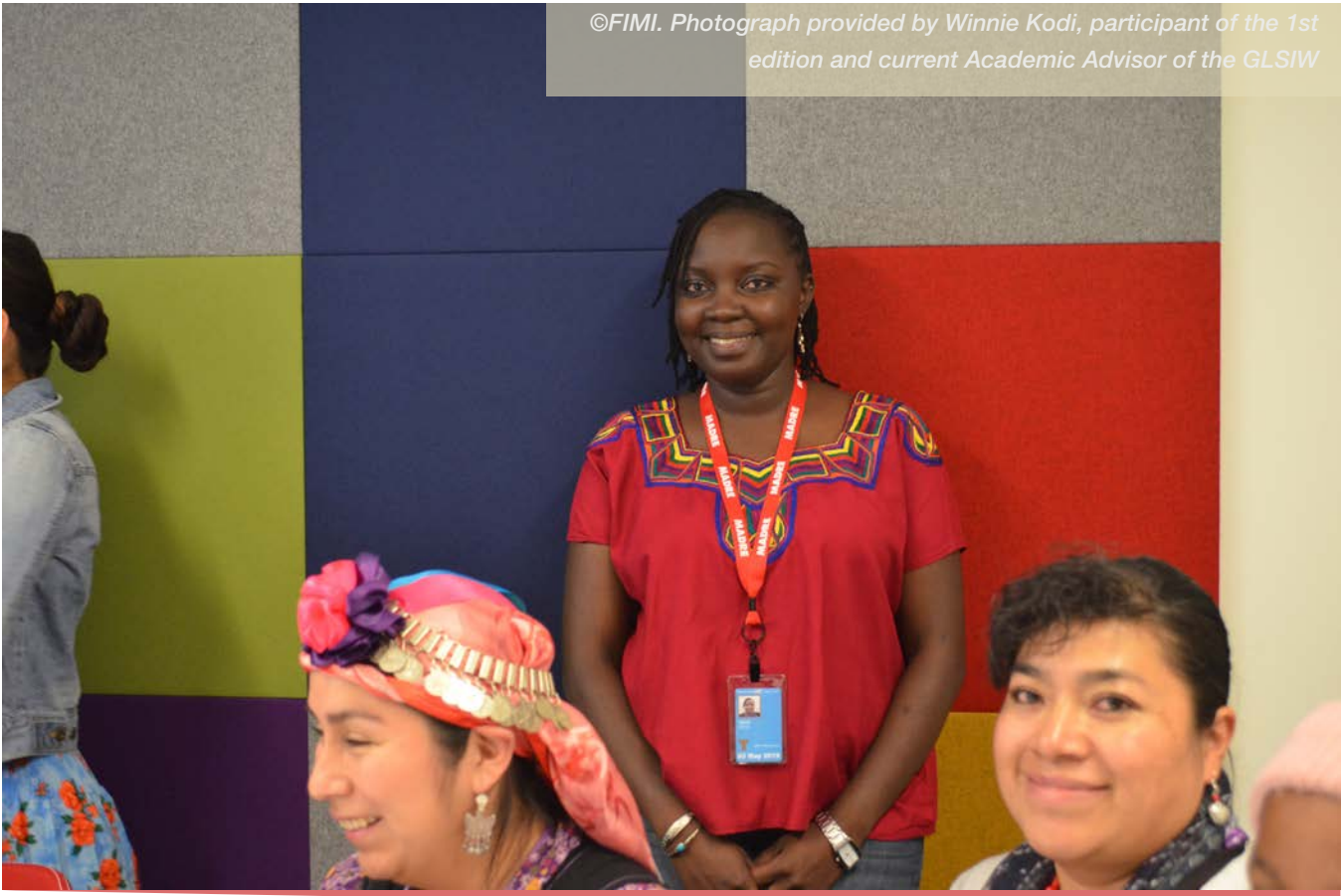
Nania Kodi is a Nuba woman, a feminist and human rights activist, who is passionate about defending indigenous women, girls, and life. She was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in Africa, the land from which her roots as an indigenous woman arise, which sustains her identity in the culture of her People.

At 31 years of age, she knows that the reality of indigenous women is crossed by triple discrimination because they are indigenous, women, and poor, which has not allowed them to have development opportunities due to the racist system of their country.

She is the second of her siblings. She is proud to belong to a family that feels part of traditional territory, surrounded by the Nuba mountains, and to contribute to the recognition and freedom of her People. She feels fortunate that her parents are teachers and interested in getting involved in politics and activism for women's rights.

She was born in a refugee camp, where she lived until her adolescence. She remembers that she was lucky enough to escape from refugee camps, although she could not escape from the effects of the war, which marked her life and had an impact on her to

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define her work in defense of life. Sadly, she recalls:

*“Sometimes I remember the bursts of gunfire, the gunshots, the military plane in the distance, and us running towards the trenches to try to get to safety”.*

As she grew older, she realized that her father had to be away for work more frequently; as a result, her upbringing was at her mother’s side. Since then, she realized the burden carried by women for the care and education of their children, so she decided to work with and for women’s rights, and contribute to the protection and execution of those rights.

She grew up in an environment where boys were more favored than girls, who consequently dealt with many difficulties. Just at that time, the movement for girls began to gain momentum and she had the privilege of being part of an advocacy program to educate girls, participating in education campaigns, through voice recordings for radio and theater programs. Spaces where she held an open debate on this issue, through civic training programs, when she was only 15 years old.

An important event that she remembers was the indigenous women’s conference in Nairobi to which girls were invited to help with registration and other related tasks. It was the first time that she felt surrounded by so many indigenous women and she affirmed that one day she would be in the same space learning with them. In this regard, she states:

*“Since then, I have not stopped working for the **empowerment and equal rights of women and girls**”.*

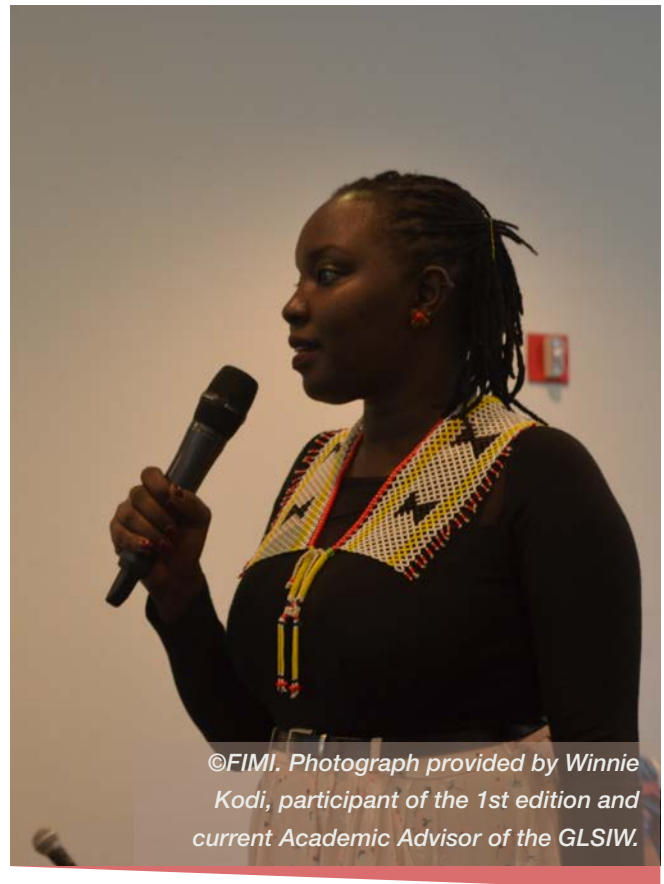
## Leadership as an indigenous woman in defense of life

The events Winnie experienced from her childhood and youth marked the beginning of her leadership. Another factor that drove her has been the trust that other indigenous leaders placed in her, assigning her roles and responsibilities that allowed her to improve her capabilities.

Since the beginning of her leadership, she has been supported by her parents and her brother, her main allies, at times when she felt like abandoning her fight. She considers her community leaders her great allies. They have supported her with their ideas, making sure that any project jointly created becomes a success. In her words, she explains:

*“Community work is incalculable because I am who I am thanks to my people and the community that I come from”.*

Her mother is a source of inspiration who has allowed her to understand the importance of betting on collective causes for her People’s women. Her mother has always been her



©FIMI. Photograph provided by Winnie Kodi, participant of the 1st edition and current Academic Advisor of the GLSIW.

example, through whom she sees the woman she hopes to become, because of her strength and resistance. Today she is the leader who has been forged in the movement of indigenous peoples due to her seed planted, and that she continues spreading in her being. Winnie joined the indigenous peoples’ movement through her mother, who represents a source of constant learning. She states:



*“I would like to point out that, in particular, my mother has been my great reinforcement, and thanks to her I can show confidence in my work along the path that she took and that I am following”.*

“I would like to point out that, in particular, my mother has been my great reinforcement, and thanks to her I can show confidence in my work along the path that she took and that I am following.”

The Indigenous Peoples’ movement has also won her many allies, who throughout her work have contributed with ideas, information, and support on behalf of the brotherhood within the movement to promote the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and especially of indigenous women.

Her journey as a leader has been guided by the strength and spirit of other indigenous women who are her role models, one of whom is Lucy Mulenkei, from Kenya, who has been a role model; a woman who has given opportunities to promote the leadership to the new generations and with a great commitment to the movement of Indigenous Peoples.

## **Global Leadership School: a space to assert the struggle of the indigenous women’s movement**

Winnie is a woman committed to collective causes in which rights are vindicated, that is why her leadership is focused on indigenous and community women’s organizations. As a strategy to strengthen the demands of these two sectors, she interacts with different claimants, identifying intersecting issues or that are associated with each other in one way or another.

In her commitment to the demands of indigenous women, her priority has been gaining new knowledge to improve her contribution. For this reason, she was motivated to be part of the Leadership School in order to get to know and understand the movement of Indigenous Peoples and women. She considers that this training space would allow her to learn about international mechanisms and instruments for her work as an activist for Indigenous Peoples. With satisfaction, she states:

*“It was an honor for me to be in the pioneer class of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women. I felt that I had the privilege of being at the beginning of something great, and I was not mistaken”.*





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During her participation in the School, her significant experiences included the provision of material, interaction with the facilitators, and an online class. She was also surprised to see how easy it was to learn in a non-traditional way. For her, it was a new platform to interact with different people from different parts of the world, learn about their struggles, triumphs and learn from their good practices, which made it possible to network with other indigenous sisters from all over the world.

One task in the Leadership School training consisted of formulating the Advocacy Plan, which raised some doubts in her mind. She was concerned about how her community would receive her plan which proposed that

women should gain more influence in politics, a field dominated by men; especially since it was a proposal of a young woman. The plan represented a seed for women, a first step to support them and make sure that from their own being, they will speak out about their thoughts and ideas. In this regard, she explains:

*“Doubts that bothered me while I was drafting the Plan also fed my will to complete it and see to its execution if it was eventually implemented”.*



©FIMI. During the seminars at Columbia University, participants of the 3rd edition of GLSIW. New York City

An exemplary and wonderful experience was implementing the Advocacy Plan, which was very well accepted by women and girls, who considered it theirs. It has been significant because, while she was writing it, her thoughts were connected to the women and girls in her community, who had been silenced for so long and had no voice to speak out in community spaces about the issues that affect them. In contrast, they were now being trained to develop their capacities and speak out within the community and move forward.

Her participation at the Global School strengthened her contributions in the community through organizational work, which includes fundraising and building relationships with other organizations.

At the national and international levels, she has spoken out in different forums as a representative of indigenous youth and specifically indigenous women, making statements at the Permanent

Forum on Indigenous Issues, in the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and at the Convention on Biological Diversity, emphasizing the rights of its People and in solidarity with other Indigenous Peoples. She also contributed to the Rome Declaration between indigenous youth and the FAO.

As a result of the implementation of the Advocacy Plan, her organization has trusted her leadership, asking her to assume the execution of projects for the community's benefit, which have included training in peacebuilding for women, economic empowerment activities, and language revitalization programs.

As a former participant of the Global School, she has had other opportunities, such as being chosen for scholarships as an indigenous representative of OHCHR in Geneva, as well as that of Sakharov of the European Union. She has also made arrangements to participate in different processes

at the local and international levels, which are opportunities to contribute even more to the Indigenous Peoples movement.

According to her, education means possibilities to grow and unlearn. Her participation in the School allowed her to acquire new knowledge. The most important one has been to have a methodology that is not limited only to its writing, but it also develops tools to write proposals and justify actions. She understood that there are different ways and concrete strategies to promote change, analyze the problems, and choose the allies who will support a determined cause. With satisfaction, she explains:

*“Having strategies was an important lesson because without them I would not have been able to have the allies I have today, nor would I have made the network of colleagues and friends that I have today in the movement”.*

She learned about the different mechanisms available to Indigenous Peoples to defend and demand their rights and how to use them. She understood about how differently the United Nations system operates. In labor terms, she has collaborated with the IIFW in projects of the AYNF Fund and Leading from the South. One of the most important opportunities after her participation was being an academic facilitator for the sixth edition in the School, which allowed her to share her knowledge and experiences. In this regard, she states:

*“I am proud of my time as a facilitator at the School because somehow I was able to give back to the School what it had given me in the beginning”.*

## Individual and collective dreams.

Winnie is a visionary woman who makes come true whatever she sets out for herself. Her participation in the school gave her a new perspective to do her advocacy work. Her behavior at work became more deliberate, informed, and coordinated. With satisfaction, she states.

