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**Guardians of Life:  
Making Sense of Gender Equality and Women's Activism  
Within Ecuador's Indigenous Movement**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Much attention has been paid to Indigenous gender ideologies and Indigenous women's political participation in Latin America. The construction of gender equality and its implications for Indigenous women's activism in Ecuador's Indigenous movement is, however, widely undiscovered terrain. The purpose of this qualitative case study of CONAIE was to address this gap and connect the dots by asking: How is gender equality constructed within the principal Indigenous confederation in Ecuador, CONAIE? In what ways does this understanding enable or restrict Indigenous women's political activism within CONAIE? As this study aims to explore women's activism, I mainly interviewed women. I shed light on these questions by using the theoretical framework of Indigenous feminism to stress the importance of situating Indigenous women's struggles within Indigenous worldview and the larger Indigenous struggle. The main results of this thesis indicated that dual complementarity is the guiding principle for the construction of gender equality within CONAIE, and that it is largely enabling Indigenous women's political activism in protests and ceremonies by emphasising the importance of practising complementarity for the IM's success and for establishing harmony in all aspects of life. Persisting patriarchal structures, however, stand in the way for applying this principle fully within the movement, resulting in restrictions of women's activism and the need for separate spaces for women.

**Key words:** Indigenous feminism, CONAIE, Indigenous movement, Ecuador, Gender equality, Women's activism, Dual complementarity, Buen Vivir

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**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

BV	Buen Vivir
CONAIE	Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas de Ecuador (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador)
ECUARUNARI	Ecuador Runakunapak Rikcharimuy (Confederation of Peoples of Kichwa Nationality of Ecuador)
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
IFT	Indigenous Feminist Theory
IM	Indigenous Movement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PFT	Postcolonial Feminist Theory
TGIWICR	‘Training Guide on Indigenous Women’s Individual and Collective Rights’

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

In order for a profound change of the inhumane patriarchal-capitalist system to take place, men, women, young people, adults and the elderly, need to join forces in the pursuit to construct a true anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist society which is founded upon *principles of life*: reciprocity, complementarity, duality, integrality, relationality and circularity. These principles make up the foundation of *Buen Vivir*; life in abundance<sup>1</sup> (CONAIE, 2016; emphasis added).

This statement was released by Ecuador's largest Indigenous confederation, CONAIE<sup>2</sup>, in relation to an Amazon women's march on International Women's Day this year. The march gathered women from seven Indigenous nationalities<sup>3</sup> that protested in Puyo under the slogans "Women's March for Life" and "Amazonian Women for the Jungle". The women took the opportunity raised by this day to manifest their resistance against oil companies that operate in their territories. Their signs read for instance: "Our territory is our life because we cultivate it to feed our children" and "We are willing to die for our jungle" (Carvajal 2016; Gímenez 2016).

The Women's March and the statement both raise many questions. CONAIE's emphasis on addressing gender inequality by promoting "principles of life" as well as the content of the Amazon women's protest on International Women's Day point to an understanding of gender equality that deviates from conventional feminist thought. It diverges particularly from Western liberal feminism predicated upon "competitive individualism" and opening opportunities for women through free market forces (Verbos and Humphries, 2012:507). Moreover, Huhndorf and Suzack (2010) and Anderson (2010) argue that liberal feminism's emphasis on individual autonomy and rights rather than responsibilities towards other human beings and nature is incompatible with Indigenous values. In fact, there is often a clash between liberal feminism and Indigenous collective worldviews. On one hand, studies show

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by the author of this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> CONAIE has been at the forefront of Indigenous struggles in Ecuador for the last three decades. Together with its regional affiliates Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of the Ecuadorian Amazon (CONFENAIE); Confederation of Peoples of Kichwa Nationality of Ecuador (ECUARUNARI); and Coordination of Indigenous and Black Organisations of the Ecuadorian Coast (CONAICE), CONAIE constitutes Ecuador's principal Indigenous confederation as it represents all 14 nationalities and 18 peoples in the country. See chapter 2 for further details.

<sup>3</sup> The women belong to the nationalities Kichwa, Shiwiar, Shuar, Achuar, Waorani, Sapara and Andoa.



that Indigenous societies commonly reject the term feminism as a Western and Eurocentric imposition (see Pequeño, 2009; Lorente, 2005). On the other hand liberal feminist theory often dismisses Indigenous notions of gender equality, as it is unwilling to take into consideration culture-specific demands rooted in collectiveness (Duarte, 2012). However, the debate is much more complex and highly important to expand on as the understanding of gender equality has effects on women's participation within the Indigenous movement.

Scholars such as Herrera (2001:42) have pointed out a void in academia around Indigenous women's political participation. Pequeño (2009) argues that the scarce literature that does exist on Indigenous women's political participation in Latin America has mainly focused on three areas: Indigenous women's leadership (Prieto et al., 2005; Molyneux, 2008), the tensions in relation to feminist movements, and Indigenous women's organisational processes and politics stemming from issues of ethnic identities and gender. Moreover, some studies have also focused on Andean Indigenous gender ideology (See Burman, 2011; Herencia, 2006; MacLean, 2014; Radcliffe and Andolina, 2004; Webb, 2012). Although Pequeño (2007) and Safa (2008) both combine Indigenous women's participation and gender ideology to some extent by exploring Ecuadorian Indigenous women's claims as rooted in cultural norms and consequent assigned roles, there is a research void in terms of a deeper understanding of where Ecuador's Indigenous movement's construction of gender equality stems from and how it is articulated, as well as the consequent effect of such a construction on women's activism within the movement. This thesis seeks to address this gap. The current second Indigenous uprising<sup>4</sup> in Ecuador and the signs of women taking up increasing space within it provides a significant opportunity to explore such implications.

### **1.1 Purpose and Research Questions**

I find it essential to unravel the complexity of how gender equality is constructed within the movement, in order to be able to explore its implications for Indigenous women's political activism. The purpose of this thesis is thus twofold; to explore (1) how gender equality is constructed within Ecuador's principal Indigenous confederation and (2) its impact on Indigenous women's political activism.

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<sup>4</sup> This will be explained in further detail in the second chapter (section 2.1).

With this context in mind, this study will aim to answer the following research questions:

- *How is gender equality constructed within the principal Indigenous confederation in Ecuador, CONAIE?*
- *In what ways does this understanding enable or restrict Indigenous women's political activism within CONAIE?*

With this study, I aspire to expand the understanding of Indigenous women's activism within Ecuador's Indigenous movement. Moreover, I hope to contribute to the scarce research on Indigenous women's activism and roles within the wider context of the struggles of ethno-political movements in Latin America.

Rather than defining gender equality by myself, I wish to examine its construction by exploring the prevailing understanding and articulation of gender equality within CONAIE. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study I define Indigenous women's political activism as women's political participation and actions carried out with the aim to support the Indigenous cause. With this study, I aspire to expand the understanding of Indigenous women's activism within Ecuador's Indigenous movement (IM) and contribute to the scarce research on Indigenous women's activism and roles within the wider context of the struggles of ethno-political movements.

## **1.2 Delimitations**

Although Afro-Ecuadorian peoples are considered by CONAIE as ancestral peoples and form part of the third regional organisation under CONAIE's umbrella, CONAICE, time and scope constraints does not allow for the study to include the Afro- Ecuadorian community. This choice is further justified by the fact that the Sierra and Amazon regions are home to the majority of Ecuador's Indigenous peoples (Zamosc, 1994). Due to the mentioned constraints, I will also not expand on what the understanding of gender equality implies for men's activism, as this thesis focuses on women's activism.

## **1.3 Thesis Outline**

Having outlined the purpose and research questions in chapter 1, I continue by situating the Indigenous movement in chapter 2. In chapter 3 I present Indigenous feminist theory. Chapter

4 outlines the methodological choices of this study. Chapter 5 and 6 present my interpretation of the construction of gender equality within the IM and its implications for Indigenous women's activism, respectively. Lastly, I discuss my concluding thoughts as well as suggestions for further research.

## **2. SETTING THE SCENE**

In this chapter, I situate the topic of this thesis by providing an overview of Indigenous peoples in Ecuador, followed by a description of the Indigenous movement (IM). I then zoom in on the movement's political proposal Buen Vivir (BV), and conclude by discussing Indigenous women's historical participation within the movement.

### **2.1 Indigenous Peoples in Ecuador**

Ecuador is home to 14 Indigenous nationalities<sup>5</sup> and 18 peoples (see Appendix 1 for ethnographic map). A correct estimate of the country's number of Indigenous peoples is difficult to come by due to varying definitions and political interests, resulting in ranging estimates from 7 to 40 per cent of Ecuador's population (Becker, 2011:48).

### **2.2 The Indigenous Movement**

Standing at the forefront of struggles for Indigenous rights for the last three decades, CONAIE makes up Ecuador's largest Indigenous confederation. It was founded in 1986 and gathers all the country's Indigenous nationalities and peoples in the struggle for political, social, economic and cultural justice (CONAIE, 2015). Although other organisations such as FENOCIN<sup>6</sup> also gather Indigenous peoples, they do not do so to CONAIE's extent. CONAIE is viewed as the most powerful Indigenous organisations on the continent as its mass mobilisations have led to the overthrow of several governments (Becker, 2011; Bowen, 2009; Jameson, 2011; Lind, 2005).

CONAIE gathers three regional organisations: ECUARUNARI, which represents the peoples of the Sierra (Andean highlands); CONFENIAE, that gathers peoples of the Amazonía

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<sup>5</sup> Shuar, Achuar, Shiwiar, Huaorani, Siona, Secoya, Cofán, Zápara, Kichwa (of the Highlands), Kichwa (of the Amazon), Awa, Epera, Chacha, and Tsa'chila.

<sup>6</sup> The National Confederation of Farmers', Indigenous-, and Black Organisations. (Original: "Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas, Indígenas, y Negras").

(lowlands); and CONAICE, the organisation that represents peoples of the Coast region. As the scope of this thesis is limited to CONAIE and its Sierra- and Amazon-organisations, I will from now on speak about ECUARUNARI and CONFENIAE as part of CONAIE by referring to all three organisations as the IM<sup>7</sup>.

In 1990, CONAIE and its local and regional grassroots organisations convoked the National Indigenous Uprising<sup>8</sup> by mobilising Indigenous peoples and small-farmers throughout the country. The IM's political struggles resulted in the 1998 declaration of Ecuador as a pluricultural and multi-ethnic country, but it was first in 2008 that the state endorsed a new constitution declaring Ecuador a plurinational state that fully recognises and promotes individual and collective rights of all Indigenous nationalities and peoples residing within the country's borders. Likewise, nature is given rights as a subject of its own (Altmann, 2015; Lupien, 2011).

**Text Box: CONAIE's Political Agenda<sup>9</sup>**

- Strengthen the Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador.
- Fight for the defence of Indigenous lands, territories and natural resources.
- Strengthen intercultural and bilingual education.
- Fight against colonialism and neo-colonialism (transnational companies in Indigenous communities).
- Promote communitarian legislation and develop comprehensive communitarianism.
- Strengthen communitarian organisation forms.
- Promote exercise of the collective rights of Indigenous Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador, as recognised in the Constitution of the Republic.
- Construct an intercultural society.
- Promote participation through the establishment of a participatory democracy, with the aim to achieve a decentralisation of power, economic resources, solidarity, and equity.
- Achieve equality and justice for Indigenous nationalities and peoples of Ecuador
- Maintain international relations with Indigenous nationalities of the continent, with the aim to enable alternative communication between Indigenous peoples.

*Source: CONAIE, 2015*

The acknowledgement of Indigenous philosophical foundation and diverse ways of life in the Constitution as well as in society opened up space for alternative political and economic proposals to take form. Morrisey (2009:495) argues that the IM embodies "a protest against

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<sup>7</sup> However, in cases where I discuss a particular aspect of either of the organisations, I will refer to them by their organization name.

<sup>8</sup> Original: "Levantamiento Nacional Indígena".