Her dream is to have a community or a world free of discrimination, where race, skin, gender, and any other form of discrimination does not exist. Only then, indigenous women and girls will have access under equal conditions and opportunities. To the extent that they are fully valued, they will be free from oppression, poverty, and other systems of exclusion. Consequently, they will be able to develop their full potential and ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy the same freedoms and opportunities. In her words, she explains:

*“I became a better advocate for indigenous women’s rights”.*

She believes it is important to pass her insights on to young women in her community, who have not had the same opportunities as her. She wishes that they would know that nothing

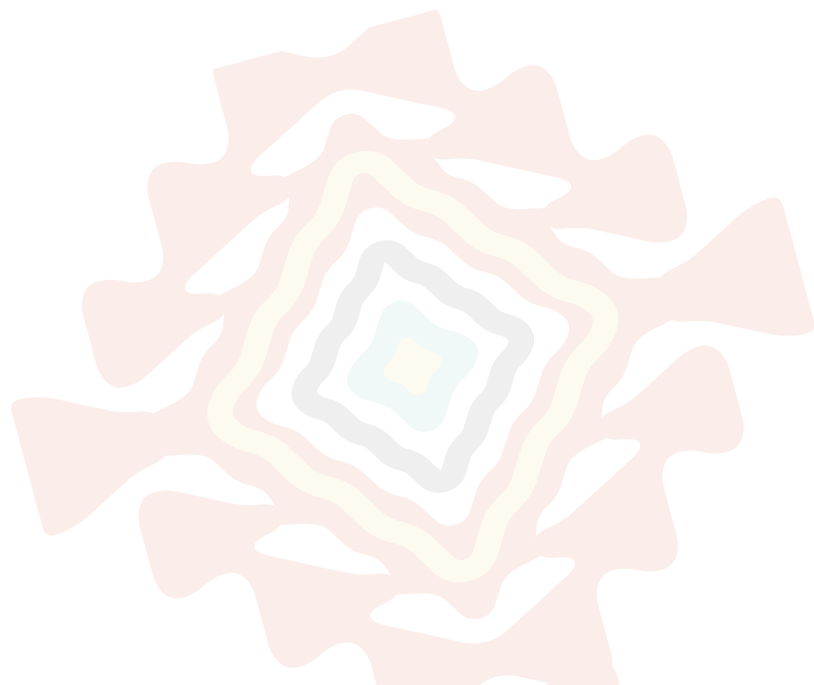
is impossible, that they can achieve whatever they want to, regardless of the communities from which they come. With emotion, she shares:

*“I believe that my dream is also a collective dream because we all want to see indigenous women succeed in a world that has been designed to impede them at every opportunity”.*

Winnie, a young woman empowered by her specific and collective rights from her indigenous identity, has made it possible to know how the being and doing of leadership is interwoven from a history crossed by an armed conflict, which raised her awareness and commitment to undertake a collective struggle and change that reality.

*“There is a young woman that is interested in my work, and we are exploring tutoring methods to learn from each other because I believe that tutoring is about **learning together to improve**”.*

Her determination to defend the exercise of their rights through training processes such as the Global Leadership School as a political tool —along with and from the women and girls of her People— is an example of conviction and struggle, which strengthened her commitment to helping more women continue to acquire capacities to believe in themselves and to be a light for others, with strong steps on wide, flat, and sure paths.





**Life stories :**  
**OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS**  
**FROM THE ARCTIC, NORTH AMERICA,**  
**AND THE PACIFIC**

# Jandi Craig



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant Jandi Craig, 5th edition.

*An indigenous woman who strives to learn her indigenous language, teachings, know-how, and beliefs, and take care of the world which she knows as her territory.*

Jandi is an indigenous woman with roots and identity from the Dischiden Nakaiye clan, which she assumes with strength, courage, and wisdom, and which sustain her leadership as an Apache woman.

She is the daughter of John and Glender Hernández, and the granddaughter of her mother's side of the late Naina Gatewood, and of her father's side of Catalina Hernández, who gave her the breath of life, for which she is grateful. She was born in Río Blanco, Arizona, in the United States of America.

From her point of view, an indigenous woman is the one who knows her lineage and ancestors, and makes way for posterity through the observance of the traditional indigenous paradigm. She strives to learn her indigenous language, teachings, and beliefs, and to take care of the world she lives in and from which she finds connection as she feels it is feminine.

At 37 years of age, she has four children from the family she formed with her husband, and three daughters of God, a gift of life received through the traditional ceremony as part of her Apache culture.

She recognizes that the influence of capitalism and racism on modern Apache people has caused the loss of their culture and language, due to the Western society in which they live. As a result, she identified the need to reconnect with the traditional ways of her people. For that reason, today her work is based on revitalizing indigenous culture and traditional language.

## Leadership as an indigenous woman

Jandi's leadership began when she was chosen to be a godmother, which means a responsibility to guide and accompany children or young people from another family. She remembers that on one occasion people from her community came to her house and asked her to be a godmother, which was the beginning of her mission that she is happy to fulfill. It has been significant since in order to take on this role a celebration ceremony is held, in which the chosen person is recognized for their work and for their privilege of being appointed by a family. With satisfaction, she comments:

*"I have been preparing for this all of my life. It speaks well of my work, what it says and reports to the tribe during the ceremony".*

She states that this traditional practice of her culture represented the beginning of her leadership, in which she has been able to support, accompany, and take care of other people so that they are good human beings.

For her, the support of other people who have accompanied her to fulfill her role as a leader, whom she has appointed as her allies, has been valuable, including her husband, who is supportive and provides the necessary care to their children in her absence, without complaining and supporting her in her international work. She also recognizes a deceased leader, who gave her advice and words of encouragement, supporting her in her activities for her people. These people have given her strength thus far during her leadership journey.

As her example and role model to follow as a leader, she has identified Rosalee González, an indigenous woman who is the coordinator of the Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas in the North Region and director of the United States Human Rights Network. Rosalee helped her to understand the mechanism of the United Nations, refine her statements, and contribute to the dialogue at the UN on behalf of her people.

Jandi has focused her leadership role in the mental health and wellness sector, working with people who have suicidal thoughts or have suffered from acts of violence, through healing systems such as therapies based on traditional practices. For some time now, she has undertaken a struggle to find solutions to the causes that trigger suicidal thoughts in the population and how to reduce and eradicate them. This is an effort that requires the involvement of all sectors in society; therefore, within the community, she encourages families to get involved in supporting initiatives that contain messages for life.

As an indigenous woman, it has been important to recognize symbols that represent the roles of authority and leadership within her culture. One significant one is an eagle feather with a very small stone that represents the work production from the cosmogony of the Apache people. This emblem means balance, as a



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant  
Jandi Craig, 5th edition

way of harmonizing her being, between the labor role and the traditional one. This symbol allows us to know what she represents in the community. On one hand, she is recognized as a program manager for the department of mental health in defense, and, on the other, as a godmother, who carries the stone for women who have undergone the initiation rite as part of their culture.

These are the cultural values that have marked her mission of leadership, guiding principles and authority among her people, with which she reaffirms her Apache identity.

## Participation in the Leadership School

Jandi is interested in discovering new spaces and obtaining knowledge to continue contributing to the people she accompanies in her town. So, she deemed it important to apply to the global school. When she saw the syllabus and its contents, she realized that the training process would be very useful to strengthen her leadership. She was also interested in obtaining the full experience of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, which she had attended in the past as an observer, and wanted to learn how to participate meaningfully in this international advocacy space.

As a participant of the Leadership School,





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she had significant experiences. For example, the opportunity to interact with indigenous women from different communities around the world. Through their testimonies and experiences when implementing actions, she learned strategies about what worked for them and what did not work, in favor of the women of their villages and, mainly, how to use the resources available in their communities.

One task of her training was to formulate an advocacy plan. Her proposal consisted of promoting a meeting space between indigenous women at the national level, which would facilitate holding discussions about their situation as indigenous and identify settlement proposals. It was put into practice through the methodology she learned in the Global School. It was a process from which she obtained valuable experiences since she

managed to focus on a specific problem.

For her, newly acquired knowledge must get converted into input and contributions. So, she has focused her work on the community, as it is an environment and space of greater trust and openness to change. It has allowed her to address problems that affect them as a people, and at the same time, identify alternatives to minimizing or counteracting the problem. This is a process that takes time and dedication along with the leaders among their people. Internationally, her contributions have focused on connecting with other communities by sharing difficulties and ideas to improve their lives. She has passed on these findings to her community, concluding that despite the different contexts among each set of people, they have similar problems that the State is not aware of.

With her experience and new knowledge gained at the Leadership School, she was able to coordinate and connect with another indigenous women's organization in the United States, through a side event during the meeting of the Expert Mechanism on Indigenous Peoples with the purpose of campaigning and addressing the various situations of exclusion that affect indigenous women. This meeting was carried out successfully. During this campaign, they realized that they were experiencing very similar complications and negative circumstances. In addition, as part of the results, they also identified positive response mechanisms to deal with the problems, as well as to be clear about what works best for each indigenous community, taking into account that there are different population groups in each one.

For her, learning is synonymous with teaching. That is to say, if you learn or know something new, you have to share it. For this reason, she really valued her participation in the Global School because she learned what it means to be aware of her own reality, as well as that of her people, thus gathering information and having contact with that reality, supporting her ideas properly on an international level. She also understood the need to be prepared for any adverse circumstances that may arise and the importance of having another colleague who can go or act on her behalf, and thus understand the knowledge and teachings received — that which is considered useful for applying in the society and organization.

During the process, she acquired greater knowledge about the United Nations mechanism. She obtained a greater



understanding of its structure and systems thanks to the fact that she was able to attend the Permanent Forum and the human rights council. Those are insights that had an impact on her leadership role.

## Individual and collective dreams.

Her greatest dream is to organize a national campaign for indigenous women, taking into account that many groups are working on similar projects with strengths and valuable experiences to share. She hopes to achieve these objectives by forging alliances and promoting coordination mechanisms with other sectors in her region.

Jandi is aware of the need to pass on her insights and experiences in order to give continuity to her actions. At first, she hopes to do it with her daughters, especially the oldest, who today is her source of inspiration and the reason behind all of her effort, whom she sees as a leader with capacities and the potential to move forward and get ahead.

To continue contributing, she deems it important to acquire other skills and resources, such as access to social networks and technology, which, when used positively, become an agile way of communicating people's lives and injustices to the world. She asserts it due to a recent painful event: a friend

of hers was murdered, but she did not know about it. She learned of this terrible news on the Internet. Therefore, she is sure that it can be a good instrument for the peoples, not only for negative things but for positive things as well.

*As an Apache leader, Jandi is a symbol of strength, courage, and commitment, as her main strengths, which characterize her sense and practice of support and services for her people. A woman who has dealt with difficulties and challenges, who has acquired new knowledge—which she has been able to turn into tools—who with patience and perseverance has managed to share and contribute to other people in her town with wisdom and dedication.*

# Judy Muliap



©FIMI. Judy M. Muliap, participant of the 3rd edition of the GLSIW.

*An indigenous woman is one who belongs to a tribe, and is identified by her lineage, which gives her obligations and responsibilities for preserving the heritage and values of her culture, of which she is proud*

Judy is a woman leader whose strength and energy come from the lineage of the Mari tribe, which gave rise to her indigenous identity, of which she is proud because it supports her struggle in the defense of women and her people.

She was born in Tapini, Papua, New Guinea, where she grew up and learned part of what she knows about life today. She declares herself an advocate of women and their human rights. She is a volunteer in the community, especially with work related to indigenous women and girls. As an indigenous woman, she recognizes the importance of her lineage,

that of her parents, grandparents, and ancestors. She is respectful of the cultural traditions of her people.

She is 46 years old and has three children. The oldest children have completed their university studies, while the 9-year-old girl still attends school. They are the ones who give meaning to her existence and struggle. She automatically belongs to her father's tribe, since society is patrilineal, the status of men is higher than that of women. Her father had a large piece of land in her village. He was a well-known man in his tribe for being a leader in the village. As a farmer, he grew sugar cane

and had a plantation —it was the only place in Papua New Guinea with a sugar factory— and with it, he supported his family.

She comes from a family of leaders, since her parents were so in their own right, and had influenced her life from childhood. She grew up watching them and learning what they did for people. She remembers that her father was someone she especially followed. She used to go with him on his campaign, and she saw him work first-hand in the community. She gladly states:

*“I developed my leadership qualities at a young age, and thanks to my parents it became my passion”*

As she grew up, her leadership also strengthened and intensified during the university, starting at the age of 19. The time she spent alongside her father and saw how he conducted himself as a leader among their people made a big impression on her as a female leader.

## **Leadership as a banner for defending women’s rights**

For Judy, leadership is a banner of struggle and defense, so she was always clear that her priority in life was to work to fulfill this mission. After college, she looked for a job and also joined various women’s groups and networks, assuming executive roles. She was part of the women’s governing council and was fully involved with them, explored their

situation to understand how to support them. Upon returning home, she founded various women’s groups and other social groups to continue with the work she was doing during her time away.

After this, she joined Soroptimist International, a volunteer service organization that she has been supporting for 15 years, helping women from the village in education and health. They carried out programs to empower them in the fight for their rights, and implemented projects to rebuild their homes, which led her to get involved in advocacy policies in the provincial government. She states:

*“I was passionate about working for women, especially since 40% of them are in the villages and they need a lot of support”.*

Since the beginning of her leadership, she has been encouraged by other people whom she calls her main allies, while her parents have been her greatest support. After her father’s death, her mother became her accomplice. She told her to work very hard to survive in a world dominated by men and insisted she be strong like them. The maternal figure was very powerful in the development of her leadership.

She also identifies May Lemont, from Soroptimist International, who lives in Brisbane, Australia, as a teacher, since she encouraged her to take a step further and assume leadership roles.

Her children have also been important, especially her oldest son, who accompanied her to women’s meetings, supporting her when she was running for leadership positions. This is very amazing, especially in a society where it is believed that men are leaders and



©FIMI. GLSIW group side event, 3rd edition

tend to have an advantage over women. It motivated her to accept and participate in the last elections, running for public office. With satisfaction, she explains:

*“The fact that my son was behind me and encouraged me, telling me not to worry about what any man said or about their reactions, gave me a lot of courage”.*

In the course of her leadership, she has identified indigenous women who have been her role models, one of them being Orovue Sepoe, with whom she traveled to New York

to get the government of their country to acknowledge and assume their responsibility on the issue of rights. She worked with her at CEDAW helping her write an article on rural women and basic services. Her experience as a doctor and political scientist helped start the dialogue within the Papuan government to acknowledge the majority of women living in rural areas.

For her, it is important to focus on her leadership. For this reason, she started as a defender of women’s rights, prioritizing her support in favor of them. She confirmed that 68% of women were the main victims of violence in her country, and found out that the justice system was not working, the security and protection mechanisms at the time of reporting and initiating prosecution of crimes of violence against them were deficient, so

she committed herself to assist women.

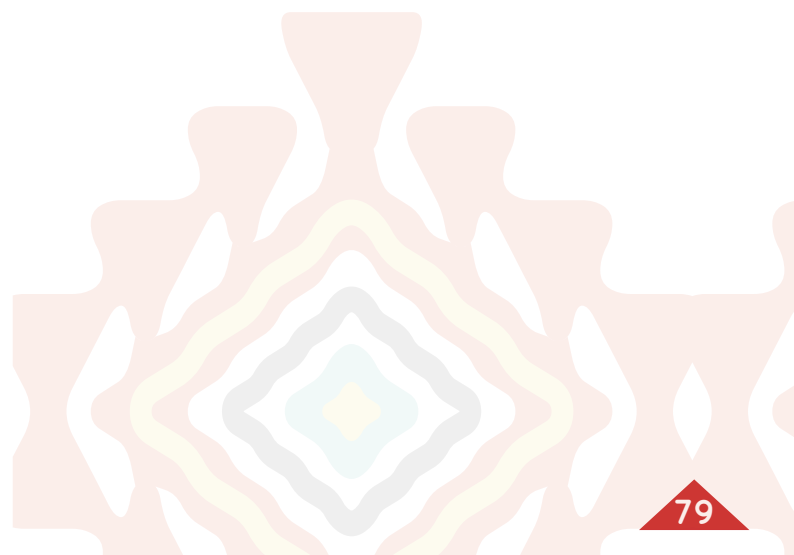
In her country, there are now many human rights defenders who are investigating the issue, so she decided to promote a different approach, creating a space where women could share their complaints in a safe environment and with support channels, seeking justice through an analysis of the laws and policies that are based on their reality. She found out that these legal instruments lacked the means to safeguard the rights of women, so they were not only unconnected to the violence they suffered, but also to issues such as inheritance and land ownership, among other things. She was also able to recognize that women were excluded from many activities, decision-making, and development in their villages.

In this, Judy identified an opportunity to work closely with the government and lobby in favor of laws and policies that would change the situation for indigenous women. A strategic sector to promote actions to benefit women was electoral politics, thus running as a candidate in the 2017 general elections. However, she did not win, due to the unfair position of men who bribed others in order to win the elections. In this regard, she explains:

*“Sadly, the only way to be listened to and do politics is through Parliament, that’s why I will run again in 2022. I learned a lot from the past elections and I want to learn from my previous elections and adopt a new strategy”.*

As a member of the Mari culture, Judy knows that authority and power are recognized in men and not in women, because, according to them, women cannot perform in a position of power, because they are weak and with a lack of leadership. She is trying to change this aspect of her culture, taking up the practices promoted by her father as a leader in the area, who told people that the tribe was not only for men but also for women. This made her feel more committed to getting rid of the harmful practice and promoting fairness.

For her, it is important to recognize that there are symbols that represent power and leadership, such as the wooden staff with a serpent carved on top. Even though it is carried only by men, it is the symbol of office and authority. In the case of women, this element is represented with a clay pot, like a food bowl, which symbolizes the sustenance of life for the people in the community. She believes that she can link these values to the role of leadership based on her culture.



## Global Leadership School, a space to position the voice of indigenous women

Judy's leadership seeks to defend and position women's rights, considering that her country has an indigenous population that represents the majority. Therefore, she persists in obtaining new knowledge that will use as tools to continue contributing to the change that improves the reality of women and indigenous peoples.

She applied to the Global School. Her main motivation was the determination to learn from other experiences about the way of approaching problems and identifying possibilities for solutions and thus returning with new contributions to share with women and their organization.

Her participation allowed her to have significant experiences, which marked part of her leadership, among them, the exercise of bringing an object from her community and telling its story. It was something very difficult for her, while for the others, it was not. It seemed amazing to her learning about the indigenous community of other peoples by showing the objects that symbolized the heritage of their culture along with a story. What made her reflect and understand that each object tells a story that also implies a practice, a wealth of diversity among indigenous peoples, and the importance of preserving cultural heritage.

Her training in the Leadership School allowed her to learn new processes and tools such as formulating the advocacy plan. She had never drafted one but knew how to develop projects. From her point of view, it was another process, it responded much more to facts, figures, working on structural problems, and analyzing



other sectors involved, with responsibility for intervening to solve the situation encountered.

Her proposal consisted of a five-year plan. It was difficult to define a single issue because there were many problems with women in this field. Therefore, she promoted a training space for women to obtain information about what was happening in their villages. So, she realized that many women were displaced from their husbands' lands after they died. Sadly, she comments:



*“I felt the pain of these women who were displaced from their land because I came from the same place.”*

She managed to develop a plan based on the reality of her own experience. She brought women together, shared her plan with the leaders — which implied its translation into their local language so that they could understand it — and also introduced it to the government. Both groups showed interest in the issue, but she did not obtain the resources to implement the plan. With the idea of managing funds, she continued presenting it to other people, but they wanted to take ownership of the proposal for the cost of granting the financing for its implementation.

Upon her return from the Leadership School, she submitted the advocacy plan to the government and it was surprising to learn that a couple of projects had emerged from her recommendations, such as the education for women and girls to provide them with menstrual hygiene topics. For her, it was positive to see that the proposals contained in the advocacy plan were carried out. In this regard, she states:

*“Change is slow, but I think it will happen because people have started to organize differently”.*

She has contributed to positioning the situation of women in her country within the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) framework since the government submitted

66 recommendations to the UN and within some time they began to act. As a result, the Family Law was passed to protect women, which does not fully protect them, but she believes that it is a start. However, it is encouraging that they are interested in taking measures to protect women. The government is now talking about these issues on radio and television. She believes this progress is part of her contributions.

At the community level, she developed a workshop in rural areas on international law and conventions signed by her country. As a result, women are making their own paths, many of them have seen a change in their lives and the number of those who experience violence at home has been reduced because they are financially supporting their family.

One insight that she wanted to share was about the importance of preserving cultural values. She organized workshops to raise young people’s awareness about this topic, encouraging them to get back home and bring change instead of staying in the city. As a representative of her organization, she has lobbied the government, addressing the importance of having laws and policies for women’s benefit.

She has promoted different coordination actions, which she strengthened during her participation in the Global School and allowed her to hold different workshops in the community using her own funds. She was able to join with other organizations and some companies that operate in the communities, requesting their support to work in association with her. It has been welcomed by them, since, through these actions, they manage to partially fulfill their social responsibility. Thanks to this, men, women, young people, and the elderly have been trained, taking advantage of places with good facilities and offering training for free. With satisfaction, she states:

*“Due to my passion for the community, people recognize and support my work”.*

She has managed to establish herself with companies in order to develop short courses on attitude, behavior, culture, and domestic violence, which she conducts based on the community needs. As a result, various young people have changed their lifestyle; many have returned to share that they are doing better in school. She has been able to manage various funds for education, comprehensive, and maternal health.

Participation in the training at the Global School was extremely valuable to her. She learned about the challenges of being an indigenous leader before men. She learned

about the working approaches of other women leaders and their courage in dealing with their struggles. In her own words, she states:

*“I am going to run again in the next election because men do not listen to nor understand women’s problems. They discriminate against us, but today, I know that as an indigenous leader I have a voice and knowledge to make changes in favor of women”.*



She learned about the importance of preserving their culture as a heritage of the people from which it comes. She was able to see how various indigenous communities around the world maintain their cultures, traditions, and symbols; unlike her country and community, where this was not happening. They waste their cultural wealth and do not know how to protect it and take advantage of its potential. They were handing over their wealth for free to foreigners, unaware of its value and importance. So, when she returned, she encouraged artisan women who weave baskets and make sculptures and made them understand that their art is a way of telling their story and representing their values as a people. With emotion, she explains:

*“Being part of the Global School challenged me to see cultural objects as a means to communicate our heritage and our history”.*

An important lesson was realizing that the issues and problems discussed by leaders during the Global School sessions were similar to those they deal with as indigenous people in their region. She was able to clarify the differences between Westminster law and common law, which helped her understand and clear up many issues that she brought back to her country and began to bring them up with the government. In this regard, she states:

*“Now the government of Papua New Guinea recognizes the value of indigenous peoples and how to preserve the land for them”.*

## Individual and collective dreams

Her dream is to work with women and advocate for their changes. She sees herself as the winner in the next elections so that she can continue advocating for the rights of indigenous women to improve their situation. She hopes to create an indigenous women’s political party to have a greater impact since when they join other parties they do not support a woman’s candidacy. With her own party, she hopes to support women leaders who have political ambitions.

She is sure of the need to share her experience with other people, especially young people, including her daughter, who is now studying law and wants to be a lawyer for women’s rights. She is aware of many young people who are interested in working on human rights, so they allow her to be their teacher and share her knowledge with them. She is conscious that they will come and take the lead.

Judy considers that it is necessary to learn more about methodologies for capacity building and be trained on strategies to advocate the government commits itself to work with fairness. It is important to acquire knowledge and skills in the political and legal field in favor of women. She asserts that it can be achieved through exchange programs between indigenous women, sharing good practices.

Learning about Judy’s path is to understand how she assumed the challenge of being an indigenous leader in a system that has historically oppressed the women of her people. With her life, she has proved that when you have clear convictions and commitments, without disconnecting from the reality of the peoples and respecting their knowledge, it is possible to make changes.

*Her story is an open window to be a role model for other leaders, who like her, have managed to build bridges of support, solidarity, and unity that contribute to empowering women to promote the full exercise of their rights as indigenous persons. It allows for providing visibility to her knowledge and experience, which she obtained during her participation in the Global Leadership School, and turned them into instruments of change, to the extent that they are shared with others and become alive.*



# Ngaroimata Chanel-Reid



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant  
Ngaroimata Reid, Maori, New Zealand.

*The indigenous woman was born from the earth and has a connection to the earth. She is aware of the values, rules, and tradition, which she revives and respects.*

Ngaroimata is an Maori woman, a place where people recognize the roots of their ancestors, whom she as a woman vindicates in her way of thinking and acting.

She was born in New Zealand and is 52 years old. Over the years, she has been able to lead her people, along with other leaders whom she calls brothers and sisters. She is married with three children, who represent the continuity of life. She is the regional president of the Tamaki Makanda Region, which belongs to the largest area with indigenous women. She is proud to know the history of her ancestors. She knows that the origin of the people comes from Waka

Hawaiki Nui, symbols with great meaning that represent the land that led them to settle in the territory they inhabit today. She states:

*“For us, our people, we are called Pakapapa, which means generations that came from Waka Hawaiki Nui, which makes us proud”.*



©FIMI. Meeting with James Anaya, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and participants of the 1st edition of the GLSIW. New York City

When she was nine years old, she witnessed a fight for Maori land rights. At that time, part of her people's land remained confiscated, which had been taken away during colonialism. During that fight, she met an active leader of the national party. When fighting for her lands, her leadership and role had a lot of influence on her.

Having closely seen the struggle of her people's leaders to defend their territory as a collective right has had a great impact on her life and career.

## Leadership as an indigenous woman.

Her leadership began as a child since the event when her people fought for their land. Her education has also helped. She has a master's degree and has also been trained in various training programs, as part of a process that she chose to support her people.

The development of her leadership has been supported and accompanied by people who she calls her allies, including her husband and relatives, who have helped her promote her

participation in the community. Together with them, she promoted the revitalization of their original language for her people within the education system available in the community, which significantly helped to recover the traditional language. It has been useful for their children to have access to and participation in this process.

In her journey, she has been able to meet indigenous women who are her role models and have influenced her life and leadership role, including Shirley Spiller and Dr. Carla Akama. She admires her grandmother and aunts, from whom she has taken the strength to undertake something new and not stop until she succeeds. She affirms:

*“One way or another, I am happy that there are women who have enlightened my leadership”.*

From the beginning, her leadership has been focused on supporting the Maori’s well-being, including their way of organization and participation. For 26 years, she has contributed to women with education access mechanisms, sexual violence prevention, information about their rights, indigenous business development, social justice, and addressing other problems that have historically affected them as indigenous persons among their people.

For her, being part of the Maori culture has meant recognizing values that promote respect for life from women’s perspective. Some important values that sustain her leadership are unity and collectivity. Reclaiming them has been essential since women are the ones who maintain them and pass them on to society generationally. This is an important symbol that makes them come together as a people

to be brave and deal with their problems as one.

In her being as a leader, she has reclaimed these principles and tries to promote them in the different spaces in which she works, ensuring their daily practice and revival.

## **Global Leadership School: a training space for indigenous women**

Being part of women’s organizations in their territory means strengthening their capacities and knowledge, so when she received the information about the Global School program —through a leader who met a member of the women’s council and introduced her to the training program promoted by the International Indigenous Women’s Forum (IIWF)— she was able to apply. It has been a great opportunity for her and her community.

As a member of the School, she confirmed the purpose of her participation, especially because she gained valuable experiences, such as creating relationships with women leaders from different parts of the world, as well as being part of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at the United Nations, which helped her understand the importance of taking action from the international level to defend the peoples’ rights.