<sup>9</sup> Translated by the author of this thesis.

mainstream development by contesting its inability to include human, social, cultural, gender and ecological needs”.

### ***2.2.1 Buen Vivir: An Indigenous Alternative to Development***

Indigenous peoples of the Andean region propose Buen Vivir (BV) as an alternative to mainstream development, predicated upon unrestricted economic growth. BV marks a rupture with conventional development as it strongly criticises the current political, economic, social and spiritual systems and advocates for a shift of focus from the individual to the collective, arguing that development is a continuous process. However, the term in its original form<sup>10</sup> does not translate easily into English or Spanish and risks to lose some of its meaning outside of its cultural context. In academic writing, it is often roughly translated to *the good way of living*, or *the good life* (Huanacuni Mamani, 2010).

Advocates for BV argue that the individualistic focus of the capitalist model has contributed to political, economic and environmental crises. Solutions to these global problems are thus found in structural societal transformations that aim to change the ways in which we understand and view the world we live in (Huanacuni Mamani, 2010). By prioritising the well being of the collective and adopting a holistic view of the world, the BV-paradigm outlines a way of co-existing with all living forms on Earth, with equality constituting one of its cornerstones (Bremer, 2012; Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2014). BV transcends the focus on the ego by prioritising the well-being of the collective and a life in harmony with the environment and all beings on the planet (ibid).

### ***2.2.3 Indigenous Women’s Role within the Indigenous Movement***

Fine-Dare (2014) shows that limited political participation and influence over policies hinder Indigenous women in Ecuador from participation in society on an equal footing with men. This has also been the case in CONAIE, which has historically been male-dominated despite its many female members. Barriers to women’s participation have made it difficult for women to reach leadership positions (Picq, 2014), while simultaneously women’s contributions within the movement have been mainly rendered invisible both by the movement and Ecuadorian society as a whole (Pequeño, 2009). Likewise, scholars who studied the first

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<sup>10</sup> The original name of Buen Vivir is *Sumak Kawsay* in Kichwa (mostly spoken in Ecuador), and *Sumak Qamaña* in Aymara (mostly spoken in Bolivia).

Indigenous uprising in Ecuador omitted issues of gender and women's participation from their analyses to a high extent (Prieto et al., 2005:156).

Paradoxical as it may seem, considering the account above, Indigenous women's contributions to the struggle for economic, social and cultural rights for Ecuador's multitude of Indigenous peoples have not always been hindered or rendered invisible. In fact, Indigenous women have a long history of occupying central roles as leaders in struggles for equality and justice in peasant- and labour movements in the 1930-1960s (McCloud, 2006; Fine-Dare, 2014). Becker (2008:8) argues that "recogni[s]ing the central role of women as not exceptional but rather characteristic of Indigenous movements is key to understanding the development of popular movements in Ecuador". Dolores Cacuango and Tránsito Amaguaña who laid the foundation for the IM today best exemplify this central role. These leaders led a great peasant strike in 1931 and a decade later established Ecuador's first Indigenous organisation, the Indian Federation of Ecuador (Picq, 2014:96). However, the efforts of a large number of women who have walked in their footsteps have been systematically downplayed throughout history. In a recent study, Picq (2014) argues that as Indigenous struggles became incorporated into Ecuadorian politics in the 1990s, women were omitted from identity politics.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

When departing from the belief that women's specific issues stem from patriarchal structures, as CONAIE evidently does in the opening quote<sup>11</sup> of this thesis, we often seek answers within feminist theory. But considering the commonly posed objection to feminism by Indigenous communities, the question is: can we truly use feminist theory when analysing Indigenous women's particular circumstances? In this chapter, I answer this question by briefly turning to postcolonial feminist theory to frame the theoretical discussion. I then proceed to explain the core ideas and practices within Indigenous feminist theory and discuss the relationship between Indigenous worldviews and gender. Lastly, I conclude this chapter by presenting an analytical model based on two categories derived from Indigenous feminist theory.

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<sup>11</sup> In order for a profound change of the inhumane patriarchal-capitalist system to take place, men, women, young people, adults and the elderly, need to join forces in the pursuit to construct a true anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist society which is founded upon principles of life: reciprocity, complementarity, duality, integrality, relationality and circularity. These principles make up the foundation of Buen Vivir; life in abundance (CONAIE, 2016; emphasis added).

### 3.1 Postcolonial Feminist Theory: A Critical Response to Mainstream Feminism

IFT builds on postcolonial feminist theory, which aims strong criticism at Western feminisms' assumption of a homogenous group of 'Third World-women'. Postcolonial feminist scholars such as Lorde (1984), Mohanty (1984; 2003)<sup>12</sup>, hooks (1984; 1992), Spivak (1988) and Davis (1982) argue that by presupposing that Western women's experiences can be applied universally, mainstream feminist<sup>13</sup> writings have rendered it impossible to see that the lives of women in the postcolonial world are marked by the interaction of various oppressive structures. Against this backdrop, Mohanty (2003:17) calls for "deconstructing and dismantling" dominant feminist discourses and for "building and constructing" new strands of feminism located within local histories and cultures. This allows for the deconstruction of the Western feminist paradigm in which experiences and voices of women of colour, including Indigenous women, have been appropriated by others who do not share their experiences. Mohanty's call ties strongly into Indigenous traditions of challenging colonial ideas and practices to liberate their peoples from colonial legacy. It is from these notions we depart when delving into Indigenous feminism: a turn in feminist theory that has grown rapidly in the past decade.

### 3.2 Indigenous Feminist Theory: Answering the Postcolonial Feminist Call

In line with PFT, Indigenous feminist theory<sup>14</sup> (IFT) has emerged within a critique of what is deemed as mainstream feminism's self-taken right to define feminism. Mohanty's call is answered in two of the most prominent scholarly contributions to the field: *Indigenous Women and Feminism* (Suzack et al., 2010) and *Making space for Indigenous Feminism* (Green, 2007). Both works<sup>15</sup> gather Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars who dismiss the Eurocentric assumptions that inform Western mainstream feminisms and make a strong case for the necessity of having a feminism that takes into account the particular issues that Indigenous women worldwide face, both within and outside of their communities.

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<sup>12</sup> See 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' and *Feminism without Borders*, respectively. Although not everyone agrees that Mohanty should be read as a postcolonial feminist, I have chosen to include her ideas in this section as they are considered to resonate with the postcolonial feminist debate. This is evident from the fact that her work, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", originally published in 1984, was included in a revised version in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (Lewis and Mills, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> In this thesis, I use the term "mainstream feminism" to refer to liberal, Western-centred feminisms as defined in the introduction.

<sup>14</sup> Sometimes labelled as Native feminism, Aboriginal feminism, or Tribal feminism.

<sup>15</sup> Note that I am drawing mainly from North American Indigenous feminist scholars. Nevertheless, the ideas and themes presented in the theoretical discussion are largely applicable to Indigenous peoples in Ecuador too, as they share similar holistic worldviews and experiences of colonialism.

Likewise, Anderson (2000), Smith (2005), Mihesuah (2003), and Smith and Kauanui (2008) have contributed with an Indigenous feminist perspective on issues of identity, Indigenous politics, political leadership, sexism, law and violence.<sup>16</sup> The need for a specific Indigenous feminism has also been advocated by Indigenous feminist scholars who have acknowledged that the majority of scholars in the field of Native Studies have historically ignored issues of gender in favour of addressing issues of racism and Native nation-making. Since Indigenous women are subjected to racism and sexism simultaneously, Ramirez (2008) argues that this misguided focus has rendered gender issues invisible in both academia and within Indigenous communities. Furthermore, Ramirez (ibid:305) writes about how crucial it is to take into account and stress the interconnectedness between "various axes of exclusion", such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality and nation. By identifying intersecting oppressions that Indigenous women worldwide face today, Indigenous feminist scholars seek to shed light on voices silenced by colonialism and racism. Sieder (2014:22) argues that Indigenous women worldwide are organising in a way that "challenges us to rethink existing feminist paradigms".

It is however important to consider the historically contentious relationship Indigenous peoples have with feminism. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the main reasons that Western mainstream feminism is commonly rejected by Indigenous communities is because it is seen as resting on liberal principles of individualism, thereby making it incompatible with the fundamental communitarian<sup>17</sup> element within Indigenous worldviews that underpins all aspects of life (Anderson, 2010). Mihesuah (2003:7) builds on this idea by pointing out the historical aspects of power and domination. Mihesuah explains that Indigenous women who believe that colonial ideology had a detrimental impact dismiss "white" feminist theory as it focuses on women who have enjoyed benefits derived from privileges they hold at the cost of the subordination of women of colour (ibid). The objection to feminism is thus more an objection to the imposition of a liberal ideology that ignores difference, rather than a rejection of feminist principles per se. This is why I choose to still use IFT as a theoretical framework.

Another controversy can be found in the argument laid forward by some Indigenous scholars

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<sup>16</sup> Although Indigenous feminist theory, according to Green (2007) also addresses how men have been affected by colonial ideology, this will not be included in the theoretical discussion due to the this study's focus on Indigenous women.

<sup>17</sup> Communitarianism is defined as the "social and political philosophy that emphasizes the importance of community in the functioning of political life, in the analysis and evaluation of political institutions, and in understanding human identity and well-being" (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016).



who argue that matters such as Indigenous sovereignty, nation-building, and decolonisation have primacy over clear-cut gender issues (Suzack et al., 2010; Jaimes-Guerrero, 1992)<sup>18</sup>. Proponents of such a focus contend that there is no need to address women's issues separately as their conditions will automatically improve as justice for Indigenous peoples as a whole is achieved (Anderson, 2010:85). But here lies a dilemma, as history has shown that gender issues continue to be neglected in many social justice movements (Bhattacharjya et al., 2014). Moreover, Green (2007) argues that the clash between feminism and Indigenous nationalism envisaged by such scholars between feminism and nationalism is false because one struggle does not need to exclude the other.

IFT comprises a broad number of issues and is not circumscribed to a single type of feminism. Yet, for the purpose of this study, I will not delve into specific orientations within the theory. Rather, I wish to focus on two main aspects of IFT: Indigenous feminist ideas and Indigenous women's struggles building on those ideas.

### **3.3 Indigenous Feminist Ideas**

In this section I discuss the key philosophical ideas discerned within IFT. These ideas are embedded within Indigenous ontology's holistic belief systems, constituting the point of departure for the emergence and conceptualisation of IFT.

#### ***3.3.1 Patriarchy as Colonial Imposition***

Although Indigenous peoples of the Americas<sup>19</sup> have highly diverse histories and cultures, they do, however, all share the devastating experience of colonialism. Moreover, Indigenous women regardless of ethnic origin or geographical location also share experiences of colonialism's impact on gender, thereby marking a distinction in how colonial intrusion into Indigenous lands has been experienced by Indigenous women and men, respectively. Many scholars (see Suzack et al., 2010; John, 2015; Tickner, 2015) build on this view by arguing that colonisation was accompanied by the imposition of Western gender roles and patriarchal social structures which changed gender relations forever and consequently the lives of Indigenous women in particular. Likewise, Tsosie (2010) argues that European colonising states systematically acknowledged male leaders only. By stripping away Indigenous

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<sup>18</sup> Jaimes-Guerrero (1992) has however changed her perception of feminism since this publication.

<sup>19</sup> The Americas refers to what we today know as the North, Central-, and South American states.

women's traditionally held authority within their societies as it challenged European male power (Cannella and Manuelito, 2008:48), colonisers reduced Indigenous women's power, status, and access to resources, leading to a complete transformation of Indigenous societies. While simultaneously exerting control over women's bodies through sexual violence, colonial powers were able to control and oppress Indigenous communities (Smith, 2003).