Ngaroimata believes that it would not have been possible to have these experiences without the connection with the IIWF, which allowed her to learn from the international mechanisms that she currently applies in her country. She states:

*“This opportunity that the IWF gave me was the most outstanding of my life as a leader”.*

Drafting an advocacy plan was an important experience for her because she was able to set out a solid proposal that she eventually implemented with the support of the IWF. This plan —sponsored by the Maori Women’s Leadership Academy on Indigenous Rights and Leadership, developed by the Te Atatu Branch Women’s Welfare League— involved organizing women in order for them to know their rights and strengthen their potential as leaders.

Part of her contributions has been to advocate change to the regional government in terms of the equitable distribution of resources. She has been involved in supporting the defense of those who are in prison in order to improve the conditions of their children who live with them in that place. Working together with her organization in the improvement of indigenous women’s situation in her region is one of her priorities.

Today she is putting into practice what she learned at the Global School, such as promoting coordination and management opportunities, considering that one of the most difficult things in her region is to raise funds for forums or training spaces. As a result, she has managed to coordinate the creation of agricultural activities with other groups and obtain funds in order to implement other actions that contribute to reducing the problem of economic inequality in women.

Her participation in the Global School allowed her to learn things such as strengthening her ability to contact and build bridges with other

indigenous women from Canada and other countries to share experiences with women and leaders in her region. She states:

*“It has been an honor to meet the Ojibwe women’s leader, as well as other leaders of different indigenous groups. It is an honor for us because we learn from them”.*

She recognizes her ability to promote alliances with other indigenous communities, sectors, and groups. Now communities can share their experiences and problems and identify solutions, based on the different strategies they have used, under the premise of understanding that as Indigenous Peoples they experience similar problems throughout the world.



©FIMI. Offering; regional capacity building program Mesoamerica, GLSIW. Guatemala City, Guatemala.



## Individual and collective dreams

According to her, dreams are a projection of life, which must begin with changes that happen within her, such as defining the topic for her doctorate, which consists of analyzing how the practices and principles of Amadi's women are unique in the world. She is aware that working on this approach has taken time, but now she is happy to have achieved it. With satisfaction, she explains.

*"I am happy with my changes, which were possible thanks to the world leadership, The Global School gave me an opportunity, and opened up my mind and sharpened it".*

One of her dreams is to rescue the Maori culture's values and its people's aspiration to have a full life. For her, it is necessary for people in her region to assume that culture is part of their identity and, therefore, they must defend and practice it.

She believes that it is necessary to pass her knowledge and experiences on to other women in her organization and community, as a way to turn new knowledge into tools for other women leaders, which can be also useful and allow them to visualize achievable changes in the future.

Consequently, she has trained women locally. In one conference, she ensured that all participants received materials on women's rights. Also, together with her organization, they hope that people will know what commemorating the women's international day in the Indigenous Peoples' struggle means.

Ngaroimata's story is that of a woman who demonstrated her leadership with integrity and strength in the constant search for the common good, and especially for women. Her life as a Maori indigenous allows us to know, based on her people's values, how her identity was defined by the principles that sustain her culture, of which today she is proud.

In her leadership journey, she has shown that knowledge can become a tool for change, provided that it is shared and assumed for a group's benefit. She learned it during her participation in the Global Leadership School, which has been an opportunity for changing and strengthening her individual and collective life.



# Sandra Creamer



©FIMI. Photograph provided by Sandra Creamer, participant of the 1st edition of the EGLMI and current member of the Board of Directors

*We, indigenous women, are strong, resistant, humble. We are the center of the universe, of our communities, and our families.*

Sandra is a wise woman, a trail guide, a leader for the defense of her rights and those of her indigenous Wannyi/Kalkadoon people from the Pacific territories.

She was born in the mining town of Mount Isa in the state of Queensland Australia. She is a professor at the law school of the Koorie Educational Institute, Deakin University. At 57 years of age, she is a determined, strong, and wise woman.

She remembers that, during her childhood, she was sent to boarding school. She did not agree, so she left at the end of the year.

However, she went to business school where she was not accepted and eventually got a job as a receptionist at the Aboriginal Legal Service in Brisbane, where she learned about injustice towards the peoples. For her, it was the beginning of her journey for indigenous peoples' rights, which had a lasting effect throughout her life as she was getting involved in an ongoing and necessary struggle. In this regard, she says:

*“For me, indigenous peoples were warriors, strong people who had paved the way. They taught me to be strong in life”.*

## Leadership as the voice of the people

Sandra asserts that her leadership stems from the need to speak out on behalf of herself and others. It arose when she became a mother. When her children started school, she started working there. At that time, she identified that there was a group of indigenous children. They became friends and worked together to give their children a better education. At that stage, she identified that some teachers did not understand the history of indigenous people, in addition to the fact that state policies kept these peoples oppressed.

It was difficult to see that the school did not understand why many parents did not appear when their children had problems. Most parents did not know how the institutional system worked, that is why they were discriminated against by teachers. This was one of the several barriers they had to deal with. During this period, she was appointed the parents’ spokesperson, and thus her leadership began in this context.

In the beginning, the accompaniment of her indigenous sisters, as well as the Legal Service in which she worked, —whom she identifies as her main allies— was important. The legal service supported her and allowed her to hold and lead a human rights workshop, which allowed her to understand the specific need



to work on these issues, as well later to attend the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. She also identifies some friends from her native Mount Isa, who understood her, knew her story, and shared time with her to guide and encourage her to stay where she is now.

Other indigenous women have been her leadership role models, such as her sisters since she lost her mother when she was young. They became her role models, from whom she received care, advice, and guidance.

Each one of them introduced her to a different perspective on life. From the elders of Rockhampton, the place where she lives now, she has followed her example. They helped her strengthen her mission as a leader through their stories, wisdom, strength, and values, which helped her to strengthen her identity as an indigenous woman.



©FIMI. Photograph provided by Sandra Creamer, participant of the 1st edition of the EGLMI and current member of the Board of Directors

Based on her experience, her leadership has focused on supporting women and children in her town, who, according to her, live in conditions of inequality and have the capacities and abilities to get out of this situation.

For her, it is very significant to reclaim and maintain some values of her culture that support the exercise of her leadership, such as respect, balance, honesty, integrity, and solidarity, which have been practiced and passed on from the elderly to the youth, ensuring to give meaning to the being and doing of women's and men's leadership among her people, which she acknowledges and affirms.

## Participation in the Global Leadership school

As a wise woman, she considers that new knowledge and lessons are part of a person's being, which is why she became interested in applying to the Leadership School. Her main motivation was to strengthen her leadership skills, empower herself to empower other women, and achieve her dreams in the defense of human rights.

Having participated in the Global School allowed her to have valuable experiences, such as sisterhood with indigenous women leaders from other parts of the world. It was important to spend time with them during

that period, learn from their different ways of being and overall from the sense of solidarity among themselves. Today they still keep in contact and remain united in the distance. With emotion, she shares:

*“When women meet in New York, a bond of sisterhood forms to show solidarity and strengthen the sisterhood, as well as the indigenous women’s networks around the world”.*

As part of the learning process in the Leadership School, she was responsible for formulating an advocacy plan. In the beginning, she was not sure how to elaborate it, although she was clear about the problem and issue she wanted to address. However, as she was listening to other classmates about how they were drafting their plans, she came up with ideas and motivation to make her own plan and finally wrote it out.

Once she completed her plan, she was able to put it into practice. When she was working at the university, she was able to write out the law program for the Indigenous Unit, based on its contents. It was satisfactory because through this she was able to convey a strategic topic for change to the students.

She continues contributing with her leadership and capacities at the community,

national, and international levels, training students, women, institutional sectors, and leaders on human rights and the United Nations system, so that they know and understand their importance. She has also been able to call upon other indigenous leaders from the Pacific to attend the Global School, who have managed to apply and do a great job in their community as a result of their participation.

She has also promoted the empowerment of women, children, and indigenous peoples for the exercise of their specific and collective rights. Consequently, in 2019 she won an award from the Government of Australia and a Medal for her contributions to these sectors of the population.

She has attended international conferences on the United Nations system and indigenous peoples’ rights, introducing contributions of the peoples in the progress of international mechanisms on human rights.

For Sandra, the Global School is one of the most beneficial learning spaces for indigenous women where they can take a short course on human rights. It allows us to learn from women’s perspective, to understand their specific and collective rights, as well as the





©FIMI. During the seminars at Columbia University, participants of the 5th edition of the GLSIW. New York City

United Nations process, its operation, and about the vision of indigenous women leaders around the world and how to work together. With satisfaction, she explains:

*“The School is an appropriate means of cultural delivery and the readings are relevant to everyday situations regarding how to know your rights in your situations”.*

One lesson she learned during her participation in the Global School training process has been the importance of sharing

the acquired knowledge with others so that they take advantage of it and pass it on to others. So, she applies the readings and tools she learned to make sure that she is providing the correct information to indigenous peoples without losing the meaning that they give to the new knowledge.

Having been selected to attend the Human Rights Defenders Program at Columbia University in New York for four months was valuable for her, as she was provided with additional tools to follow her passion for supporting women and indigenous peoples who live in oppressive situations. Through this, she had the opportunity to become partners with Witness Human Rights in New York, a system on which she was trained to teach indigenous peoples around the world how to use their telephone to record violations

of their rights, have skills to tell their own story and how to protect themselves from any type of abuse to your dignity. Since then, she has conducted one online training course and four in-person training courses in the United States of America regarding the management of this system.

## Individual and collective dreams

Today, Sandra sees her that her life has changed. Now she uses her law degree, not as a practicing attorney, but as a speaker and community worker. She is proud to promote her profession from that new perspective. Something important is that she is part of the IWF board of directors, a space that allows her to continue strengthening the leadership of more women and young people in her region. She is the Executive Director of the National Indigenous Women's Alliance in Australia, and Associate Professor of Health Care at the University of Queensland.

Her greatest dream is to continue promoting her leadership for the collective good and to develop actions that help indigenous women

and their peoples demand and defend their rights.

One of her main concerns is that people can give continuity to the work she has started, which is why she is currently passing her main lessons on to her children and indigenous women's organizations in her region. She hopes they will become multiplying agents of knowledge for other generations.

Sandra's story as a leader invites us to learn about the different challenges that she has had to deal with to achieve the steps she has taken in defense of the rights of indigenous women and her people. Her career allows us to understand that it is possible to achieve a balance between being a professional and being a social activist, complementing both roles that have opened up new growth opportunities.

Today, as she takes part in local, national, and international spaces in favor of indigenous women, she demonstrates that when knowledge becomes a tool to be put toward collective service, leadership from and for women is strengthened and promoted, with wisdom, commitment, and dedication.



©FIMI. Opening photograph, 5th edition GLSIW



Life stories:  
**INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS  
FROM ASIA**



# Khesheli Chishi



©FIMI. Kesheli Chishi, participant of the 2nd edition of the EGLMI, during the opening of activities of the regional capacity building program Asia, EGLMI, Gujarat, India.

*We have been here for a long time. For the people, I am a woman with a heart when it comes to identity and Indigenous Law.*

In her story, Khesheli carries the strength and prosperity of the earth, sun, air, and water as elements that her Sümi Naga People have acknowledged since the time of their ancestors.

She identifies herself as a simple, clear, honest, and strong woman. She was born in Satakha, a city of the district of Zunheboto in the state of Nagaland, India, where she grew up as an Indigenous girl, an identity that she assumed and affirmed throughout her life. She is a 59-year-old leader who challenges the oppressive systems through which she has lived for being Indigenous and a woman.

She is proud of being part of a culture that tries to maintain its own way of life and has endured despite the presence of another system imposed by the State, that is why it remains convinced of the need to reclaim the identity of its People.

Her life has been marked by events in her childhood. She remembers that the primary school she attended was only for boys, who saw her differently. Boys behaved in a way that she was not used to; however, they chose her to be the student body leader. In this regard, she states:



©FIMI. Photograph provided by participant  
Kheseli Chishi, 2nd edition, GLSIW.

*“I started learning how to lead from the time I was in school. It is something that I have always looked back on when I think about who I am today”.*

Her parents and sister helped her discover her talent and abilities to face children at school. With this, she converted negative things into a challenge, always looking for possibilities around her to achieve her goals. She explains:

*“When I say ‘I can’t,’ they say, ‘don’t go, don’t run away, face it, show them you can do it.’ I have valued my parents and my sister’s words of encouragement thus far”.*

## Leadership: strength to move towards freedom as Indigenous Peoples

Khesheli knows that as Indigenous Peoples in India, and especially as Sümi Naga, they have been fighting for their freedom for 60 years. Since then, they have lived in a conflict zone, under the 1958 Armed Forces Special Power Act implemented in their region. The army has been committing torture and murder and exercising control over women, children, young people, and the elderly, and the army continues being the most responsible for the multiple human rights violations against the Indigenous people in their town to this day.

Sexual violence, trafficking, militarization, state violence, and the impact of displacement have affected mainly indigenous women, who have been deprived of their individual and collective rights in public and private spaces. Living close to this reality woke her up to the need to help people from her town, and especially women, by joining the indigenous women's organization, which she is leading, promoting actions so that women can have a more peaceful life. She believes that this group is probably the oldest women's movement in history as it has existed for almost 70 years.

She knows that this mission has not been easy as it is based on addressing a structural



problem, which is growing but requires a lot of effort and support from various sectors to reduce it. With concern, she states:

*“This situation is still happening. We are fighting against all of this, and will keep on trying for now with strength and determination”.*

Her leadership mission has been supported by her family, who are her main allies, such as her older sister, who passed away a few years ago. She was her mentor, managed to study and help the community preserve her culture, and was the founder of the women's organization. Sadly, she recounts:

*“I still remember her words. She said: women, you have to come together, unite, realize who you are if you want to occupy a place in society and be recognized as people who can assume responsibilities. Those words have stayed in my thoughts, and I keep them in mind”.*

She recognizes her father, a humble and persevering teacher; her mother, who did not go to school, but was a strong woman. They both taught her to be patient and always reflect before making decisions. They helped her reclaim the principles of their culture, such as Sümi Naga, in the face of the strong



©FIMI. Group photo regional training program Asia, GLSIW, Gujarat, India.

influence of Christianity that undermined the values practiced by the elders, and that currently young people and children of their people have lost.