Anderson (2010:83) also argues that patriarchy embodies the "handmaiden" of colonisation, illustrated by the fact that one of the main bodies targeted by the colonial project throughout the Americas was the Indigenous family structure. The strong relations within extended families wherein women had considerable power and influence enabled Indigenous women to employ agency in "political, social, economic and spiritual" areas of society (ibid: 86). Indigenous feminists thus view patriarchy as a colonial construct that was used deliberately as a conquest strategy. Tickner (2015) notes that when reciting and celebrating Europe's process towards modernity, Enlightenment, and capitalist economy, the "simultaneous story of Europe's colonisation and enslavement of native peoples and the emergent *gendered and racial structures*" is often left out (ibid:539; emphasis added). In doing so, one also ignores how these structures were incorporated into a state system that privileged Western men over Indigenous peoples, and in particular over Indigenous women (ibid). IFT scholars thus view patriarchy as a colonial construct that was used deliberately as a conquest strategy. At the same time, they argue that patriarchal structures have been internalised into Indigenous communities over time (Suzack et al., 2010).

Moreover, IFT is also grounded in the conviction that Indigenous peoples were in fact exercising forms of feminism through practising politics and culture along feminist lines in their pre-colonial societies, but that such authority was taken away from them by colonial ideology. Huhndorf and Suzack (2010:5) argue that even though Indigenous feminism is a relatively new field within academics, it stems from extensive struggles of Indigenous women for social justice and gender equity. Anderson (2010:82) too, states: "what we now call feminism, was simply a way of life to our ancestors. Feminism was simply one plank in the platform of life-affirming values that kept us alive." These arguments have been commonly overseen by mainstream feminism as defined in the introduction, which instead has represented Indigenous women, along with other non-Western women, as the "other of other", depicted as merely victims of universal patriarchal structures (Bidaseca, 2010; Mohanty, 2003). The life-affirming values mentioned by Anderson (2010) are embedded

within Indigenous ontology and form part of the principles and values inherent in Indigenous worldviews. Anderson further argues that Indigenous feminism is strongly connected to a fundamental principle that underlines all Indigenous societies, namely, “the profound reverence for life” (ibid). Indigenous peoples have honoured life in all its forms since immemorial time, and still continue to do so in everyday life. Indigenous beliefs and practices all aim towards observing a balance between all living beings, which in turn guarantees a healthy and good life for everyone. By founding political, social and economic systems upon these principles, Indigenous societies ensured the well-being of its peoples as well as their surrounding environments throughout history (ibid).

### ***3.3.2 Understanding Gender Equality as Complementarity***

The objection to Western feminist thought among Indigenous societies also implicates a distinction in strategies adopted to achieve gender equality. Although Tickner (2015:536) notes that “Indigenous knowledge is strikingly similar to certain feminist thinking”, she also suggests that instead of pursuing “equality defined by Westerners as equal rights with men”, Indigenous women strive to repair the cultural traditions and practices that historically held women in high esteem (ibid:540). While Western feminists often base their claims on the premise of democratic principles within liberal ideology, Indigenous feminists build their demands upon principles of duality and complementarity. These principles constitute a major tenet in Indigenous feminism as they lay the foundation for how gender roles and equality are understood within Indigenous societies.

While Western thought has categorised gender roles in a hierarchical, binary manner, Tsosie (2010) explains how most Indigenous tribes historically have categorised the world through opposing but complementary pairs, formed by a male and a female essence. Having a pair is what makes a being complete. Life is thus contingent on the balance between male and female energies (ibid:33; MacLean, 2014). Since the existence of both is equally needed, none is superior to the other. Rather, these co-dependent pairs are seen as essential in creating a harmonious unity (Webb, 2012; Diaz Carrasco, 2010). Irigaray (1998 in Diaz Carrasco, 2010:13), argues that the alliance between men and women is understood here as a bridge between nature and culture. This dual complementarity is therefore also understood in terms of reciprocity between human beings and nature.

Herencia (2006) asserts that the principles of duality, complementarity and reciprocity helped maintain equally respected roles for women and men in Indigenous societies since the public sphere was not regarded as separate, nor superior to the private sphere. Domestic work and childrearing, which were considered as women's responsibilities, were therefore not classified as less valuable as they were in European societies. Many scholars (Herencia, 2006; Webb, 2012; Diaz Carrasco, 2010) suggest that this understanding of the world lays the foundation for the interpretation of gender equality in Andean Indigenous societies too.

### **3.4 Indigenous Women's Struggles**

Having outlined how gender equality is understood within IFT, I proceed to discuss Indigenous women's struggles. These struggles build on the ideas presented in the previous section: (1) that colonialism brought with it patriarchal structures that distorted the traditionally maintained equilibrium between women and men, and (2) that gender equality is understood in terms of complementarity; the principle guiding the Indigenous categorisation of the world. Furthermore, I exemplify these struggles with examples of *cosmopolitics* and strategic essentialism.

#### ***3.4.1 Indigenous Women's Struggles as Embedded within Larger Indigenous Struggle***

Huhndorf and Suzack (2010:1) argue that IFT "engages the crucial issues of cultural identity, nationalism and decolonisation particular to Indigenous contexts". Smith (2009:161) builds on this idea by proposing that IFT provides a framework for understanding the struggles carried out by Indigenous women as embedded within a wider, global Indigenous struggle for collective self-determination and liberation (ibid). In this vein, Indigenous feminism does not only seek to transform women's position in society, but also to change how we view the nation-state. In this vein, it strives to create another world with the help of Indigenous notions of governance and nationhood that are based on interconnectedness and responsibility (ibid). Indigenous feminist scholars thus theorise a feminism that is applicable and useful to Indigenous societies, as it does not exclude notions of collectiveness, sovereignty and relation to land and spirituality as intrinsic parts of Indigenous women's struggles (Tickner, 2015:544).

Indigenous women's struggles are grounded in practices of decolonisation which according to Penn Hilden and Lee (2010:75) "first requir[e] recognition of who we [as Indigenous peoples]

are today and recognition of the heart and intellectual core of our peoples before colonisation was deployed to subsume us". This statement reflects the numerous calls for decolonisation made not only by Indigenous feminists, but also by Indigenous scholars and movements in the world. Pursuing the practice of decolonisation is deemed necessary in order to heal as peoples, rid societies of colonial legacies and restore the life-affirming practices found in pre-colonial societies. IFT scholars argue that decolonisation is an essential step towards Indigenous autonomy and nation building. Therefore, they consider it as the key to transforming society (Suzack et al., 2010).

Decolonisation consists of two closely interrelated elements; reviving Indigenous knowledge, and pursuing the recovering of Indigenous ways and values. According to Sium et al. (2012:2), "decolonisation does not exist without a framework that centres and privileges Indigenous life, community, and epistemology". Challenging the common misconception that Indigenous people passively stood by while being colonised and then victimised, Doxtater (2004:625) argues that Indigenous peoples have at all times "resisted colonial-power-knowledge physically and intellectually". Likewise, Smith (2009) accounts for Indigenous women practising collective resistance against colonialism since its advent through spiritual practices, rituals and resistance against assimilation through ensuring the survival of native languages and cultures.

A central component of women's collective resistance is found in the illustration of how Indigenous women in the Andean region form their identity through the spiritual practice of *cosmopolitics* (de la Cadena, 2010). The emphasis on rebuilding the relation to land and spirituality is evident in the way Indigenous politics are framed and practiced in the Andean countries. The last decade has witnessed the introduction of non-human actors in politics and social protest by Indigenous movements. Such earth-beings consist of spirits and natural elements such as mountains, rivers, plants with whom Indigenous hold social relations to and consider as living elements that make up life. These entities are often summoned during ceremonial rituals hosted by the women as well as being incorporated into women's political demands. These manifestations go beyond conventional politics since spiritual and natural beings become incorporated into politics and, in other words, become "politicised". In doing so, Indigenous political actors challenge and bridge the "dominant ontological distinction between humans and nature" (de la Cadena, 2010:341).

These elements of Indigenous worldviews are incorporated into political struggles as they are seen as intrinsically connected to them. Spirituality is present in all aspects of everyday-life for Indigenous peoples, including decision-making (Sium et al., 2012), which contrasts with what Western ontology prescribes for the political realm. Sium et al. (ibid:5) explain how "land, spirit and mind are inherently connected" in Indigenous worldview, which is why the separation of these three elements has been central to the colonial mission. This interconnectedness is also evident in Indigenous women's construction and expression of identity.

### ***3.4.2 Using Identity as Political Strategy***

In traditional societies, women derived their authority within the private and public realms from their role as mothers. As motherhood gives women a particular connection with children from the time of birth, the responsibility to teach future generations about culture, language and tradition has traditionally fallen on them (Anderson, 2010; Herencia, 2006). Thus, women are assigned the role of guardians of life and culture and considered the backbone of society (Anderson, 2010) because their role is essential for the cultural reproduction of the own group (Crain, 2001:353). This representation of Indigenous women as guardians of collective identity, as they preserve language, dress and customs, is not only discerned in political discourse, but also in much of academic literature on Indigenous women (Prieto et al., 2005). As a result of the primacy of identifying as Indigenous, women often face the dilemma of being expected to devote their time and energy to their people instead of gender issues (John, 2015:47f).

Pequeño (2007) shows that such notions of maternalism are often invoked by Indigenous women in Ecuador in a contemporary quest to reclaim power and authority. This politically strategic use of what is deemed as Indigenous women's specific characteristics is labelled strategic essentialism, a term which has been accredited to Spivak (Pequeño, 2009:11). The women use strategic essentialism in a number of areas of demands, such as the right to land. As Indigenous people's cultures are land-based to a large extent (Jaimes-Guerrero, 2003:62), land in itself is closely related to women's identity as it forms the base of the community. Moreover, being an Indigenous woman is fundamentally tied to the community and its struggle for self-determination. Along the same line, Tsosie (2010:30) views the "collective existence of native women as tied to land, culture and community". Indigenous women thus

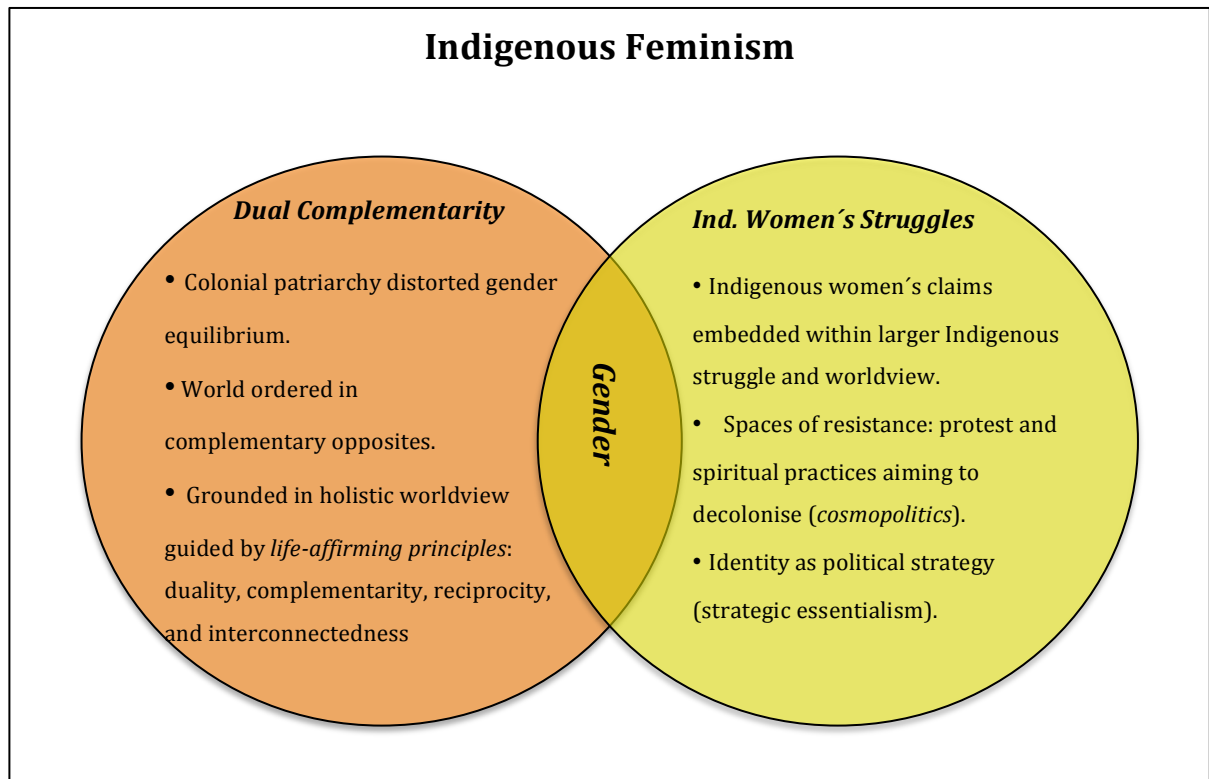
hold a highly spiritual relationship to land, from which they derive knowledge about the survival of their peoples. These three components are seen as fundamental to Indigenous women's identity and their autonomy as both individuals and peoples. Women's leadership is consequently understood as "an ethics of survival, of connection to the past generations, present in all native culture" (ibid:29). This understanding of identity is further built on by Anderson (2000, as cited in Anderson, 2010:85) who outlines a four-step process in the formation of Indigenous women's identity: "(1) resisting oppression, (2) reclaiming Indigenous tradition and culture, (3) incorporating traditional Indigenous ways into modern lives, and, (4) acting on responsibilities inherent in newfound identities". By protesting against politics that affect the wellbeing of their communities or nature, as well as fulfilling their roles as guardians of life and culture, these women are further reconstructing their identities as Indigenous women.