For her, it has been fundamental to recognize that in the exercise of her leadership other indigenous women have been role models, as she has identified strengths and challenges in her life path. She mentions Vicky Tauli, Otilia Lux, and Tarcila Rivera, whom she admires because they have helped her strengthen her identity with their example and their work in defense of the peoples' rights, defined by their Indigenous origin.

Her leadership has been focused on women's groups, leading church-sponsored programs, and being a member of the Human Rights defenders group in the ***Naga People's Movement for Human Rights, being responsible for the management of justice processes and conflict resolution. In these organized spaces, she has been promoting***

***alliances in the*** search for harmony and peace, as well as to leave the conflict zone in which women and their people now live. She affirms:

*"I want to live in peace. I want to see women, my family, and my community living in peace and dignity".*

She has looked for ways to recover cultural principles that can still be rescued through leadership. An important one is that represented by the older people who guide the younger people and the community. People respect them and listen to them to be guided, led, and advised in difficult and troubling situations. Part of their ancestral practices is linked to mutual help between community members in difficult situations.

They are trying to pass on, maintain, reinforce, and promote these values with the help of the elderly as young people's guides so that they can cooperate, ensuring that both assume their role to maintain community ties.

Reclaiming and maintaining the values of her culture has become her challenge, especially in the face of a conflictive and violent

environment that is strongly having an impact on the lives of girls, boys, youth, women, and men in the communities. Given this, these elements of her people's worldview can be a spiritual and philosophical basis to regain strength and energy to move forward.

## Global Leadership School: a learning mechanism regarding the collective rights of women and Indigenous Peoples

Being linked to rights defense movements and seeking new mechanisms to strengthen this work has been one of her priorities. Learning about the existence of the Global Leadership School represented an opportunity to achieve it. In this regard, she states:

*"I want to know my rights and those of my people. I really want to help families, women, and the people; so, I registered at the IIFW's School where I saw a possibility".*

Meeting indigenous women leaders from another country, learning from her journey, having new knowledge regarding the issue of Indigenous Peoples' rights and putting those into practice, and serving their people were her main motivations.

One significant experience during her participation in the school had been gaining greater confidence in herself, the courage to fight for justice and the peace and strength



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of her people, which she achieved in her intervention as part of the Human Rights defender movement, using the existing international instruments as an argument for the defense and demand of the rights that as women and Indigenous Peoples have in the search for justice.

She reaffirmed her interest in continuing to learn about, become familiar with, and research experiences that have arisen among other peoples around the world regarding mechanisms for the defense of rights, peace and justice management, as well as the importance of working together as a country and organizing a collective defense before the State.

Formulating and implementing the advocacy plan allowed her to analyze the problems experienced by her people's women regarding

the violation of their individual and collective rights. She also delved into their impacts to define possible achievable strategies to minimize this situation.

Her plan addressed the issue about the promotion and protection of indigenous women's Human Rights, executed by the Indigenous Women's Forum of Northeast India, to promote training and awareness actions for her people's women on the existence of their rights and their protection and defense mechanisms. With the support of the IIFW, it was possible to organize workshops and train women on their rights, since most were unaware of them. It was amazing for her to see the expression of joy on their faces when they learned about the topics since they had never had the opportunity to train. With the implementation of the plan, she achieved a new opportunity for women. With satisfaction,

she explains:

*“It was something revealing for them. We are women, although many of them were unfamiliar with our rights”.*

This action allowed her to put into practice and share what she learned during the Global School. She also strengthened her own knowledge and realized the women’s need for a space to express themselves, share what they know, and about their experiences to defend their rights. They also confirmed the importance of sharing what they learned with other women and their families.

At the national level, she motivates other women and men leaders about the importance of providing visibility to their rights and exercising them. In regional and national spaces, she raises issues about the situations affecting Sümi Naga women. In Kathmandu, she managed to be a women’s representative, raising the need to maintain a fight in defense of the fulfillment of indigenous women’s rights as everyone’s responsibility. In this regard, she states:

*“I was able to share some of my thoughts with confidence and courage. **Our condition makes us brave; our arduous life makes us resistant. That’s where courage is born”.***

At the international level, she feels more and more capable of participating and intervening, with strength, security, and with forceful arguments, passing on what she learned at the Global Leadership School, and facilitating the

optimization of their funds. A lesson learned has been to maintain proper coordination, which is key to comply with the plan set out.

One strength has been to ensure that the actions be implemented based on the organization’s interest, focusing on working with and for women. With this vision, the matter of funds was secondary for her, because the ultimate goal has been to promote the principle of collectivity and independence in women leaders.

In this journey, one lesson consisted of being clear about their rights as indigenous women as such knowledge remains to be shared, owned, and assumed by them. The Leadership School opened a door for her to move forward and identify other paths, break down barriers, and open up new possibilities for the women of her town and region.

## Dreams and challenges

From her point of view, dreams represent possible ideals to be achieved, if they become purposes to be fulfilled at specific times to make them come true. She hopes that one day her struggle and that of the Indigenous Leaders will be worth it, so that women, children, and the young and old are free to decide their own future. She dreams of a people free of violence, exercising their rights, and passing this on from generation to generation.

She is convinced that to this end it is necessary to pass her experience or insights on to others, so she has started sharing her experiences and knowledge as a leader with her children, and also with the young people who are working with her; socializing their lessons learned so that they become knowledge multipliers for others. She is always accompanied by some of them in the meetings as she tries to get them to interact with others, ensuring that when she participates they can listen to her,

and later she facilitates a space for them to share their point of view, thus coming to know their level of understanding of what they heard and observed.

She asserts the need for more young people to feel motivated and be sure of the fight for their rights. It is time for adults to delegate spaces for youth to lead, guide their actions, give them an important role, and encourage them to be on the front line. In her own words, she explains:

*“Older people must provide a space for the younger generation to lead, and older people must be there to ensure that **young people can stand up for themselves**”.*

Khesheli’s leadership is a window open to the encounter of possibilities for change, from a perspective of self-recognition, of the reunion with her Sümi Naga identity, which has given her strength and wisdom to challenge the

oppressive system that has violated the rights of her people and indigenous women; who, just like her, have endured inequality and violence with courage and tenacity.

Her story asserts that knowledge is comprised of tools and instruments for the defense of their rights, which become truths when they are useful and applied in favor of a group without causing contradiction; instead, they strengthen their values and principles of life. She represents a life of struggle, perseverance, and loyalty to what being and doing leadership means.





# Shannon Massar



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*The indigenous woman is connected to the culture, tradition, and land. She is a guardian of knowledge, of their own culture and tradition.*

The Khasi people are settled in a territory that concentrates ancient wisdom, spirituality, and strength as an essence that adorns the identity that gives meaning to Shannon's life and story, an indigenous woman who represents the feminine side that their culture recognizes as a giver of life for a useful existence.

She was born in the city of Shillong, Maghalaya, in northeast India, located in the mountains and surrounded by hills representing the main wealth of their lands, which gives meaning to her name: home to the clouds. She completed a Master's degree in Social Work at the University of Mumbai, a profession that has opened up an opportunity for her to serve women and youth organizations. At 35 years

of age, she is a leader willing to continue her struggle so that young people assume their ethnic identity as a principle of life.

She is the founder and director of Faith Foundation, a foundation that works with women, youth, children, and especially girls in cases related to substance abuse, HIV/AIDS, human trafficking for sexual exploitation, and child sexual abuse. She addresses the main causes of this problem at the level of prevention in grassroots communities.

During her childhood, she lived in a city where she had services, resources, and means of communication, conditions to study and have a relatively comfortable life. However, she



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was far from people in the villages, which meant having no connection with life. In this period, her grandfather played a very important role. She always taught her about animals, plants, and the planet, which made her feel close to nature despite living outside the communities. In this regard, she explains:

*“I think that I was very independent as a child. I am someone who takes risks and explores. I completed my master’s degree in social work. Working for the people was all I ever wanted to do”.*

## Leadership as a mission for change from the indigenous women’s perspective

Leadership is an action in favor of or for benefit of a group. From Shannon’s point of view, it arises and develops in the face of a specific situation in which she needs to guide, accompany, and guide to change or transform it.

Upon completing her master’s degree in Social Work, she joined an organization engaged in issues on human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation, where she worked in the rescue and rehabilitation of women and children who were experiencing this problem that takes place from the north to the interior part of the provinces. Realizing how this phenomenon grew and strongly

affected the most vulnerable population cause her to return to the communities and deal with that situation, thus contributing to the analysis of the causes of this phenomenon and their prevention.

Working in the province represented a new path; understanding the need that people were going through was something totally different; seeing the reality of social inequality and exclusion in which women and children were living was very shocking. This experience allowed her to affirm that Indigenous Peoples are rights-holders and the role of the State is to create conditions to enforce them. In her words, she states:

*“When I started working for the community I did not know that as Indigenous people they have rights, but that they are not enforced”.*

In the development of her leadership, having the company and guidance of other people whom she considers her allies has been important. She has been supported by her mother and husband who have helped her a lot with work and housework, and with this have the possibility of dedicating herself to work in the province.

She has been able to identify indigenous women who are her example to follow, who have taught her with their lives the way to go and how to remain firm in her work conviction. She recognizes Sandra Creamer and Tia Oros. She admires them for their strength and perseverance in maintaining a fight to defend the rights of their people. In this regard, she explains:

*“When I went to the World Indigenous Legal Conference in 2014, I began to understand the work I needed to do and I met many indigenous women who motivated and encouraged me”.*

The way her leadership has been woven together has given her opportunities to identify sectors with which she energetically feels connection and harmony to support them, thus focusing on children, especially girls, due to their vulnerability in the unequal situation they are going through. Likewise, she has chosen to work in schools with adults, parents, and students on the issue of sexual abuse, regarding the impacts and causes that this problem generates for the victims and their families.

She has been contributing to ensure women’s economic subsistence, the promotion of traditional forms of agroecology and agriculture to protect the land; and at the same time, to provide them with resources, thus encouraging them to exchange the ancestral



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knowledge available to the community. Another important contribution is the passing on of intergenerational knowledge, a space that allows older women's knowledge to reach young women so that it becomes a thread of knowledge that must be maintained and replicated.

Through her community work, she identified that the Khasi people have a matrilineal-origin system, that is, the family bond comes from the mother, while the father is the one who assumes the role of provider and the woman is responsible for taking care of the household goods, but she cannot make decisions about them. She believes that this system continues being patriarchal by nature, but she can

encourage women to use this role to change this reality.

For her, it is important to reclaim the values that give meaning to authority, such as wisdom, solidarity, and balance, which she learned from her grandfather and mother. An important and relevant element to reclaim from her Khasi people, in order to explain feminine energy, is that the names of inanimate things are of masculine gender, but change to feminine gender when they become useful; for example, "wood" is a masculine word, but "table" is feminine. This is how the feminine has strength and value. It is a life philosophy that can be reinterpreted in a strict sense and assumed by women, men, the elderly, youth,

and children in the communities, and relate it to leadership and power, which is linked to women and their feminine energy.

## Leadership School: a learning space

Shannon is always looking for new ideas to move forward in her work and continue supporting the communities. For this reason, she applied to the Leadership School, considering that her leadership required new tools from the perspective of indigenous women's rights. It was one of her main motivations to participate.

Being part of the Global School represented a significant experience. It was exciting because it opened doors for her to understand Indigenous issues, as well as to channel what she was doing up to that time in favor of the women and girls with whom she worked, most of them indigenous. With satisfaction, she states:

*"It was a completely new and another-level experience that helped me to strengthen the work that I do".*

Participating in all the sessions allowed her to experience the strength of the participating leaders, who motivated her to do a better job. It was an opportunity for them to share challenges as Indigenous people from all over the world.

The process of formulating the advocacy plan allowed her to understand that advocacy is a strategy to analyze problems and identify lines of action to minimize their possible

effects on those who experience them, or at best transform reality in favor of the affected population.

Bringing up actions for her proposal was extremely challenging. It became a personal challenge that she turned into a collective one when she implemented it. Her topic was "Advocacy to prevent sexual and gender-based violence against Khasi girls and young women," to prevent gender-based violence in matrilineal/patrilineal society at the local level, as a growing problem among her people, to which the State does not pay attention.

The implementation of the plan was a challenge as it was a sensitive issue revealing a latent reality, but it was not recognized and even less denounced. With the support of the IWF, they worked for 7 months, which implied valuable learning through advocacy and the importance of addressing a problem that affected many women and girls. With concern, she states:

*"The experience of formulating and executing the plan was a starting point for us. The IWF grant also allowed us to do a better job on it".*

Shannon's experience regarding the advocacy process is a way of providing visibility to how knowledge becomes an instrument of change and improvement when the reality is understood and approached objectively. All this resulted in contributions for the sectors with which she has been supporting since the beginning of her leadership. She took advantage of the availability of the population, who demonstrated their potential to contribute with ideas to leave behind their problems and



©FIMI. Shannon M., Cecilia R., Khesheli C. and Isabel C, during the regional capacity building program Asia, EGLMI, Gujarat, India.

recognize their contributions as a sector in favor of the development of their provinces. Having been part of the Global School allowed her to learn about the importance of establishing links and alliances to achieve planned actions. She appreciates the support of the IIFW, which from the beginning has believed in the work of the foundation in favor of women. In her own words, she states:

*“The IIFW has supported us whenever we’ve needed it, through aids and funds, and they have always been there recognizing our work”.*

It implied traveling a new path through which the knowledge she acquired became opportunities to continue growing and helping other people. It represented an opportunity to learn about indigenous women’s rights, consolidating her interest in supporting those who are victims of violence and discrimination, with clear, precise, and concrete foundations regarding defense and complaint mechanisms against the various violations that they experience.

As an insight, she asserts that advocacy can be achieved to the extent that collective efforts are made. It is a process that cannot be done without the participation and involvement of various sectors and actors who can contribute from their space and resources to achieve the goals.

## Individual and collective dreams

Part of her journey as a leader has involved changes, which have been an opportunity to grow and develop. For her, dreams can be achieved; they are goals that can be met in the medium or long term, for which it is necessary to continue striving and working responsibly.

Her main dream is to get more young women involved so that they can be empowered to break the cycle of violence, as well as to promote young leaders so that they can deal with community problems and thus create networks and collective groups with the participation of youth in the search for alternative solutions to the various problems they are dealing with. A personal dream is to work harder to study and obtain additional education to get the resources so that her family may have the conditions to contribute to the collective work. She states:

*“I need to equip myself with the knowledge to strengthen my work and the organization to move forward”.*

Therefore, she is committed to passing her knowledge and experiences on to the Faith Foundation, which means faith and represents the meaning that drives her mission of support, that is why passing on what she learned at the Global School is very important. To give continuity to her leadership mission, she is sharing her experience with three young women, encouraging their training so they can participate in organizational and advocacy spaces.

Knowing the journey of Shannon’s leadership is like opening a door in which a wide, flat, and white path is visualized, through which she has left footprints with strong and sure steps on the earth that supports her. It has been an approach to the Khasi culture’s



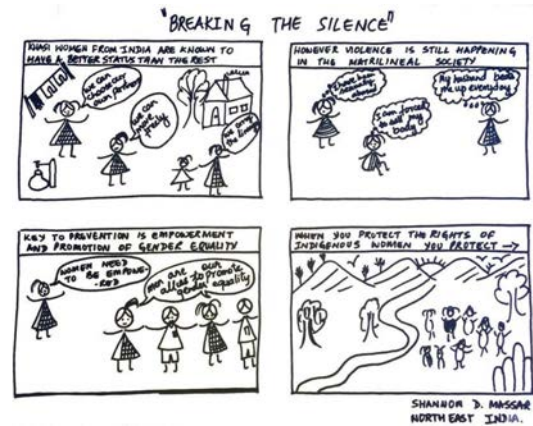
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©FIMI. Opening of activities, GLSIW Asia regional capacity building program. Gujarat City, India.

values and principles, of which she takes what she considers useful to move forward and continue sowing seeds in the lives of women and young people.

Her story allows us to understand how her training at the Global School became a way of learning about her rights as an indigenous woman and vindicate them for herself and other women who experience violence and need to get ahead. Her strength and determination are a life lesson that shows how women's energy is like a chain of knowledge and experiences that together contribute to their development.







**Life stories:**  
**INDIGENOUS LEADERS**  
**FROM LATIN AMERICA**

# Gilma Luz Román Lozano



©FIMI. Photograph provided by Gilma Luz Román, Uítoto, Colombia, the participant of the 1st edition, GLSIW.

*“We are shapers of being, which means creating all that ancestral knowledge within the framework of balance, within a culture, within a spirituality, within our people”.*

Adding color to Gilma’s story allows us to understand why her lineage — she being a descendant of the Uítoto clan— gave her the name Ocabaina, which gives identity, and the symbol of the Totem as part of its spirituality.

She is from Puerto Santander, a departmental regiment of the Amazons in southern Colombia. Gilma Luz grew up in the town of Uítoto, whose culture and worldview are based on an origin myth that states that they emerged from a hole located in the La Chorrera region and that one of the gods, Moma, chose this place because it was the channel through which the earth breathed. She is a member of the Organization of the Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC for its acronym in Spanish) and completed studies

for a Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology and Pedagogy.

She remembers that she had the opportunity to see the production of rubber and tiger skins, a period when it was considered a treasure. Later, illegal mining began, and consequently, territories were invaded by Brazilian miners, resulting in a large amount of forced displacement. Also, within the context of the armed conflict, a new factor that violated the territory rights emerged: drug trafficking, which had serious consequences affecting the people of her community. As a result, all of the families organized to protect children from prostitution and the youth from drug addiction.

Children only studied until the fifth grade of primary school; however, Gilma finished her primary level successfully. Then, she moved to another department to continue studying and once she completed her studies, she joined the Organization of the Indigenous Peasant Movement (OMIC, for its acronym in Spanish), a space where she was trained on political issues. She currently has a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and Pedagogy. She is also part of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (OPIAC, for its acronym in Spanish). She learned about the cultural knowledge, practices, and traditions of her people from her grandparents and parents, from whom she also inherited the values and principles as a Uitoto woman, of which she feels very proud.

During her youth, she worked in the Colombian Amazon region, an opportunity that allowed her to learn about the economic and social inequality conditions that caused harm to indigenous women, as well as to identify some cultural practices that affected them, which she considered necessary to change. For her, realizing the effects of forced displacement on children and youth and the absence of public policies that should change this reality led her to continue working to vindicate women's role, which she continues doing to this day.

## Exercise leadership as a guarantee for Human Rights defense

For Gilma, Human Rights defense is a political action deeply linked to the exercise of leadership, since it is the basis for the exercise of the rights of all women and all peoples. She asserted this action when she began her university studies as she realized that Indigenous Peoples could not meet the requirements demanded by the university for enrollment. Consequently, she promoted the unification of all university students in the country so that special vacancies were granted in different study centers, thus achieving the creation of a decree that ensured access to higher education for Indigenous Peoples at the National University.

In conjunction with the ONIC leadership as an indigenous movement, Decree 004 in the area of Human Rights and Decree 092 in the area of women were created pursuant to an order of the Constitutional Court. The decree consists of a program to guarantee the indigenous women's Human Rights in displacement situations. Regarding her leadership actions, she has participated in



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great struggles through marches, demanding health and education issues from the State, especially to vindicate the role of women and increase their participation and empowerment at the local and regional levels. The latter has been a difficult struggle. In this regard, Gilma states:

*“Here, in the Colombian Amazon, a decree was made, a legal instrument to protect uncontacted Indigenous Peoples so that they not be bothered and not have risks of threats; the whole issue of local governments in the Indigenous territory was also achieved”.*

Gilma’s tireless work is reflected in what they have managed to do as an organization, demanding the State to comply with their obligation and responsibility of being a guarantor of their people’s rights. She recognizes that her achievements in the exercise of her leadership — working together with her organization— has been possible thanks to the male and female allies, such as the women’s organizations and networks with whom they share common objectives, including the Regional Indigenous Council of Middle Amazonas (CRIMA for its acronym in Spanish), which represents the founding organization of the indigenous movement in Colombia.

From the bottom of her heart, she appreciates the support of great leaders such as Rosalba Jiménez, Rosa Iguaran, and other fellow leaders who are no longer there but have left Mother Earth to become air and light. She remembers Leonor Salabata, who represents

teachings and wisdom in her life to sustain herself and stay at the forefront of the rights defense processes for the peoples’ good living. At the international level, she mentions Eva Gambo, whom she has followed because of her life path and struggle.

With commitment and responsibility, her leadership is focused on two sectors of the Uitoto people: children and women, since despite the conditions of inequality in which they live they continue enduring and moving forward with strong steps, generating changes from the community for the people’s benefit.

Respectful and proud of her Indigenous origin, she shares the representative value of authority, a tangible symbol of culture based on the Mambe Lambil and represented in the sweet yucca. From that life philosophy, each one assumes their roles, focused on education and formation of the being, as a guideline for the upbringing and passing on knowledge. In this practice, assuming responsibility according to the roles of each one within the community is very important.

Also, from this viewpoint, a Cacique cannot be an authority if he does not have the balance of the feminine being, since he transfers the values of respect, tolerance, love, and peace through his example. However, she states with concern that the arrival of religions in her territory has resulted in a rupture in this community fabric, and the role of women has become subordinated. For this reason, she continues to promoting their reclamation so that women and youth maintain their authority.

Given Gilma’s great commitment to be part of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon, and to contribute her experiences to the coordinators of the women’s committee at the level of the 65 Indigenous Peoples, she submitted her application to the Global Leadership School, facilitated by the IWF.



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## Leadership School: a space to provide visibility to indigenous women as guardians of the jungle

One of her main motivations for training is to return the knowledge obtained to the women leaders because they cannot acquire it due to the distance from their communities and the lack of access to these spaces. For this reason, to become the bearer of new insights and tools, she undertook her training to support their role as guardians of the jungle, which means strengthening the source of teaching and life that they represent from their woman and mother being. From

the chagra, the place where they meet with their children for passing on knowledge, she builds a cultural pedagogy to teach new generations the importance of preserving culture and protecting the environment. The Amazonian indigenous woman becomes the life project builder of each Amazonian people in Colombia. About this, Gilma states:

*"I decided to participate because we work for the empowerment of women at the local level, and being part of the IIFW's school, opened international spaces for us to let our voices be heard".*



©FIMI. Fotografía proporcionada por la participante Aehshatou Manu.

Her participation in the Global School allowed her to develop very significant experiences, among which were getting to know the struggles of indigenous women from other countries, especially their form of organization, such as the case of Mexico, Guatemala, Central America, and South America, with which she confirmed the importance of establishing alliances between women leaders and movements. For her, it was valuable to know the process of filing complaints about violations of rights, since, in most cases, women do not know how to direct processes in international spaces, such as the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Likewise, she values and recognizes that these spaces have been the result of the political advocacy of other indigenous women leaders, in addition to the great challenges they deal with as a lesson in life.

As a post-school experience, being part of a process of analysis and definition of criteria

to evaluate a project was something very instructive in her professional life. It led her to decide to work at the local level directly in the communities, with more tangible actions that allow her to closely see the different realities that women are experiencing and, mainly, their changes.

Her time at the Global School also gave her the opportunity to understand more clearly that advocacy goes beyond the implementation of actions. The most important thing is that these involve concrete changes in people's lives. In addition, having written and formulated the advocacy plan was one of the significant processes in her training. In this regard, she states:

*“For me, it has been positive because we are provided with the guidelines on how to formulate a project, as it is not easy. In reality have an idea of how to advocate what we are doing because many times we have to give speeches, but writing it out is very difficult for us”.*

The advocacy plan formulated by Gilma responded to the defining of actions for differential attention to indigenous women of the Colombian Amazon who are victims of gender violence, so they have an intercultural model for the prevention and care of intrafamily violence that they experience daily. She has seen these problems up close, and that she hopes it will be minimized with the contribution of all the sectors and actors that must intervene in order to promote change.

She believes it is vitally important to promote coordination opportunities, both within their organizations and external spaces as it would facilitate the possibility of building bridges and collective alliances to strengthen the indigenous women’s leadership, to create support and solidarity networks in the development of change actions that contribute to exercise rights from the individual aspect and as part of their peoples.

Having been part of the Global School, she received her a variety of lessons, among which were: a better understanding of the construction of the Amazonian people’s identity, the role of indigenous women that

has been vital for the survival of Indigenous Peoples from the familiar to the community aspect; learning about biodiversity, the existing conventions, the rights of women, as well as the achievements made by women –for example, CEDAW and the Sustainable Development Goals— realizing that, as Amazonian women, they are working on their own economy at the local level by promoting their people’s ancestral arts.

Finally, she believes it is necessary to create a follow-up process with the leaders who are and have been part of the Global School in order to maintain the fabric of empowered women and make it increasingly stronger.

## Challenges and dreams in the fight for the voice of women to be acknowledged

Posing challenges is part of Gilma's being. She has always dealt with them since she began her organizational work and bet on supporting women. With a hopeful glance, she mentions that her individual dream is to spend much more time with her family, continue with her master's degree studies, and strengthen her knowledge to put them toward the service of women in very specific local processes with two associations in her municipality. She gladly comments:

*“My individual dream is to dedicate more time to my children, to my oldest son who grew up like this; spend more time with my 8-year-old girl and dedicate time to myself because I think I neglected many things with myself”.*

For her, the personal aspect leads to the collective aspect, which is why she believes that women's work in Indigenous movements is very hard. She asserts it is a great challenge due to the still prevailing patriarchal system and racism, causing the voice and decision-making spaces for women to be an uphill climb despite the progress achieved in terms of the law.

Gilma is aware that knowledge becomes alive to the extent that it is passed down, passed

on, and shared with other people, so now that she is close to a group of young people and the women's committee, with whom they have formulated project proposals, and she has been contributing her new knowledge and tools to support such proposals. This makes her feel useful, and she also knows that her experience can be used for the training of other leaders.

She also believes that assistance strategies should be created in conjunction with other women, breaking communication barriers, and establishing alliances from the community, regional, national, and international levels.

Gilma's leadership is a living example of how identity construction from her indigenous woman being is crossed by the demand for the acknowledgment of the voice, work, and presence of the Uitoto People's women. who, just like her, have been fighting since their youth. Her experiences and life leave valuable teachings on what it means to be a leader, and how strategic it is to have training spaces, from and with indigenous women, such as the Global School, which turned her into a woman warrior with new knowledge that she implements in her work with her groups of women and young people in her municipality.

Her life is an example of struggle and hopes to continue with strong and sure steps on wide and flat roads, just like the strength of the Amazon that she carries in her spirit and soul.



# Jessica Muller Muller



©FIMI. Jessica Muller and Cassandra Leealan, participants of the 3rd edition of the GLSIW.

*As an indigenous woman, I am a fighter, a dreamer, strong, with positive thinking. I fight daily so that my children, grandchildren, and great-grandchild may live a quiet and peaceful life*

Weaving Jessica Muller's story as a Miskito woman is to know the color-threaded network that makes up her life, which is traced by events that have marked her being and doing as a leader with the organized Wangki Tangni women.