However, these essentialist notions do not evade criticism. In feminist scholarship, essentialist arguments founded in what is deemed women's "natural roles", e.g. as mothers, are sometimes dismissed. Scholars argue that the suggestion that women are biologically inclined to take care of others often results in women being confined to constrained roles within the home, as wives and mothers. This element is also criticised by Indigenous feminist scholars themselves such as LaRocque (in Green, 2007).

### **3.5 Analytical Model**

In the previous section, I summarised the core aspects of the theory in two sections: 'Indigenous feminist ideas' and 'Indigenous women's struggles'. In this section, I present an analytical model building on the theoretical framework. To do so, it is important to first acknowledge the challenge of constructing an analytical model based on Indigenous worldview, which is predicated upon a circular way of thinking about the world, as opposed to the Western, linear approach. The Indigenous understanding of gender equality is thus difficult to order as it is closely intertwined with Indigenous worldview and Indigenous struggles. Since I wish to do justice to the Indigenous way of thinking in terms of circularity that guides the participants of my study, I have identified two main theoretical categories that I believe summarise the core of my theoretical framework: namely (1) Dual Complementarity, and (2) Indigenous Women's Struggles. In the figure below, I illustrate the overlap between the two categories and explain it further in the following sections.

**Figure 1. Analytical model**



### **3.5.1 Dual Complementarity**

I understand dual complementarity as encompassing the holistic understanding of how the world is ordered through complementary opposites, which establish equilibrium and harmony. This understanding is guided by *life-affirming principles*: duality, complementarity, reciprocity, and interconnectedness: principles found in their original state in nature. The equilibrium within the natural world thus becomes a model for how to construct relations between human beings. Likewise, gender equality is seen as a way of life that was characteristic for Indigenous societies where equal relations existed to a large extent prior to colonialism's advent. Within this understanding, gender equality is constructed and expressed as dual complementarity and harmony between women and men.

### **3.5.2 Indigenous Women's Struggles**

Drawing from the examples on Indigenous women's struggles and resistance in the theoretical discussion, I define Indigenous women's struggles as *claims* made within the frame of the Indigenous political agenda, as well as the *spaces of resistance* where those claims are put forward through cosmopolitics (spiritual ceremonies, rituals and protests) or the strategic use



of Indigenous women's identity. These struggles are inherently linked to the principle of dual complementarity as they are grounded in a profound reverence for life and a quest to re-establish the balance and harmony in the universe. This implicates that gender inequality is interpreted as stemming from an imbalance in the natural equilibrium. As Indigenous peoples struggle for liberation from colonial legacy in terms of full recognition of peoples - including acknowledgment of cultural practices, right to ancestral land, and reconstructing and strengthening cultural identity - Indigenous women's struggles needs to be situated against the backdrop of the larger Indigenous struggle.

### ***3.5.3 The Space of Convergence: Gender***

As illustrated in the analytical model above, both categories are closely interlinked, as dual complementarity is an intrinsic part of Indigenous women's struggles. Together they assist in understanding the construction of gender equality and its implications for women's different forms of activism in the IM against the backdrop of Indigenous worldview. As Indigenous feminism is a part of the wider political struggle carried out by various Indigenous peoples, both are ultimately rooted in Indigenous worldview. Gender is politicised in the space where ideas of the universal order, including ideas of gender equality, and Indigenous women's struggles converge and overlap. Gender is thus acted upon when Indigenous women plant their demands from the principle of dual complementarity and act upon those demands through various forms of activism. Thus, when analysing the construction of gender equality and how it enables and restricts the specific struggles carried out by women, I understand both to be inseparable from Indigenous worldview and struggles for Indigenous liberation.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

In this chapter, I outline the methodological choices that have guided this research, including research design, sampling, data collection methods and ethical considerations.

### **4.1 Feminist Methodology**

Feminist scholars such as Sprague (2005), Sultana (2007) and England (1994) among others emphasise that research focusing on marginalised groups inevitably calls for the researcher's close attention to positionality and power relations. This is particularly important when considering Indigenous women's experiences of colonisation. To deal with such difficult issues as a Western researcher, I adopted a feminist methodology as it places these issues of

power relations regarding knowledge production and representation at the core of research.

#### **4.1.2 Constructivist Epistemology**

Since my understanding of gender equality and Indigenous women's activism is contingent on the meanings assigned by my respondents to gender equality and Indigenous women's activism, I view knowledge as constructed within its particular context and in interaction with other human beings. This stance is in line with a social constructivist epistemology, which is predicated upon the idea that no objective truth exists. Rather, knowledge is a social construct (Alvesson and Skjöldberg, 2010; Creswell, 2014). Moreover, the specific Indigenous context in which the construction of gender equality and Indigenous women's activism takes place calls for what Haraway (1988) labels as situated knowledge – the idea that knowledge is embedded within a specific context in terms of language, culture, history and geographical location. Knowledge is in this sense "evershifting" (Sprague, 2005:43). This feminist conceptualisation of constructivist epistemology assists in studying phenomena in its local setting and to some extent overcoming the issue of appropriating women's voices in research.

#### **4.2 Research Design**

This thesis uses a single-case study design. This design allows for an in-depth investigation of a particular phenomena bound in time and place (Yin, 2009:224ff). This makes it an appropriate design for achieving a detailed and comprehensive understanding of gender equality and women's activism within the IM. The unit of analysis is the Indigenous confederation CONAIE including two of its regional organisations, ECUARUNARI and CONFENIAE. Since no differentiation is made between the organisations, they are not to be seen as subunits in an embedded case study, but rather as part of the IM as a whole. My case study design uses multiple data sources, which I outline in the following section.

#### **4.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

Data collection took place in Quito in December 2015 and January 2016. This study was conducted against the backdrop of the national Indigenous uprising. During my fieldwork, political tensions grew and the IM protested frequently, which was met by violent responses from the police and arrests of several members of the IM. The data collection was therefore restrained in some ways and the number of intended interviews had to be reduced as the

movement's involvement in the uprising naturally took up the time and energy of the members. Below I outline methods for data collection and analysis.

#### ***4.3.1 Sampling***

I chose to focus this study on CONAIE upon the basis that it a) constitutes the largest Indigenous confederation in the country and is an influential advocate for Indigenous rights, b) gathers a diverse array of Indigenous peoples with different cultures from the grassroots level in Ecuador's three regions, c) works actively with key issues of the Indigenous struggle.

My initial contact with CONAIE was established through my internship at Latinamerikagrupperna, which allowed for me to present my study and myself to the national women's leader, Katy Betancourt. By attending a few CONAIE events, I quickly initiated contact with other members of its leadership. Although Betancourt cannot be viewed as a gatekeeper in the traditional sense as she did not assume an active role in terms of sampling (Scheyvens, 2014:172), her enthusiasm for my study constituted an important facilitation of my fieldwork.

I employ a combination of strategic, convenience and snowballing sampling. I embarked on this process by strategically choosing to interview the leaders of CONAIE, which in turn led me to snowballing sampling as leaders recommended me to speak to other members of the organisation. Ultimately, I also used convenience sampling by going to protest sites or simply to CONAIE's headquarters to find potential new respondents (Bryman, 2012:201ff).

#### ***4.3.2 Semi-structured Interviews***

The main source of data is in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews is a common and preferred method in feminist research as it opens space for women's lived experiences to be voiced as well as allowing more for a non-hierarchical relationship to take place than a more rigid interview design would do (Bryman, 2012:491; Sprague, 2005). This method was used to answer both research questions posed by this study as it allowed the respondents to describe and delve into the meaning behind Indigenous worldview and women's activism. I covered a wide range of subjects to stimulate the discussion. One way to explore the gender understanding was to ask open-ended questions about what concepts such as BV, feminism and decolonisation meant to them and what it implicates for the relation between men and women.

Feminist researchers advocate for interviews to be conducted within a framework that creates “a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee; a high degree of reciprocity on the part of the interviewer; the perspective of the women being interviewed; a non-hierarchical relationship” (Bryman, 2012:492) I tried to establish a non-hierarchical relationship by being clear that I conducted this study as a student and not as a former intern at Latinamerikagrupperna. I also attempted to increase the level of rapport and reciprocity between myself and the participants by showing genuine interest in the IM’s on-going events such as assemblies and protests as well as accompanying the participants on protests both to observe and conduct interviews and to increase their trust in me.

Indigenous scholar Mihesuah (2003:6f) points out that “feminist scholars who wish to write about Indigenous women must be aware of the various voices among them”. Following Mihesuah’s call to avoid colonisation of Indigenous women’s voices by allowing them to actually speak for themselves when writing about them, I have actively chosen to elevate the voices of women belonging to various Indigenous nationalities and peoples. Interviews with male members of the IM are fewer in number and serve mainly to support the women’s answers in order to untangle the prevailing understandings of gender within the movement. I conducted ten interviews, of which seven with women and three with men from different nationalities and peoples in the highlands and the Amazon region (see Appendix 2). Two interview guides with a set of themes were used to guide the conversations with women and men. One of the guides was slightly adjusted so that the questions would be meaningful for the men.

### ***4.3.3 Participant Observation***

According to Bryman (2012:494), a phenomenon can be better understood through participant observation as it allows the researcher to interact with participants in various situations and roles. It also has the advantage of strengthening “the links between behaviour and content”. Observations proved highly meaningful in this case in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of women’s forms of activism. I was able to conduct observations on protests and ceremonies as well as at the Women’s National Assembly (see Appendix 3). In order to remember the observations as accurately as possible, I took notes directly afterwards when they still were fresh in my memory.

#### ***4.3.4 Desk-based Research***

Scheyvens (2014:98f) argues that gathering written data can compliment more conventional methods of data gathering as it assists the researcher in gaining access to viewpoints that perhaps not would have been discovered otherwise. This method was highly useful to me as primary documents such as books, compendiums, and flyers (see Appendix 3). It complemented my understanding of the construction of gender equality expressed in interviews and observations. The documents also provided insights on the participation of Amazon women when time constraints did not allow for me to conduct interviews myself. The participation of Amazon women is thus mainly illustrated by the analysis of primary documents. Moreover, I kept a field diary to reflect on and keep track of the process and jot down interesting aspects and contact information of possible participants.

### **4.4 Analysis**

#### ***4.4.1. Retroductive Approach***

A common way to conduct qualitative research is to start with a fluid theoretical framework that gradually becomes established in the course of the research process. This flexibility implies a retroductive analytical approach characterised by a combination of induction and deduction, which allows for the “interaction of ideas and evidence” (Ragin and Amoroso: 2011:50). By going back and forth between the empirical material and theoretical concepts, one reduces the risk of missing out on various voices that can add to or even change the theoretical framework altogether (ibid). Creswell (2014) also stresses the richness that diverging findings can add to the research. In this sense, the retroductive analytical approach combined with data collection methods such as semi-structured interviews and participant observation enabled me to discover new themes and concepts by going back and forth between material and theory during the data collection. As I learned about the primacy of Indigenous worldview within the IM, I managed to find the appropriate theoretical framework only after I finished the data collection.

#### ***4.4.2 Transcribing and Coding***

I transcribed the interviews word by word almost directly after they were conducted. I then identified themes that I labelled and colour-coded (Creswell, 2014:195) and translated interesting quotes to English.

#### **4.5 Validity, Reliability and Limitations**

Some drawbacks regarding the research design and methods have to be acknowledged. Case study designs are at times accused for employing subjective data collection. Thus, in order to increase the validity of the study, I triangulate my data through a variety of data sources. Flyvbjerg (2006) argues that although the case study design allows for studying a particular case in-depth, it is less suitable for generalisations to be made to other contexts. Since I only focus on CONAIE, the conclusions I make are limited to the context of the organisation (Creswell, 2014).

Furthermore, Bryman (2012:492) emphasises the importance of attention to be paid to dilemmas of interpretations, such as the researcher's interpretation not being consistent with the respondents' accounts. Since my thesis is written in English, a language that the majority of my respondents do not speak, I have not been able to address this issue directly by having the respondents read my preliminary interpretations. Instead, I have tried to build my analysis in close relation to the accounts of the respondents by extensively using quotes to illustrate their views as accurately as possible. The fact that the interviews were conducted in Spanish is also an issue worth raising. The majority of the participants speak Kichwa or Shuar as their first language. Spanish is their second language, yet they speak it fluently. Although my level of Spanish is advanced, it is not my first language. Combined with the fact that I do not speak any of the Indigenous languages, there is a risk that subtleties, e.g. regarding Indigenous concepts, may have gone unnoticed.

#### **4.6 Ethical considerations**

##### ***4.6.1 Reflexivity and Positionality***

Positionality and reflexivity are central aspects of ethical feminist research. For instance, Sultana (2007) argues that researchers need to pay particular attention to power relations and positionality not just during the undertaking of field data collection but throughout the whole

research process. Moreover, England (1994:80) rejects the notion that research and fieldwork can be conducted objectively and argues instead that it is a mutual process between the researcher and the people partaking in the study, which inevitably brings issues of positionality to mind (ibid). I constantly reflected on my own values and beliefs about how my being a feminist with my own definition of gender equality could affect how I interpreted the gendered ideas and practices I witnessed within the movement. Feminist research also demands of the researcher to be highly reflexive about existing power relations both within and outside the field when creating an understanding of the 'other'. It forces us to be mindful of how we as researchers portray the subjects of our study, since we inevitably reproduce unequal power relations and oppressive structures when we conduct research (England 1994; Kapoor 2004). Moreover, Kapoor (2004) and Sprague (2005) note that the playing field is never level when a Western researcher conducts fieldwork in a developing country. Rather, as researchers we are actively creating the stories told by choosing which lives to study and which quotes to include in our texts (Sprague, 2005).

As a European researcher I carry many privileges. By asking people to participate in my study, without giving anything back and possibly causing the recollection of unpleasant memories, this unequal power relation continues to some extent. At the same time, it is important to recognise that I am an outsider to the movement, although I had some familiarity with the field and sympathise with the Indigenous movement's struggle for justice. Furthermore, the on-going Indigenous uprising sometimes made it difficult to legitimise for myself why the participants should spend time contributing to my study when they could use that time for their own, urgent cause. However, at the same time, Scheyvens and Leslie (2000) note that feminist research can contribute to increasing consciousness among the respondents, consequently leading to increased empowerment and gender equality. Moreover, Ritchie and Lewis (2003:65) argue that "sharing some aspects of cultural background or experience may be helpful in enriching researchers' understanding of participants' accounts, of the language they use and of nuances and subtexts". In this vein, my physical appearance could occasionally help in bridging difference, as respondents would ask me about my origin - a query raised by the fact that my dark features contrasted with their image of the light-featured Swede. Speaking about my Persian heritage and Swedish upbringing helped to connect with the participants on a higher level as we could discuss the similarities within collective elements in Persian and Indigenous cultures, respectively.

#### ***4.6.2 Informed Consent and Confidentiality***

All participants were fully informed about the purpose and use of my study prior to the interviews and consented orally to participate. Oral consent was also given to record the interviews. I refrained from using information sheets on purpose, as, even though their use would have been ideal, would have formalised the situation and possibly caused discomfort. Although anonymity was not an issue for the participants, I did not feel that the disclosure of their identities was appropriate due to the increased criminalisation of social movements in Ecuador. I therefore took the liberty to use pseudonyms for all but one of the participants; the national women's leader Katy Betancourt who gave her written consent (Scheyvens, 2014:168f; Ritchie and Lewis, 2003:67f).

## **5. THE INDIGENOUS MOVEMENT'S CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER EQUALITY**

In this chapter, I aim to answer the first research question by analysing how gender equality is constructed among female and male members of the IM. The chapter is divided into two main parts and is structured around the analytical model. However, it draws mainly on the 'dual complementarity'-section of the model. In the first section, I present the members' views on feminism and discuss why the term is rejected. I then continue to discuss how members speak about gender equality and the relations between men and women. Throughout the whole discussion, I emphasise that the holistic Indigenous worldview is ever-present in the stories told by the respondents and is therefore key to understanding the IM's construction of gender equality.

### **5.1 Feminism as Western Construct**

We, as Indigenous women, cannot say that we are practicing feminism. We practice duality, man-woman. Feminism only involves women, and the men cannot intervene. There *are* Indigenous women who talk about feminism, but then we embark on another path and move away from our principles as Indigenous women (Rocío, women's leader, ECUARUNARI; emphasis added).



As the quotation above by a senior women's leader illustrates, feminism is according to her believed to interfere with the principle of dual complementarity. This sentiment corresponds to the views of the majority of the participants in this study. Patriarchal structures are recognised by most male and female leaders and members and feminist statements are found both among the respondents and in official CONAIE documents (CONAIE, 2013a; 2013b). Still, the term feminism is deeply contested and politicised within the movement. Feminism is often perceived with scepticism and understood as "an European proposal" (Marlon, male leader, CONAIE). A male member takes on a similar stance arguing that "*luchadoras*<sup>20</sup> do not care neither about machismo or feminism, but are always subjected to the community and the organisation" (Nanki, male member, CONFENIAE). Rejecting feminism as an academic term for women who do not belong to a community, he argues that his community is an example of where there is "neither feminism, nor *machismo*, only harmony between men and women" (Nanki, male leader, CONFENIAE). He thus understands feminism as a way to turn male supremacy around and instead promote a matriarchy where men are oppressed. Moreover, Nanki regards the community to be of great importance - a view that is shared by all respondents. A young staff member of CONAIE also highlights the importance of the community:

It seems to me a bit like feminism is about dividing the community, because men and women make up the community. For instance, when we do the sowing, the man ploughs and the woman plants the seed in the Earth. So it is a complementary work. Feminism tries to separate the woman a bit to claim her rights and all, but at the same time it creates a rupture. For me, it is rather complementarity, duality, like we say in the Andean world. Working together, not separated, nor differentiated (Sisa, female management staff member, CONAIE).

The quote above demonstrates a concern that feminism would disrupt the unity of the community. These expressions are in line with Anderson (2010) who argues that Indigenous peoples often interpret feminism as liberal and individualistic. Thus, it is not thought of as being applicable to Indigenous women and men who view themselves in a dual complementary relationship with one another and see feminism as a wish to separate women

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<sup>20</sup> Translates to female fighters, but refers more specifically to the women fighting for the Indigenous cause here.

from men in order to pursue women's individual rights. A senior women's leader in ECUARUNARI also gives expression for this perceived contradiction between feminism and Indigenous communities:

For me, [feminism] is very contradictory because the theories of wanting to feminise oneself contradicts a lot of what we want to speak about within the frame of complementarity and duality. A lot of the times, it goes to extremes of going against men, of women wanting to leap too much as if there was a competition with men (Patricia, women's leader, ECUARUNARI).

Notwithstanding, people from non-Indigenous women's organisations have commented that Patricia's views are in line with feminism. Patricia says that if that is true, it is grounded in "another logic": namely to "always look for a bridge, a path that allows us to exercise rights as women within the frame of complementarity and duality" (Patricia, women's leader, ECUARUNARI). Feminism is thus understood to implicate the opposite of complementarity: the separation of women and men. Patricia, Katy and Sinchi hold that colonisation disrupted the communitarian structures in which family and society are grounded, and imposed a certain way of thinking about the world. Patricia further argues that in the past, when the relation to land was stronger, inequalities between men and women were not as evident. Rather, men and women shared responsibilities in all societal areas. Although neither states it explicitly, the implication is that the dismantling of communitarian structures affected the equitable relations between women and men, as argued by Green (2007), Tsosie (2010), John (2015) and Cannella and Manuelito (2008).

## **5.2 Gender Equality as Part of a Whole**

By taking a closer look at how gender and gender relations are constructed in the Andes, we can acquire a more profound understanding of how gender is constructed and negotiated within the IM in Ecuador. As argued by Indigenous feminists, Indigenous worldviews are grounded in the view that life is organised according to a harmonious balance (Suzack et al., 2010). Similar patterns are manifested within Andean cosmology. Comparable to other Indigenous societies, Indigenous peoples in the Andean region organise the world through philosophical *principles of life*, of which duality, complementarity and reciprocity are most often emphasised. Indigenous peoples in this region have since time immemorial practiced

complementarity in every-day life by applying it to the lives of all beings existing on the planet and in the universe (MacLean, 2014; Iván, 2006). MacLean (2014) and Burman (2011) explain that female or male characteristics are attributed to all beings, and that the principle of dual complementarity sustains equilibrium in many Indigenous societies, thereby forming relationships that provide harmony and balance.

### ***5.2.1 “Men and Women Walking Side by Side”: Complementary Opposites***

Drawing upon stories told by the respondents in my study, dual complementarity is seen as a fundamental tenet of the communitarian Indigenous worldview that prevails within the movement. This view is prevalent among the Kichwa peoples in the Andean highlands and the Kichwa and Shuar peoples in the Amazons alike. A senior women’s leader in ECUARUNARI states that dual complementarity is the underlying principle of life in Indigenous worldview. Together with a majority of the participants, she views dual complementarity as a tool for achieving gender equality, in the sense that it establishes harmony and equilibrium between women and men as well as between human beings and nature.

This equilibrium is considered to be manifested in nature. The Amazon peoples assign great importance to the jungle, which is understood as life. This is manifested by the concept *kawsak sacha*, the “living jungle”, which is believed to be home the lives of all beings in the jungle, including humans, animals, plants and minerals. It is a place that re-establishes energy, life and balance for all beings. Amazon peoples argue that this “philosophy of life” establishes harmonious balance between human beings and the ecosystems and permits them to maintain their cultural roots, knowledge and identities as peoples. This universe, the harmony it provides and the existence of all living beings within it depend on the respectful relationship between human beings and beings of the jungle; a relationship considered as sacred and its nurturing constituting a way of honouring life (CONAIE, 2013b). CONAIE’s national women’s leader Katy Betancourt illustrates this further by making reference to how relationships between men and women as well as adults and children are closely tied to nature.