As an indigenous woman, a life fighter, and a dreamer of changes for her family and people, she has a positive and entrepreneurial mind. She was born in San Juan de Río Coco in Honduras and lives in the Barrio Campesino, Waspam Rio Coco, Nicaragua, among the Miskito people. She is 33 years old and obtained a Bachelor of Sociology with a minor in Autonomy at URACAN University. She is a

member of the Wangki Tangni indigenous women's organization, which works for the indigenous women's empowerment regarding their rights and assessment processes for victims of violence. She is responsible for providing advice to women who have suffered violence. She is a technician and facilitator of training workshops on issues of capacity building and violence prevention with indigenous women of the municipality.

Desde niña, después del retorno de la guerra. When she was a child, after the war returned in the 1980s, her family moved to Honduras. During her childhood, she remembers closely witnessing human rights violations against



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her people and how her family had to fight daily to survive. Years later, she returned to Nicaragua where the struggle was the same since the inequality and injustice committed by the State against the peoples affected mostly women.

With sadness, she remembers how at that time women walked long distances to get water, cut and cleared the vegetation, while most of the men stayed at home and only came for the harvest or when it was necessary to cut down large trees. During her adolescence, her parents separated, so her mother was left in charge of her 6 siblings. Also, their few goods were left to her father, leaving their mother without land, without a house, and with the children under her responsibility.

These events had a significant impact on Jessica and prompted her to join the Wangki Tangni Indigenous women's organization at the age of 13, as well as work on promoting indigenous women's access to justice, health, and a piece of land for planting.

## Leadership as a mission to help women cope with violence

From the beginning, her leadership has focused on women, adolescents, and young people at the municipal and community levels, since she believes that these groups deal with the greatest inequality in their town, who are also victims of violence and are at greater risk.

For this reason, closely experiencing how violence affects women's lives led her to develop her leadership, which she conceives as a mission in life in the course of which she is born and rebuilt. In this regard, she explains:

*“My leadership began within the indigenous women's organization, organizing youth groups to raise awareness for the prevention of violence”.*

Working in human rights organizations and assisting women victims of domestic violence in her municipality allowed her to realize how important it is to have information and practical means available so that women can report and also deal with the justice system, which usually revictimizes them. With this, along with her organization, she promoted a route that facilitates access to justice with the assistance of women leaders to provide support regarding the violence prevention system.

Her leadership continued with the organization of young women diagnosed with HIV so that they can deal with their emotional and physical situation. In addition, she has undertaken

advocacy actions at the municipal and regional levels to improve the quality of life of women, youth, and adolescents. She is part of a program that promotes the prevention of violence and drugs in young people and adolescents in the municipality.

Jessica sees with satisfaction what she has achieved so far and recognizes that this is a collective process, in which she has counted on female and male allies, together with whom she has been able to move forward and do her part. Her mother has been her main ally and counselor since she was a victim of violence but has also been her inspiration in the struggle to improve their environment and reality; not only for themselves but for all of the women who experience the same problems in their community. One of her teachers along the way was Wangki Tangni, the executive director who guided and taught her how she should direct the area under her charge, as well as the support of the Alliance of indigenous women of Central America and Mexico, which endorsed her struggles and demands at the international level.

Rose Cunningham, an indigenous Miskita woman, has been her main role model and inspiration in her leadership mission; whom she considers an ancestor, from whom she learned everything she knows now.

She refers to her as her mentor and leadership role model. She also mentioned an adult and wise man who contributed to her leadership training.

As part of the Miskito people's culture, Jessica states that the authority system is based on Law 445 regarding territorial demarcation and titling, under which communities are organized, but in turn, each community and locality have their own rules and norms of organization and coexistence, that is why each leader and elder who directs within the community is the one who determines its principles. This is quite significant because it



©FIMI. Photograph provided by Jessica Muller, participant of the 3rd edition of the GLSIW.

represents the sense of leadership based on her people's values, which she tries to pass on and practice with women and youth.

## **The Global Leadership School: a resource for passing knowledge on to indigenous women**

A constant challenge for Jessica has been academic training and preparation since there

are few opportunities in her town to achieve it. For this reason, since she began her leadership, she has sought spaces in which she can acquire new knowledge.

One of her main motivations for applying to the Global Leadership School was to strengthen her knowledge mainly in the field of human rights, considering her need for passing on what has been learned to new generations, as well as the limitation of women trained on this issue. For her, it is a way of giving back what she has received in this period of her life as a principle of reciprocity. In own her words, she states:

*“I feel privileged to have been nominated for the Global School through the Alliance of Indigenous Women of Central America and Mexico and be endorsed by the Wangki Tangni indigenous women’s organization, which has represented a great commitment to women”.*

Having been part of the Global School was a great opportunity, in addition to the commitment assumed with the organizations that nominated her, which was one of the most important experiences. The fact of being able to acquire knowledge, and sharing it with colleagues from different countries, languages, practices, and such diverse cultural customs became a link and a network of brave indigenous women, which represents great value.

Drafting the advocacy plan represented a challenge for Jessica because she did not have much experience regarding it. Its preparation was a bit difficult; however, it was important for her to have the support and advice of the Global School coordinator. In this regard, she explains:

*“Cecilia was always supporting me in some things that I did not understand, that I was not able to define to draft the advocacy plan”.*

With modesty, she recognizes that advocacy is something that she does practice, but writing, formulating ideas and proposals to achieve a good advocacy action is still a pending task, a skill that she managed to strengthen as she attended the School.

Her plan addressed actions to improve assistance for indigenous women victims of gender violence in the municipality of Waspam in Nicaragua, with the Wangki Tangni women’s organization, with the aim that indigenous women from the seven territories of this municipality will have access to mechanisms for the prevention and care of violence, a problem that mostly affects women in the region.

In this experience, she recognizes the support of the indigenous women’s organization representative, who was her right hand in accessing the resources that allowed her to carry out the plan and thus achieve coordination with the community, regional, and municipal authorities.

At the community level, she promotes the coordination of indigenous women’s organizations in their localities with other nearby communities, strengthening them to link them at the municipal level.

It is evident that Jessica is a woman who gathers experiences and knowledge, that is why she shares with satisfaction that some of her contributions at the national level have been her participation at the work table for drafting Law 779, a very important contribution because she had the opportunity to position the issue of indigenous women’s rights and conditions as an important item to consider for achieving access to justice.

She comments that, in the past, there was a community law called the Calamana, which consisted of the fact that a man could rape a woman, but could pay for the rape he committed with an animal or with money.



Currently, that law no longer exists. If a rape is committed, the aggressor and the perpetrator must pay years in prison for this crime. This achievement is the result of the tireless work of women's organization leaders that continue empowering themselves. She has had the opportunity to coordinate some awareness-raising actions with Millaway women's organizations in Porto Cabezas and participate in a program to launch an awareness campaign called "Change now, just do it," working with young people and adolescents with more than eight communities of the municipality of Waspan Rio Coco. She also participated in a program called "Education for Success" that works on advocacy to improve the education and quality of life for girls, adolescents, and young people in the municipality of Waspam.

Jessica recognizes that going through the Leadership School left in her personal and

collective life a diverse sum of knowledge and learning, which she believes is an immense treasure, with which she has managed to reaffirm the importance of teamwork and advocacy to continue working jointly with other spaces, generating alliances among indigenous women and peoples, and change reality based on this perspective towards justice in the recognition of collective and individual rights.

## Challenges and dreams for a new dawn

From the beginning of her leadership and after she participated in the Global School, Jessica has experienced changes in herself and her collective life. She decided to get divorced when realized that she was experiencing

violence within her own home. She managed to discover that minimal things that did not appear to be violence were, in fact, a situation of domestic violence. In her own words, she states:

*“Today, I am a more proactive woman, with positive thoughts, with greater knowledge, and free of violence”.*

As for her work, she has greater knowledge and tools in the area of human rights, administration, and leadership management. Now she can work with groups of 30, 40, 50, and up to 100 people without difficulties in networking and organization. She sees herself as a person capable of participating in any environment and not being afraid of anything.

She has changed her way of seeing the world with a more positive outlook, firmly believing that when more people are working for social change it can be achieved. In her own words, she explains:

*“Keep building piece by piece with every word you say and wherever you go in order to make the most of your advocacy to achieve change”.*

For this reason, her main dream is to continue specializing in the subject of rights, attend the assignment of Human Rights in Geneva, and obtain more knowledge and tools to share them with women. From the collective point of view, her challenge is to continue building peace in her municipality; working together with women, young people, girls,

boys, teachers, authorities, institutions, and the State to achieve harmony, balance, and good quality of life for everyone, from the community to the municipal level; making people who think negatively realize that they are in the world to build rather than destroy.

To achieve these dreams and challenges, she believes that it is necessary to bet on training spaces where women and young people are strengthened through courses on Human Rights, environmental protection, the impact of climate change. and mechanisms for protecting the territory. Also, they need to participate in spaces at the international level to continue working on the defense of human rights and mother earth in our localities.

Moreover, she firmly believes in the importance of passing on her knowledge and wisdom as part of her leadership mission, that is why she is committed to passing on everything she knows to children, young adolescents, and women of the organizations, in order to build new knowledge together with them.

Jessica’s life as a Miskito woman has been about understanding the approach to her great challenges as a leader. It has been the gathering of the changes that have intersected in the different stages of her life, which show that strengthening the identity of being an indigenous woman involves reclaiming and practicing the values and principles of her culture and people, insofar as this allows her to exercise her specific and collective rights.

Her story is about going through a passage of struggle in defense and search for a life free from violence for her and other women, and of training opportunities and the acquisition of new knowledge know-how, such as from the Global Leadership School, opportunities which become a bridge of possibilities to shorten the path that women travel.

# Cecilia Ramírez Pérez



©FIMI. Cecilia Ramírez, GLSIW Coordinator, during the Africa regional capacity building program. City of Nairobi, Kenya

*Cecilia's story begins with the strength of her umbilical cord, which connected her existence to this earth and after her birth, it was planted under an agave plant known as "maguey". According to the Mixtec worldview, this rite means the physical and spiritual connection of a person with the earth, where they always return.*

She spent the first years of her life in a community located in the Mixtec region of Oaxaca, in the municipality of San Miguel el Grande, district of Tlaxiaco. When facing the fact that the Mixtec people have a long history of migration to the main cities, including the United States, it made her question the conditions that motivate people to migrate from their place of origin to a completely different one.

Within her nuclear family, Cecilia has two older sisters and two younger sisters. Since childhood, they all have stayed together until the present, supporting each other. For her

part, her mother always was interested in them to pursue their studies, despite the difficulties.

Therefore, each one of them assumed the responsibility of working and studying to have a career. She believes that her mother has been the main influence in her life decisions.

Some memories come to mind that she shares about her grandparents, who did not have the opportunity to attend school, although during her childhood there was a time in Mexico in which extensive literacy campaigns were created nationwide. They were peasants and also migrated seasonally to different places to



cultivate or trade, but they always returned.

Her mother was the only woman among several male siblings, who also had the privilege and access to study. However, due to her condition as a woman, her parents only provided her with elementary school, despite her wishes to continue studying. This fact was not fortuitous at that time, since those who did not take their children to elementary school had to be fined by the community authorities in case they did not fulfill their duty to provide elementary school education for all their children.

During her youth, she collaborated in an intercultural and bilingual program for Indigenous migrant children in Mexico City.

An experience that allowed her to strengthen her identity as a Mixtec, as well as having the opportunity to share with many children, who

are now young. As a result, they learned the different languages existing in Mexico and how to call them by name, because whenever they heard the elderly speak in other languages, according to their region, they referred to them as English. This as a consequence of the education system, which maintains a structure of colonial and racist content, which still prevails today. Later on, she had the opportunity to study and obtain a degree in Political Science and Public Administration at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. She is grateful and proud of that education because the public university was a space that gave her opportunities to learn and understand new challenges.



©FIMI. Closing of face-to-face activities of the 6th edition of the GLSIW. New York City.

## Being part of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women: an opportunity to learn and unlearn

Cecilia, as a woman who believes in bettering herself, continued strengthening her capacities and knowledge, which is why she was invited to participate in the Diploma Program for Strengthening Indigenous Women's Leadership, promoted by the Alliance of Indigenous Women of Central America and Mexico. There she met Dr. Mirna Cunningham, who invited her to do an internship at the IIFW and thus help out for a few months performing some tasks entrusted to her. As a result of her good work, she was asked to continue contributing to the IIFW mission in the training program. Currently, she is the coordinator of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women. She gladly shares:

*"This had been a dream I've wanted to achieve to strengthen the knowledge of indigenous women leaders".*

It has been a great achievement that allowed her to be part of a training process, accompanying women leaders around the world, who contribute effectively in global spaces, which have been maintained with much effort and struggle, such as the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.





In the same way, the implementation of the first edition of the school implied a lot of learning, observing, and listening to those who had coordinated these processes during that phase. The orientation and instruction of Mariana López, who coordinated the IIFW programs at that time were also important.

Under her guidance and with the participation of various allies, indigenous and non-indigenous leaders, they developed the different training contents, designed for women leaders from different peoples of the world. From her point of view, the school is not only a virtual training space with a presence at Columbia University for women leaders, but it has also made it possible to expand and articulate the IIFW to more organizations with local and national advocacy. It has been a meeting space for various women with different backgrounds, in which training is a point of intersection that

has united them, providing mechanisms to build bridges of solidarity among them.

For the participants, it is a one-of-a-kind meeting space, and for many of them it has been a watershed in their lives, marking a before and after, allowing them to understand their leadership in a broader dimension of space and to realize that their battles are not isolated, since they share things in common concerning the lack of recognition of their rights and the constant violation of them.