We see that there is equilibrium in Nature<sup>21</sup>: we have a plant that is male, another that is female, and together they give us complementarity. [S]o Nature teaches us about this existing equilibrium. Equally, we should learn this way of life, which is manifesting itself in nature and we as a part of Her [Nature] should see this. (Katy Betancourt, national women's leader, CONAIE)

Katy continues by calling for a transformation of relationships on a number of levels: “Ecuador needs to relate to Nature in another way. Relate between men and women in other way and with Indigenous peoples”. The interconnectedness between humans and nature and the reverence for the equilibrium found in Nature is expressed and highlighted as a model for constructing more equal gender relations among Indigenous peoples and society as a whole. A Shuar man who is engaged both within CONFENIAE in his home community in the Amazons as well as within CONAIE builds on this idea:

When we speak about complementarity we also see the human being in a complementary manner with water. Water is the source of life, and sometimes we also say that it is a woman. Because it is life, it gives life to us. [...] There are also male mountains and female mountains. Grandfather Imbabura [volcano in the Andean region] is considered a male, and grandmother Cotacachi [volcano in the Andean region] is considered the wife, or the woman. And like this we can make a sense of the male-female complementarity (Nanki, male member, CONFENIAE).

As evident from Nanki's statement above, nature is seen as an existing being, which is gendered to a high extent. This way of relating to nature also implicates a responsibility to protect it. Katy states that Indigenous peoples defend their territories “because they make up our Mother Earth, because we were born there, because She is the giver of life”. Likewise, human beings are referred to as “sons and daughters of Mother Earth, of Father Sky” (Patricia, ceremonial speech, 2015-12-17). Nature is thus given a male or a female essence. And since Mother Earth is seen as the life-giver, human beings are obligated to protect and honour her.

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<sup>21</sup> I capitalise the word 'nature' when I wish to emphasise the meaning it holds to the respondents who speak about Nature as a being according to Indigenous ontology.

The accounts from the leadership, management staff, and members of the movement all reveal that gender equality is embedded within the frame of the Indigenous struggle for achieving BV. Thus, it cannot be understood as separate from that struggle. Harmony and dialogue are stressed as important elements of living *a good life* in both the private and the public sphere. For instance, a women's leader stresses mutual respect between "all beings that exist on Mother Earth" as a cornerstone of BV (Patricia, women's leader, ECUARUNARI). Within the family sphere, BV implies harmony and equality between men and women, between parents and children. Such relationships are characterised by open dialogue and freedom from both discrimination and violence in all forms. The stray away from BV principles is considered by most respondents as one of the reasons of Indigenous women's marginalisation in Ecuadorian society. This view is also illustrated in a CONAIE publication, where the infringement upon Indigenous women's rights is seen as "an expression of the capitalist and androcentric models of development" (CONAIE, 2013b). Here CONAIE also stresses the multiple layers of oppression experienced by Indigenous women, which are often highlighted by Indigenous feminist scholars.

Painting a picture of what a society built upon principles of BV would implicate, a male leader says: "A true construction of a harmonious society should be accompanied with an emancipation of women's rights" (Sinchi, male leader, CONAIE). Similarly, the senior women's leader Patricia suggests that this implicates an equal division of labour in the family sphere:

[Sumak kawsay] for women is that they feel fulfilled but also, since we [women] are always united in the views of our children, or our families. [It also means] feeling fulfilled in the sense that there does not exist this accumulation of work for the women, a load of work for the women. But that it is shared, that there is reciprocity between men and women (Patricia, women's leader, ECUARUNARI).

As evident from Patricia's thoughts on the implications for gender equality in a society aligned with principles of BV, reciprocity is considered as crucial for achieving complementarity and consequently harmony and balance in one's relations. The unity between complementary opposites is further illustrated by Patricia who quotes the elders' advice to newly-wed couples:

They said: “Look, things are done together. Today, you form a couple, you cannot walk alone. Now you two convert into one, you are one”. Or, “you wash the face with two hands, not only with one”. And this means that there is a pair: man and woman. Or, “you need to walk on two legs”. All this refers to men and women walking side by side. The mutual support between men and women (Patricia, women’s leader, ECUARUNARI).

This holistic worldview underpins the movement’s overarching political project; the BV-paradigm, from which the movement outlines a way to co-exist with all living forms on Earth. As equality constitutes one of BV’s cornerstones, inequalities between women and men should ideally not exist in a society based upon BV principles (Bremer, 2012). Rather, the different qualities and roles of women and men are thought to lead to BV when joined together. Similar to the balance existing between natural elements, mutual respect, harmony and interconnectedness between men and women as well as adults and the youth are highlighted as essential in order to achieve the ability of co-existence. In this vein, many of the participants in this study emphasise that one cannot lead a *good life* if a member or a group within the community suffers for example through discrimination or violence.

In this chapter I have shown that the term feminism is largely rejected as the IM’s construction of gender equality is based on the principle of dual complementarity, which is strongly rooted in an Indigenous holistic worldview. Both the leadership and the members of the IM understand gender equality as guided by the life-affirming principles of duality, complementarity, reciprocity and interconnectedness. Men and women are thus seen as complementary opposites reflecting the equilibrium found in the natural realm. The community is at the centre of this understanding, as the prevailing belief is that all people, regardless of sex, have specific responsibilities to fulfil for the well-being of the group. Thus, it is only with the contributions of the whole community that the IM can achieve its agenda, as well as a society where complementary relationships guide all aspects of life and consequently, establish harmony. This view is in line with IFT’s theorisation of gender and gender equality. Although the term feminism is highly contested as it is deemed individualistic and imposed by the West, the participants do not reject feminism’s core belief of gender equality per se. There is, however, a clear distinction in how it is considered to be achieved: through the community and by striving for the realisation of both collective and

individual rights, rather than single-handedly working for one's individual rights to be fulfilled. In the next chapter, I turn to the analysis of how this understanding of gender equality enables or restricts women's activism within the movement.

## **6. INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S ACTIVISM: OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES**

In order to analyse the opportunities and obstacles for women's activism, I look specifically at the claims made by women and the various spaces in which they participate with those claims. The chapter is thus divided into two main sections, 'Women's Claims' and 'Women's Spaces', and draws on the analytical model in its entirety.

### **6.1 Women's Claims**

In line with the communitarian worldview that underpins the IM's agenda, Indigenous women's political claims are divided into four areas that place the well-being of the collective at the centre: (1) territories and economy; (2) health and education; (3) participation; and (4) violence and justice (CONAIE, n.d.). These claims largely follow CONAIE's political agenda as they seek to promote Indigenous people's collective rights. A majority of the female respondents emphasise their participation in the IM as a continuation of the struggle carried out by the "grandmothers and grandfathers who have participated in the struggle for more than 500 years" (Nina, youth leader, ECUARUNARI). The women often stress the resilience with which the ancestors fought as a source of motivation. For some women, such as Sisa and Rocío, historical female leaders such as Tránsito Amaguaña and Dolores Cacuango continue to motivate them in their commitment to CONAIE's struggle for political justice. This is further illustrated by a young female member at a protest outside the Parliament where a debate on the contentious land law was held:

[The struggle] has been passed down by our brothers, our parents, ancestors, because they set an example for us as to why one needs to fight. Because if we do not fight, we do not gain anything. When one fights, one finds something, a seed. One has to defend the rights. Not with money. But with the struggle, raising one's voice. And now [the government] is silencing our voice. But regardless of whether they silence us or not, we are here (Illari, female member, ECUARUNARI).

Illari's statement demonstrates the perseverance with which the women fight for their voices and Indigenous women to be heard. She continues by emphasising the importance of joining forces in order to secure the collective rights:

In the Indigenous movement we are all supporting. We are all united. In the community, we never say: only these will participate. We start [to participate] from a young age. Everyone in general. In the actions we undertake, we all carry the same voice. Nobody is different, because we are all people, we are all human beings (Illari, female member, ECUARUNARI).

Illari and Sisa both always witnessed their mothers and fathers participating in the IM, which made them feel that their participation was important, too. There is a consensus among the participants that the participation of women and men is equally important for the IM's success<sup>22</sup>. Men and women alike argue that the struggle is carried out *together*. Rocío, who was met with strong resistance from her family and husband, experienced this when male elders persuaded her father to stop resisting her wish to take up a leadership position by emphasising the importance of women and men complementing each other in the movement.

### ***6.1.1 "Fighting for Sumak Kawsay": Women's Struggles Embedded within Indigenous Struggle***

Smith (2009) and Tickner (2015) both argue that Indigenous women's specific struggles have to be understood against the wider Indigenous struggles for autonomy and liberation involving claims for collective rights and the sacred relations held to ancestral territories and the spiritual world to be respected. In the same vein, CONAIE (2013a) highlights the importance of Indigenous women's roles in organising and constructing communitarian politics by standing up for the defence of their own lives, those of their families and for Nature. Women's resistance also includes a strong element of anti-neoliberalism, as is prevalent within the IM as a whole. This is illustrated by women's strong rejection of the financial power held by agribusinesses and other large companies, arguing that their activities on Indigenous territories endanger the survival of life on earth (ibid). By defending vital

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<sup>22</sup> As illustrated by Patricia's account in chapter 5 of the elders saying: "you wash the face with two hands, not only with one" and "you need to walk on two legs", referring to the complementary relationship between women and men.



elements of life such as water from falling into the hands of companies through FTA's, women have, according to CONAIE, "stood at the forefront of the defence of life and the struggle against the capitalist system" (ibid).

During the on-going Indigenous uprising, demands regarding the right to ancestral territories as well as the constitutional right to resist<sup>23</sup> were often expressed. This suggests that the claims are in line with IFT as they revolve not around the individual woman, but the community and the IM as a whole. The women's stories reveal to a high degree that they place the well-being of the community at the heart of their resistance (Suzack et al., 2010). In the same vein, two male participants highlight the importance of Indigenous women maintaining a strong link to the community stating that it is crucial for the success of women's political participation within the movement. Sinchi argues that a woman who has lost her connection to her community and the organisation does not have much legitimacy as a political actor. Rather, he believes that women's participation needs to arise from the engagement within the community and that a *luchadora*<sup>24</sup> should live among her community and defend the land together with the men.

As Smith (2009) argues, Indigenous feminism not only seeks to transform women's position in society, but also to change the way we view the nation-state, and to outline another world with the help of Indigenous notions of governance and nationhood, centred on interconnectedness and responsibility. In this pursuit, Smith explains that practices that challenge colonialism are central to Indigenous feminism's organising (ibid). This historical struggle is represented by the advocacy of BV, which among IM activists is mainly referred to as *Sumak Kawsay*: its original Kichwa name. This is often done to mark the distinction between the proposal advocated by the IM and the government. The movement considers the government's interpretation of *Sumak Kawsay* to be a whitewashed version developed in order for the government to continue to pursue natural resource extraction.

Katy illustrates this:

[Sumak Kawsay] is a proposal of life that we have sustained and we believe that it has not worked as consolidated within the Republic [of Ecuador].

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<sup>23</sup> This struggle is a reaction to the Ecuadorian state's increased criminalisation of protest that is enabled through the Presidential Decree 16, which grants the state rights to monitor and dissolve NGOs.

<sup>24</sup> As defined in section 5.1.

Therefore, we continue to defend the proposal of Sumak Kawsay in Ecuador (Katy Betancourt, national women's leader, CONAIE).

All women in this study maintain that their participation is rooted in a strong conviction of the need to fight for the realisation of the proposal of Sumak Kawsay where their rights as peoples can be fully respected. As evident from the discussion above, the women's strong engagement with the IM's general agenda does, however, not exclude them from shedding light on those claims from women's perspective. They formulate claims specifically linked to women's issues, and take space in the movement by acting upon the principle of dual complementarity, e.g. by highlighting the issues within the agenda from their perspectives as women and mothers by demanding for instance that the government ceases to shut local, bilingual schools in favour for new, larger ones as the latter compromise their children's right to access to bilingual education. This is discussed further in the following section.

### ***6.1.2 "Guardians of Life": Indigenous Women's Identities as Political Strategy***

As Mihesuah (2003) emphasises, Indigenous women's identities are anything but homogenous. Some patterns can, however, be discerned in terms of the importance assigned to women as guardians of life, or culture. Women within the movement often emphasise that colonialists attempted to strip Indigenous peoples of their languages and cultures, and how their ancestors resisted through different means. According to Tsosie (2010), land, community and culture are vital to the collective existence of Indigenous women as they make up "enduring components of who we as Indigenous women are: they are vital to our self-determination, as individuals and as people." (ibid:30) Likewise, members of the IM do not separate land, community and culture from gender. This is exemplified by a long-time member of ECUARUNARI:

Our resistance is not only about quarrelling, strikes, that is not it. For our resistance, there are several actions that can be taken, as women, peacefully. Of course, the men have argued and been present in everything, but that is not bearing fruit. This is why [we women] are looking for other strategies to keep sustaining our Pachamama<sup>25</sup> (Leonora, women's leader, 2015).

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<sup>25</sup> Mother Earth in Kichwa.

Leonora makes a distinction between men and women's strategies arguing that women persistently work on developing a dialogue with the police and military during protest clashes. The strategies Leonora mentions can be explained by unravelling the ways in which Indigenous women's identity is constructed. A majority of the women highlights defence of territory and Nature as essential components of their struggles and, like Leonora, emphasises their role as women in "sustaining Pachamama". Leonora expresses the IM's understanding of Mother Earth as the "mother of all lives", drawing a parallel to the importance rendered in Indigenous worldview to women's ability to give life. Thus, the peaceful attempts to dialogue during confrontations with authorities are rendered a particular strategy for women. As Tsosie (2010:38) poignantly reminds us, "Indian nations are fighting to preserve not only their remaining lands and resources but also their cultures and ways of life". Women's role as guardians is also understood in terms of upholding culture. Their responsibility to preserve traditional styles of dress and adorning as markers of Indigenous identity is rendered highly important within the IM:

We women have always spoken about identity departing from the way we act, from what we see. For instance, I am a Saraguro woman but I have to demonstrate it with my clothing, everything, the language, the understanding. An Otavalo woman [does] the same. So it is from there that we need to maintain the cultural identity. [...] In this sense, we have to be coherent with what we say [that we are] (Rocío, women's leader, ECUARUNARI).

Like Rocío explains, Indigenous women highly value their traditional clothing as it expresses the people and culture they belong to. The importance assigned to identity and its manifestations, as well as the emphasis on motherhood, embodies and affirms gender relations within Indigenous worldview. Drawing on Spivak (in Pequeño, 2009), this constructed image of the Indigenous woman as *guardian of life and culture* can be interpreted as a manifestation of strategic essentialism. By incorporating a gender perspective to Indigenous claims and highlighting this specific role, women make efforts to add more weight to the IM's political struggles. The women thus use strategic essentialism to make their voices as Indigenous women heard, to justify their participation in the movement and to promote the IM's agenda. As the identity of the woman stems from the roles assigned to her in the

complementary relationship with the man, I interpret that the principle of dual complementarity enables women's activism in various spaces of the movement.

Nevertheless, the identity as mothers can also restrict women's ability to participate, as argued by LaRocque (in Green, 2007). Several leaders such as Marlon, Katy and Rocío shed light on such challenges illustrated by the fact that the women who are most active within the movement are either single, widows or have adult children. Raising and taking care of children is considered a mother's main responsibility. In this regard, the role as mother derived from the woman's role in the complementary relationship restricts, rather than enables women's activism.

In this section I have shown how women and men within the IM justify women's activism by referring to the importance of everyone's participation, which indicates that dual complementarity informs their arguments. This suggests that the understanding of gender equality provides opportunities for women's activism. One prominent example is that women use their identity as guardians of life as a political strategy to further the IM's claims. This emerges from the complementary role of women in maintaining equilibrium in the world. At the same time, it can also restrict women's activism in the sense that the heavy burden of women as mothers makes it difficult for women to freely participate in the IM's activities. In the following section, I analyse the spaces in which women participate with their claims.

## **6.2 Women's Spaces**

A senior women's leader in ECUARUNARI says that "many times we see that we are lots of women in the struggle, to resist, to defend the territories, water, life itself" (Rocío, women's leader, ECUARUNARI). Similarly, a male CONFENIAE member states that women are "having an immense voice and prominence" in the on-going national Indigenous uprising by participating "with their own voices, thoughts and ideologies" (Nanki, male member, CONFENIAE). The majority of respondents argue that women's participation in the mobilisations, for instance in protest actions, is crucial as their efforts are equally important to those of men for achieving the movement's goals.

### 6.2.1 *“We are here resisting, as always”*: Protests

There is a consensus among the participants of this study that women comprise a large part of participants during protests. This has been evident in the uprising against the sitting government, where women have been at the forefront of all marches. In August and December 2015, respectively, I observed how women headed marches, holding up the *wiphala*<sup>26</sup> and shouting slogans against the government’s extractivism politics and for the revival of bilingual schools, among other demands. As they walked, they paved the way for the male leaders and security teams of the movement. The male leaders Marlon and Sinchi explain that the position of women at the front of protest marches is part of a political strategy as it is less likely that police attacks the women because they are women, which again indicates the use of strategic essentialism. The sacredness of women as life-bearers is emphasised as a defence strategy, but could also be interpreted as a way to demonstrate the important position women hold in Indigenous societies as mothers of Indigenous nations.

Nina, a youth leader, has also witnessed an increased participation in the workshops and protests held in her region due to the uprising. The current political situation in which the IM is highly involved in provides Indigenous women with opportunities for activism and taking up more space. For instance, women also arrange protests for female participants only as part of a mobilisation strategy. In the “March for dignity, democracy and against extractivism”<sup>27</sup> that took place in August 2015, I observed how Indigenous women convened in a tent in the park where the IM gathered with other civil society actors. It bore the name “Tent of Women of the Uprising”<sup>28</sup> and was filled with women only, belonging to the IM and a number of feminist and women’s organisations. This initiative enabled the women to express their shared sense of anger towards the Correa administration, the police and the military and how these entities have treated Indigenous and non-Indigenous women. A woman from the IM stated that they would not move until they achieved justice, pointing to their constitutional right to resist. This initiative can also be understood as another example of founding political strategies on the notions of Indigenous womanhood to enable activism.

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<sup>26</sup> A rainbow-coloured flag often used in marches and protests to represent Indigenous peoples’ struggles for self-autonomy and rights in the Andean region of Latin America. The colours represent the principle of duality, among other things.

<sup>27</sup> “Marcha por la Dignidad, la Democracia y Contra el Extractivismo”

<sup>28</sup> “Carpa de las Mujeres del Levantamiento”

Likewise, Amazon women who have been the driving force behind protests against oil exploitation on Indigenous territories in the Amazons draw on their roles as guardians of life. As mentioned in the introduction, Amazon women took their claims to the streets in 2013, in the first of marches initiated by women, in defence of their territories and for the well-being of their children and future generations. Amazon women see themselves particularly affected by extractivism. They argue that they are not included in the consultations and that decisions about their territories are taken by male community leaders and male representatives from oil companies without their participation or consent. Furthermore, the women highlight that their rights are constantly violated (CONAIE, 2013b; CONAIE, 2013a). The women demanded that their constitutional rights to land be respected and that the government would stop allowing transnational companies to violate Nature's rights by exploiting Southern Amazon for oil (CONAIE, 2013b: 47ff).

The examples analysed in this section show that women are highly active within protests, and that the site of protest provides a space where women carry out struggles both alongside the men, and on their own by invoking strategic essentialism.

### **6.2.2 “Purifying and Protecting”: Spiritual Ceremonies**

Sium et al. (2012: 5) argue that decolonising is not possible without first recognising the importance of land held within Indigenous communities, along with Indigenous peoples' autonomy over their ancestral territories. They emphasise that “decolonisation demands the valuing of Indigenous sovereignty in its material, psychological, epistemological, and spiritual forms” (ibid). The spiritual meaning assigned to the connection to land is often manifested through ceremonies prior to important events such as protests, seminars or conferences. The sacred altar represents one of such ceremonies and can be understood as a manifestation of cosmopolitics (de la Cadena, 2010). It commonly consists of placing the four elements; fire, water, earth and wind<sup>29</sup> in the cardinal directions, laying out flower petals and grains in a circular pattern and burning *palo santo*<sup>30</sup>. The purpose is to purify energies, call upon the energies of the ancestors and to awaken the four elements. Constructing the altar and guarding the fire is often the task of the women. The Inca cross *chakana* is manifested through the placement of the elements and embodies the principles of duality,

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<sup>29</sup> The latter element, wind, is placed out symbolically.

<sup>30</sup> Holy wood.

complementarity and reciprocity. A senior ECUARUNARI member explains the importance of this ceremony:

Our sacred altar is for purifying all the bad energies. Yesterday, we started to light little fires so that the bad people within the congress who want to hurt our Pachamama will turn around. Now is the theme of Land and Territories, this is why we have come here to light the fire. It is protecting. There are four stones, there is water, Mother Nature who gives us all life, and it is accompanied with foods, flowers, candles. We respect Mother Nature a lot. To show our respect for her, we do this everywhere. It is always present on the side to purify our bad energies. Sometimes we are carrying bad energies, due to difference, problems. On the other hand, sometimes there are people hurting other peoples. That is where [the fire] is purifying, regulating, separating (Leonora, women's leader, ECUARUNARI).

Members and leaders commonly gather around the altar to do a ceremonial call before a protest starts. Women are often in charge of this too. At a protest against the land law proposal, I observed a senior women's leader's summoning on a protest outside the Parliament by asking all participants to gather around the altar and hold hands.

We are going to initiate the call to awaken our ancestors, Tránsito Amaguana, Dolores Cacuango, all the grandfathers and grandmothers that were in the struggle. We are going to invoke them, we are going to make a ceremonial call: The sons of Pachamama [Mother Earth], the daughters of Pachamama! The sons of Allpamama [Mother Earth]<sup>31</sup>, the daughters of Allpamama! The sons, the daughters of Wayramama [Mother Wind]. Of Intitaita [Father Sun]! We are here, we are offering, we are indicating that we are defending their rights, continuing to be the voice of Allpamama, of Yakumama [Mother Water], of Pachamama. And for this, we are going to invoke all the ancestors with all our might; we are going to shout (Ceremonial speech, Patricia, 2015-12-17).

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<sup>31</sup> Pachamama and Allpamama are used interchangeably but both translate to Mother Earth. However, Pachamama refers more to Earth as the universe, while Allpamama is used to speak about the physical earth.

As the quotation above illustrates, these ceremonies are considered to be essential to all gatherings. Calling upon the grandmothers and historical female leaders who played important parts in the movement for guidance and strength, assigns a powerful role to women in the struggle. Smith (2009:161) explains that "[n]ative ceremonies can be a place where the present, past and future become co-present". In other words, they offer a space where the practitioners can freely imagine the future they wish for themselves and future generations. The spiritual ceremonies thus constitute a vital element of political activism within the IM as they allow for the participants to gather strength and fuel their political conviction through reminiscing about the historical actors who carried out similar struggles before them. A woman's connection with Mother Nature in the dual relationship assigns her the important task of being responsible for the realisation of the ceremony.

### ***6.2.3 "Women's Own Space": Women's Councils, Assemblies and Leadership Training***

Until now, I have shown how women's activism is sometimes segregated. This is for instance done to highlight women's perspectives of an issue during protest or to carry out women's responsibilities in the complementary relationship through spiritual practices. This section however focuses on women's need for own spaces within the IM.

Who leads? It's the men, it's the men that decide and sometimes they call on us to "just affirm and support already". There is no space for analysis, proposals, suggestions, debate [...] We participate with our presence, but not with our opinions. For instance, we participate in a large assembly, but who leads the discussion? The majority consists of men. Up until now, you always have to argue with the [male] leaders. Who speaks at a press conference? A line of men! (Rocío, women's leader, ECUARUNARI)

Other women voice similar experiences. Leonora says that "the men do not want to give up these spaces" referring to various positions within the organisations. Rocío also highlights the need for women to speak about issues that concern women in particular. These accounts point to the restrictions faced by women in every-day activism. Suzack et al. (2010) argue that patriarchal colonial structures became entrenched within Indigenous societal structures. With this in mind, the marginalisation of women within the common spaces of the IM could be understood as a clash between these patriarchal structures and the Indigenous ideal of



relations guided by the principle of dual complementarity. The majority of women acknowledge a need to have spaces where women can gather with other women. Some men also support these initiatives, such as Marlon who says that there is a need for two spaces: one for women, and one where all members gather.