Cecilia acknowledges that the implementation of five editions of the School has made it easier for the IIFW to identify indigenous women leaders that have contributed with technical tasks within other processes as part of its mission, allowing them to put their abilities, knowledge, and experiences to the service of others, as well as be in contact with

other leaders in international and regional spaces, in which they have brought the voice of indigenous women with proposals and demands for the fulfillment of their specific and collective rights

She also recognizes that one of the challenges is to work remotely, link, and connect women leaders from various parts of the world to meet and share during two intense weeks in New York, which means a greater effort in terms of logistics, communication, and response to conditions according to the different contexts to which they belong. Actions from which they have learned, as well as other circumstances they have overcome such as language or internet access.

*“In a world of broad inequalities, I am inspired by all the women leaders who have participated in the IWF’s School. Without a doubt, after 5 editions I trust and believe in what I do”.*

In addition, she believes that the school has contributed minimally in providing them with tools that strengthen the indigenous leaders’ mission, from their communities, in their countries, and at a global level in their tireless struggle to position their rights to land, territory, health, education, peace and justice; the right to the continuity of their language and against discrimination, racism, and climate change in the first line of defense; and supporting them to continue working to build improvements from the local to the global level and vice versa, ensuring a good standard of living for their peoples. In her own words she says:

Today, for her, it is gratifying to have 40 life stories of indigenous women and leaders, in which it is possible to understand how the School strengthened, united, and gave them tools to continue effecting immediate and long-term changes. They are dealing with challenges to lead the progress of their Indigenous Peoples at a global level, from the community and national levels in their countries. From her experience, the Global Leadership School has always renewed its processes in each edition to improve its content and methodology, and thus respond to the conditions, interests, and identity of the participating leaders.

Cecilia’s life story has made it possible to understand, from the inside, a woman’s conviction of assuming a different identity, marked by shades of different colors, which add strength, empowerment, and wisdom to her leadership. It is a journey where she has met many indigenous women, who have shared lessons and insights with her through their own experience, and have strengthened their conviction to work with and for indigenous women in the demand of their specific and collective rights.

Now, as the coordinator of the Global Leadership School, she is aware of her mission in this process: to provide women with new learning opportunities from the International Indigenous Women’s Forum, a space for organization and advocacy at a global level, which makes it possible to plant seeds of additional knowledge and wisdom in each participating leader, who in turn will sow seeds in the lives of other women in their communities, provinces, and countries.

Cecilia is an example of an indigenous leader and professional woman, who, from her Mixtec being, integrates and balances her various roles with dedication, commitment, and determination.



## 5. CONCLUSIONS

*Through the stories told by indigenous leaders from different parts of the world, it was possible to learn about their struggles, insights, experiences, examples, conquests, successes, mistakes, and dreams. Figuratively, the threads of their lives weave a fabric of stories that describe a journey in the defense of their rights as women and ancestral peoples, allowing us to see how the project of the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women strengthened their leadership personally and collectively. The main conclusions about the 40 stories told are set forth below.*

## **Identity and origin, determining factors in the being of women leaders**

Their stories tell about the lives of women who assume different identities from the recognition of their being, integrality of values, principles, symbols, and elements that are part of the history, culture, knowledge, and ancestral practices of their peoples. They are creators, carriers, transmitters, protectors, and supporters of this set of values and life systems, based on worldview and spirituality, linked to divinity as something intangible but visible in people, the universe, and natural goods, which gives strength, power, and wisdom to the being of each person and their original Peoples.

The female being with whom each leader arrived on the earth plane is deeply intertwined with the earth, water, and natural resources; as givers of life, providers of everything that inhabits the universe; that is why, from their identity as women from different Peoples,

they conceive an intimate connection with everything that gives and nourishes the meaning of life in the universe, which has its origin in the ancestral roots that for centuries and generations have been transferred and inherited to them and their peoples, by their ancestors, grandmothers and grandfathers, wise men and women. From the transmission of cosmogony, science, philosophy, spirituality, knowledge, values, and practices, of which they are now part and that they also pass on to the new generations based on the culture of life.

The place of birth of each leader was based in territories and Peoples from Africa, Asia, the Arctic, Latin America, North America, and the Pacific, regions of the world inhabited by ancestral Peoples, with diverse cultures, languages, knowledge, and rich biodiversity, which have given sustenance to their



existence; territories with history and realities that have directed the life of each one of them, and today are being strongly threatened by the impacts of climate change.

## Decisive relevant events in the lives of those women leaders

The stories and lives of women leaders have been influenced by events that intersect the impacts of racism, discrimination, exploitation, patriarchy, and exclusion; historical and current oppressions determined by the existence of monocultural and oppressive governments, which did not recognize (to date, in some countries, they are not yet recognized) the rights and identity

of indigenous peoples and women. As a result of these systems, they have been victims of wars, repression, displacement, historical and current dispossession; facts and history that they have to go through due to constant violence. They have survived in conditions of poverty, illiteracy, lack of basic public services, food insecurity, and poor health conditions. They have dealt with conflicts such as persecution and criminalization, human trafficking, exploitation of natural resources, and the dispossession and depredation of their territories.

These stories told about the strength, wisdom, and resilience of indigenous women dealing with these colonization actions from the spirituality and knowledge of their ancestors, families, and peoples. They showed how over the last 70 years, the number of women trained spiritually, energetically, humanly,

politically, and academically, in social and legal disciplines, has grown. With these tools, they have gained greater strength to care for, defend, and demand their rights as women and as Indigenous Peoples.

## Indigenous women's leadership: a banner of struggle and defense for life and rights

The women leaders' stories told about how leadership is understood and developed from the perspective of indigenous women, understood as a mission and a principle of life, which is transformed from individual actions to collective movements, which makes it possible to revitalize and contribute knowledge, capacities, abilities, and experiences in an intergenerational way, so that they can influence in an organized way in different areas against the situation of inequality and historical and current oppressions that women and peoples are

facing. Therefore, based on their experience, being a woman leader is a banner of struggle, power, and resistance in favor of life and the defense of her specific rights, such as the right to a life free of violence; the rights to political participation, education, comprehensive and integrative health; ownership and control of their own resources, so that their voices and proposals are heard and taken into account in public policies, plans, programs, projects, and budgets of the States.

Furthermore, in their leadership roles, they speak out about the demand for their collective rights, such as the right to own land, water; the right to live in their territories as owners and protectors of mother earth, and of all the natural assets that belong to it. To a large extent, the main demand of women leaders is their right to self-determination. It is that Peoples and communities choose and protect their territories and learn how to use the natural assets that derive from it. Their leadership proposes other alternatives, contrary to the invasion and exploitation of transnational companies. It is a life action turned into a political demand for the transformation of the reality that the States have imposed and forced them to maintain. However, with



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the strength and wisdom of their ancestral cultures, they have resisted and are willing to continue moving forward along wide, flat, and clean paths.

Today, leaders are contributing to the compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the enforcement of actions contained in the Beijing Platform for Action, including recommendations of these

international mechanisms that governments have committed to implement, but have failed to do so. Indigenous women leaders, as politically active subjects, are following up with these governments, promoting the inclusion of their approaches in the laws and government policies, in particular those referring to women and Indigenous Peoples.

## Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women: a gathering of knowledge

Women leaders have found that strengthening and building collective knowledge is synonymous with weaving learning and capacities, which provide their leadership with new tools and skills that they put at the service of other indigenous sisters and their Peoples. In their stories, they stated that having participated in the training process at the Global Leadership School represented an opportunity to grow, a place for a gathering of knowledge, learning, and wisdom. Fellowship through virtual and in-person sessions with sisters from different peoples of the world allowed them to understand and reaffirm the importance of their struggles and resistance in demanding a dignified life.

A training, learning, and unlearning process from and for indigenous women contains a deep meaning that strengthened their identity as indigenous women and leaders, which fortified their sense of collectivity, joint work, and coordinated support with other organizations and networks. This space also provided them with knowledge and management of international instruments, and the importance of their application for the defense and demand of their individual, specific, and collective rights as women and indigenous peoples.

They asserted that every advocacy action must be linked to the transformation of problematic issues experienced by indigenous women, their communities, and peoples on the assumption that this is a strategic tool to establish actions that respond to needs according to people's current circumstances, knowledge, and resources. For women, advocacy is synonymous with working together, making alliances, and building bridges of support: it means transforming issues into proposals and actions into the change towards a better standard of living.



## Challenges and dreams: a new cycle in the development of leadership

Today each woman leader who participated in the 5 editions of the Global School of Leadership asserts herself as a promoter and defender of individual, specific, and collective human rights. They continue demanding the fulfillment of their rights, but mainly, they suggest and carry out actions to exercise them from their different identities, latitudes, cultures, and contexts.

Dealing with the State is still a challenge, as well as strengthening their participation in political processes at the national, regional, and international levels to occupy positions of decision-making, in which they can advocate by promoting plans, public policies, and legislation in favor of indigenous peoples and women; contribute to the building of peace in their countries so that they may have a good quality of life as peoples; and continue encouraging generations of young leaders who have the strength, power, and wisdom to go keep fighting and not allow themselves to

continue losing their identity.

They dream of being free from violence in societies in which they can speak without being discriminated against for being indigenous women, as subjects and holders of collective and individual rights; living as autonomous Indigenous Peoples and with dignified treatment in all their areas of life; replacing fear with freedom, exchanging dependency for empowerment, replacing silence with a collective voice; achieving a world free of discrimination, where skin, gender, and any other form of discrimination is eradicated.

They are indigenous women leaders who designate themselves as multipliers of changes and transformations in order to dignify the lives of women and ancestral peoples. They are weavers of dreams and realities, transmitters of knowledge, know-how, vindications and struggles, from their being and actions with strength and determination.

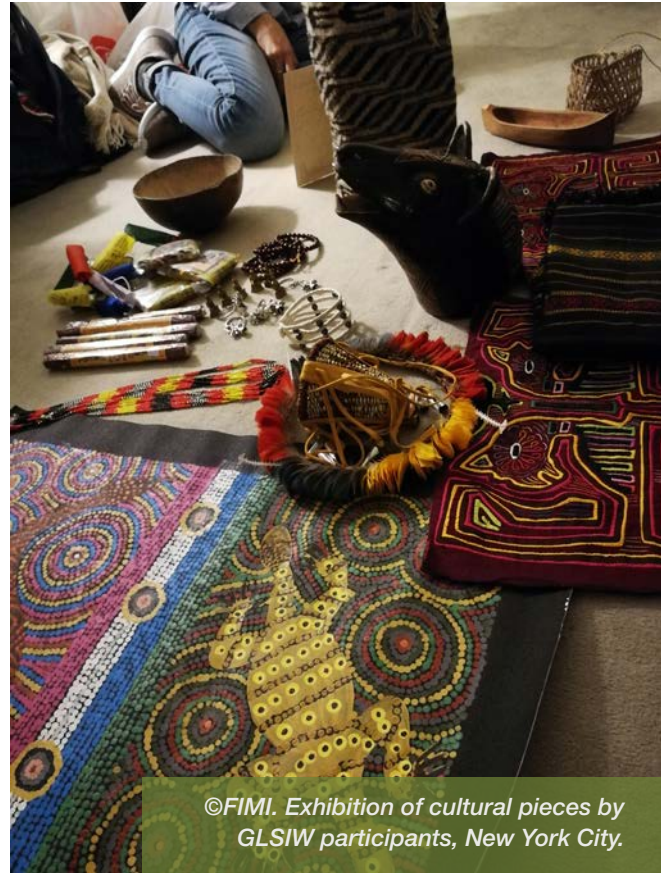


# 6. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to give a special and affectionate thanks those who have done the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women for five editions.

Our deep thanks to:

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- ◆ ***The Regional Networks that articulate for the existence of IIFW.***
- ◆ ***The organizations of indigenous women from the six sociocultural regions of the world for your persistence in the struggle of our rights.***



©FIMI. Exhibition of cultural pieces by GLSIW participants, New York City.

Thanks to all the participants for your cooperation, efforts, perseverance, endurance, wisdom, reciprocity, constancy, teachings, responsibility, commitment and conviction. For creating and recreating better worlds. Thank you for sharing your stories, for telling us your dreams, learning and entwining your hands among diverse cultures, invested with symbols and ancestral principles, that as leaders make alive with your implementation and by transmitting them to the current and new generations.

Thank you, ancestors. Thank you for your centuries of resistance.

***These stories are your harvest and also seeds for those who come.***





*“The Global School empowers women to take the voice of their communities to the international level, to influence the creation of public policies, which are later brought back to their communities so that they can advance their work.”*

**Dr. Myrna Cunningham, ideologist and advisor of the IWGLS**

*“I feel stronger knowing that I am not alone, that there are many (women) in the world fighting for the same goals.”*

**Rani Yan Yan, Marma, Bangladesh**

*“My leadership began with my participation in social movements and civil organizations when the armed conflict ended and I reached the legal age. Since that time, due to my minimal academic preparation, I know that I contributed with my grain of corn to society and have been accepted.”*

**Ana Ceto, Pueblo Ixil, Guatemala**

*“Being part of the School motivated me to share experiences and learn good practices among ourselves as indigenous women.”*

**Aeisatu Bouba, Mbororo, Cameroon**

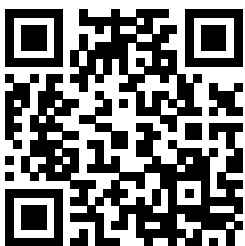
*“My mother could not go to school and her family allowed her to send her brothers, so my mother did not want to do the same and changed the course of history.”*

**Sreyniang Loek, Bunong, Cambodia**

*“Today I am recognized as a female leader of my community, and the older leaders and culture authorities, amid jokes and truth, tell me that I am the ambassador of Llaguepulli.”*

**Fresia Painefil, Mapuche, Chile.**

Global Leadership School of  
Indigenous Women eBooks



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