The recognition of women's marginalised role in society and within some areas of the IM has resulted in a number of spaces for women. CONAIE has a National Women's Council that in turn organises an annual National Women's Assembly where women from all three regions participate to discuss the movement's issues from the women's perspective. The aim of the Assembly is to discuss the movement's agenda from women's perspective and form action plans for the forthcoming year. The resolutions are then presented at CONAIE's General Assembly to inform the rest of the movement about the activities that the women plan to carry out during the forthcoming year. This allows for women to take space without having to struggle with the male members for it and to speak freely without fear of being interrupted. ECUARUNARI also recently formed a Women's Council. The initiative has, however, been met with resistance by both men and women (Rocío, women's leader, ECUARUNARI; Patricia, women's leader, ECUARUNARI). Rocío explains how women have opposed the creation of ECUARUNARI's Women's Council by arguing that it disrupts the dual relationship between men and women. Patricia points to similar arguments by male members. An effort to reopen the ECUARUNARI-led Dolores Cacuango Leadership School for Women has also been opposed by men. Patricia explains the strategy used by ECUARUNARI women to eliminate the opposition: "Firstly, we will show them that the school is necessary, that it is necessary to strengthen [women's space]. Our intention is not to differentiate us, but to have our own space" (Patricia, women's leader, ECUARUNARI).

Having analysed the claims made by women in various spaces: protests, spiritual ceremonies, Women's councils and assemblies, I interpret that the principle of dual complementarity can both enable and restrict women's activism. The principle's emphasis on harmony and equilibrium constitutes an entry point for women's activism. By opposing 'women's only'-spaces and insisting on complementarity despite the prevalence of patriarchal structures that stand in the way for relationships characterised by dual complementarity, the understanding of gender equality becomes an obstacle for women's activism in the IM. Since the principle of dual complementarity does not benefit the women in this case, they challenge it by deviating from it with the argument that women need their own space within the movement.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

### 7.1 Summary

This thesis was dedicated to two questions: (1) How is gender equality constructed within the principal Indigenous confederation in Ecuador, CONAIE? (2) In what ways does this understanding enable or restrict Indigenous women's political activism within the Indigenous movement? To answer these questions, I created an analytical model based on Indigenous feminist ideas and practices. The fieldwork for this single-case study was conducted in Quito in December 2015-January 2016. The findings show that dual complementarity is the guiding principle for the construction of gender equality within the IM, and that it is believed to create equilibrium in all relations, including those between humankind and nature. Since the participants in this study draw on life-affirming principles embedded within Indigenous worldview, the term feminism is largely dismissed as a Western, individualistic construct that is deemed incompatible with Indigenous collective worldview. Thus, members believe that it creates a rupture in the complementary relationship between women and men if applied. Regardless, as IFT centres around Indigenous worldview and collectiveness, it has assisted in explaining both how gender equality is constructed within the IM, and its impact on women's activism within the movement.

As this study shows, Indigenous women participate actively in the movement in a number of ways. Women and men alike emphasise that the participation of all members of Indigenous peoples and nationalities, regardless of sex, is essential for the success of the Indigenous struggle. These findings suggest that they found their arguments on the principle of dual complementarity. Women are able to carry out their activism through protest and spiritual ceremonies with the larger movement. I have also shown that these actions constitute vital elements of the Indigenous liberation struggle. Moreover, they use their roles assigned by Indigenous worldview as guardians of life and mothers to justify their participation, add women's perspectives to different issues and strengthen the IM's claims.

Nevertheless, this construction of gender equality also restricts women's activism when it clashes with prevailing patriarchal structures within the movement. As dual complementarity is an ideal that the participants strive for, it does not always provide opportunities for women to participate fully. The women thus try to expand the meaning of dual complementarity to also include the need for women to have segregated spaces that allow them to discuss issues

from their particular positions as women and/or mothers. This is illustrated by the women's persistence in creating Women's councils and assemblies, as well as pushing to reopen a leadership school for future female leader, despite the resistance they occasionally meet from fellow male and female members.

## **7.2 Suggestions for Further Research**

It is important to consider that I am an outsider to the Indigenous movement, which makes this thesis limited to my interpretations of the IM's understanding of gender equality. However, I have tried to stay as close as possible to the stories told by the participants in this study, and thus identified several enabling and restricting aspects of dual complementarity.

Yet, as the scope of this thesis did not allow for studying the third regional organisation belonging to the IM, CONAICE, the findings cannot be generalised to the Afro-Ecuadorian community. Nevertheless, I suggest that it constitutes a highly important area for further research as the IM represents a number of Afro-Ecuadorian organisations. Taking into consideration the differences between Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities, the question of whether the Indigenous principle of dual complementarity is prevalent among Afro-Ecuadorian members, too, is highly relevant. If it is not, then how is gender equality constructed in the organisation? If it is different, how does it relate to the prevalent understanding in the rest of the IM? And how does this affect Afro-Ecuadorian women's activism within the IM? These questions are important to consider, as the IM constitutes an influential political actors representing Ecuador's minorities, and possible discrepancies in understandings of gender equality can have implications for the achievement of gender equality and women's activism. This study also shows that more attention needs to be paid to women's contributions within the IM. The role of the Indigenous woman as guardian of life and Indigenous culture raises the question of how women's contributions assist in furthering the IM's demands. The current political situation in which an increased number of women are participating provides valuable opportunities to explore this.

In this study, I have shed light on the importance of understanding how gender equality is constructed within IMs and what implications they have on Indigenous women's activism. In doing so, this thesis has contributed to a deeper understanding of the ways in which Indigenous women participate within Ecuador's IM. Although the findings are highly context-specific, they can hopefully be relevant to studies on Indigenous women's activism in other

IM's within the broader Latin American context, such as in comparable Andean countries. Together with suggestions for further research, I hope that that this study can contribute to making Indigenous women's contributions to the liberation of their peoples more visible.

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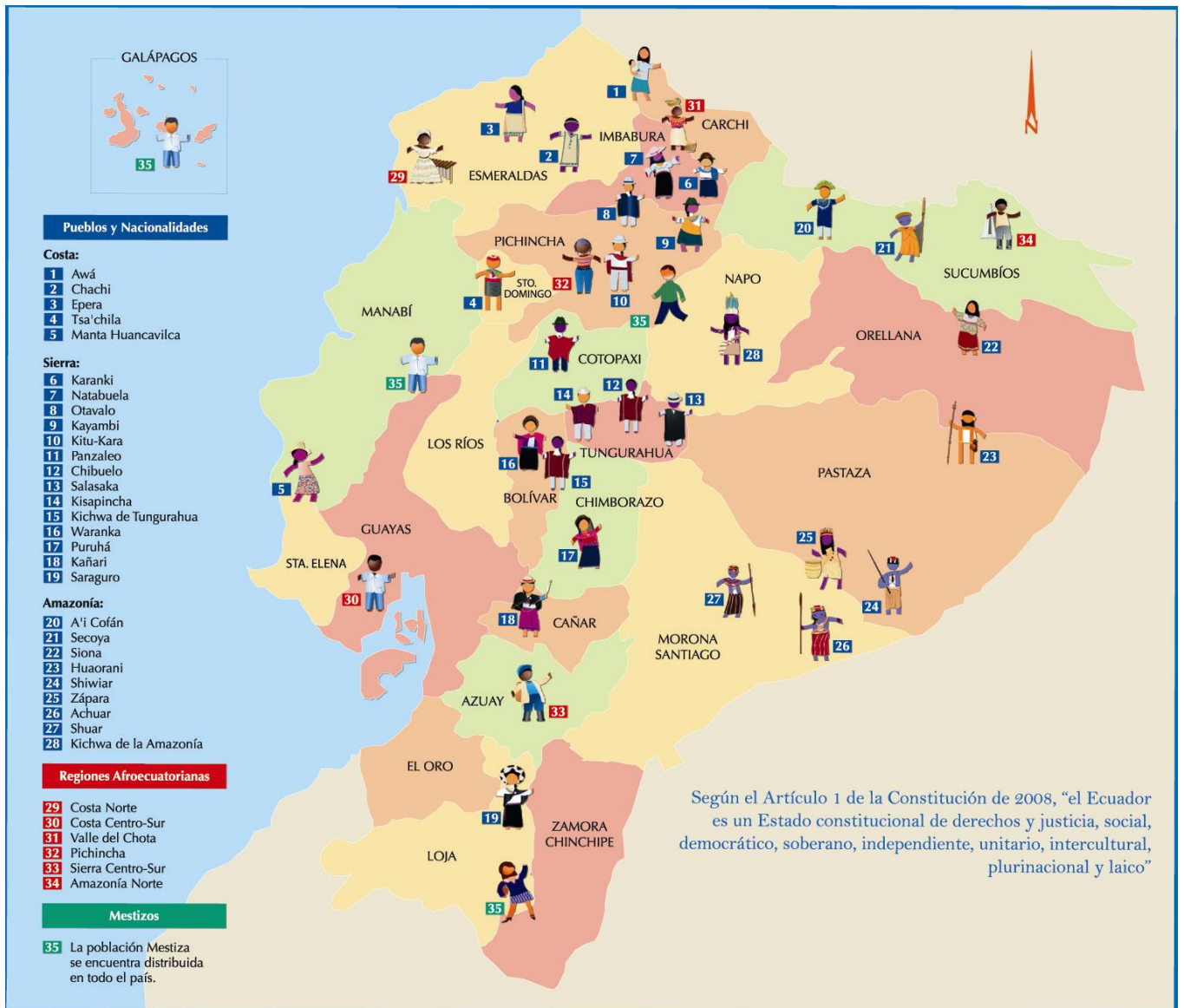
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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: Ethnographic Map of Ecuador



Source: Zonu.com

## Appendix 2: List of Interviews

Number	Date	Respondent	Nationality & Region	Organisation	Sex	Role	Location
1	2015-12-01	Katy Betancourt	Kichwa, Amazon	CONAIE (originally CONFENIAE)	F	National Women's Leader	CONAIE office, Quito
2	2015-12-15	Sinchi	Kichwa, Highlands	CONAIE (originally ECUARUNARI)	M	National Leader	CONAIE office, Quito
3	2015-12-15	Marlon	Shuar, Amazon	CONAIE (originally CONFENIAE)	M	National Leader	CONAIE office, Quito
4	2015-12-17	Illari	Kichwa, Highlands	ECUARUNARI	F	Member of ECUARUNARI	Protest Site, Quito
5	2015-12-17	Nina	Kichwa, Highlands	ECUARUNARI	F	Member of ECUARUNARI	Protest Site, Quito
6	2015-12-17	Leonora	Kichwa, Highlands	ECUARUNARI	F	Member of ECUARUNARI	Protest Site, Quito
7	2015-12-17	Roció	Kichwa, Highlands	ECUARUNARI	F	Women's Leader	ECUARUNARI office, Quito
8	2016-01-06	Nanki	Shuar, Amazon	CONFENIAE	M	Member	CONAIE office, Quito
9	2016-01-07	Patricia	Kichwa, Highlands	ECUARUNARI	F	Women's Leader	ECUARUNARI office, Quito
10	2016-01-07	Sisa	Kichwa, Highlands	ECUARUNARI	F	Member/Part of management staff	CONAIE office, Quito

(Author's construct)

## Appendix 3: Primary Documents and Observations

### Participant Observations

Date	Observation
2015-08-13	March within Indigenous Uprising, Quito
2015-08-15	Women's Tent, Quito
2015-10-30	National Women's Assembly, CONAIE's Headquarters, Quito
2015-12-03	March within Indigenous Uprising, Quito
2015-12-17	Protest outside Ecuador's Parliament, Quito
2015-12-17	Ceremony outside Ecuador's Parliament, Quito

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