



## An examination of the economic and educational reality of the Zenú indigenous woman: reflections from the El Campo Mirella Minor Council

### Una mirada a la realidad económica y educativa de la mujer indígena Zenú: reflexiones desde el Cabildo Menor el Campo Mirella

Erika Astrid Araque Geney<sup>1</sup>  

#### ABSTRACT

Indigenous women face a relentless struggle for gender equality, the recognition of their rights, and the attainment of a dignified place in society. This quantitative study aimed to describe the social reality of the indigenous women from the Campo Mirella Minor Council, part of the San Andrés de Sotavento indigenous reserve in Córdoba and Sucre, with a focus on economic and educational aspects. Moreover, it underscores the challenges and barriers these women encounter in these fields. According to the obtained results, it became evident that indigenous women play a pivotal role within their communities. They not only take care of their families and territories, but also preserve cultural legacies and ancestral traditions. However, due to the lack of opportunities and a historical context of discrimination, these women face ethnic inequalities in both work and education. These constraints hinder their personal, familial, and territorial growth, perpetuating existing disparities when compared to other social groups. The fight for gender equality within indigenous communities involves confronting barriers not only from their own environment, but also those stemming from a predominantly patriarchal and unequal society.

**Keywords:** culture, women's education, women and development, social issue.

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<sup>1</sup>Corporación Unificada Nacional de Educación Superior. Sincelejo, Colombia.

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#### RESUMEN

La mujer indígena enfrenta una lucha constante por la igualdad de género, el reconocimiento de sus derechos y la conquista de un espacio digno en la sociedad. Este estudio cuantitativo tuvo como objetivo describir la realidad social en la que se encuentran las mujeres indígenas del Cabildo Menor Campo Mirella, perteneciente al resguardo indígena de San Andrés de Sotavento en Córdoba y Sucre, centrándose en aspectos económicos y educativos. Además, destaca los desafíos y barreras que enfrentan en dichas áreas. Según los resultados obtenidos, se pudo constatar que las mujeres indígenas cumplen un papel fundamental en sus comunidades. No solo cuidan de su familia y su territorio, sino que también preservan los legados culturales y las tradiciones ancestrales. Sin embargo, debido a la falta de oportunidades y al contexto histórico de discriminación, estas mujeres experimentan desigualdades étnicas en el ámbito laboral y educativo. Estas limitaciones dificultan su crecimiento personal, familiar y territorial, y perpetúan las brechas existentes en comparación con otros grupos sociales. La lucha por la igualdad de género en las comunidades indígenas no solo implica enfrentar barreras propias de su entorno, sino también aquellas que provienen de una sociedad mayoritariamente patriarcal y desigual.

**Palabras Claves:** cultura, educación de la mujer, mujer y desarrollo, problema social.

**Clasificación JEL:** J15; I29.

## INTRODUCTION

Indigenous women should be recognized, protected, and individually and collectively repaired for the permanence and survival of indigenous peoples (Decree-Law 4633 of 2011 article 16) since they help to strengthen and conserve the ancestral legacies of their territory, in addition to actively participating in all contexts (Tiburcio, 2012). In addition, they conserve the land, territory, natural resources, traditional medicine, history, philosophy, and handicraft activities (Latin American and Caribbean Committee for the Defense of Women's Rights [CLADEM], n.d.).



Being a woman in indigenous territories is synonymous with diverse situations, needs, and demands (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2013). Within the population of indigenous women, there is evidence of high illiteracy rates, low participation in the political process, and social marginalization; they do not have opportunities in the labor market, they face geographical and economic barriers limiting access to medical services, education, programs, and social services (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [IACHR], 2017). Furthermore, in Colombia, although statistics on violence against indigenous women by armed groups are not official, the National Registry of Victims recognizes close to 3 million women, where 85% were sexually violated (Peña & Tejerina, 2015).

In order to understand the violence against indigenous women in Colombia, factors related to the intersectionalities between gender, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality must be analyzed (Gender Affairs Observatory, 2013). Thus, the Zenú indigenous people recognize that, although women's struggle has not been easy, they have a cultural identity and possess harmony with nature (Colombian Ministry of the Interior [Mininterior], 2018).

The Zenú territory is extensive and diverse (National Administrative Department of Statistics [DANE], 2019); according to Resolution 007 of 2010, it is the second largest, with 307,091 inhabitants and 83,000 hectares distributed in fifteen (15) municipalities. The territory's economy is based on agricultural production and handicrafts (Larraín, 2014). For its part, the Campo Mirella Minor Council, created in 1998, has 213 families who are dedicated to planting bread crops such as corn, cassava, yams, beans, bananas, eggplant, pumpkin, sweet potato, fruit trees, vegetables, and also have some arrow cane crops, medicinal, ornamental and dyeing plants.

In addition, they have a traditional socio-political organization where they exercise authority and seek the conservation of the customs of the Zenú ethnic group; they live marked social problems, such as the lack of drinking water, sewage services, social investment in health, education, decent housing, employment opportunities and economic support for agricultural production; which violates their rights and prevents community growth and development.

Therefore, the main objective of this quantitative approach study was to describe the social reality challenged by the Zenú indigenous women of the Campo Mirella Minor Council, belonging to the Indigenous Resguardo of San Andrés de Sotavento Córdoba and Sucre, in terms of economic and educational reality. The barriers they face and how they have become limiting the empowerment of women and their recognition within the territory and society were evidenced.

## METHODS

The development of this study was done under a quantitative approach with a descriptive non-experimental design; that is, the phenomenon is studied systematically (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2018). During the first phase of the study, an approach was established with the Campo Mirella Minor Council authorities, to whom the study's objectives were explained. In the second phase, a direct observation of the social reality of the population under study was conducted. In addition, information was collected through surveys and interviews with a sample of 100 women between the ages of 18 and 69. These instruments focused on the socio-demographic aspects of the women's households, economic activities, and level of education. Finally, in phase three, the information was tabulated and analyzed.

## RESULTS

### **Economic and educational reality of indigenous women**

To address issues related to indigenous women is to associate them with the role of guardians and reproducers of culture and the disputes waged to reach spaces of representation (Gigena, 2017). The problems affecting indigenous women must be addressed comprehensively (García, 2010) since they have been protagonists in the birth and consolidation of ethnic movements (Acevedo, 2014) to demand the right to have a dignified life, be educated, be free and not be victims of discrimination, violence or live in poverty due to lack of opportunities.

Indigenous women leaders are exemplary because they have managed to sensitize their families and organizations, overcoming multiple cultural, educational, and training obstacles (Valladares de la Cruz, 2004). However, in the indigenous cabildos of Colombia, progress related to awareness, participation, and empowerment of indigenous women's rights has been gradual, wasteful, and according to the realities of the territories and culture (Gender

Affairs Observatory, 2014).

It is essential to recognize that indigenous women have helped strengthen and conserve the ancestral legacy of the territory by actively participating in all contexts (Tiburcio, 2012); they raise livestock, cultivate, fish, and hunt for food (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations [FAO], 2018). Like Mother Earth, they use the seed and soil to provide food, housing, and air for their children and animals, as love and security to their families (Colon, 2020). That is, seeking the welfare of all (Indigenous Cultures Centre of Peru, 2015).

Thanks to the land, indigenous women cultivate a diversity of vegetables, fruits, and medicinal plants and raise domestic animals for family consumption (Escobar-Cuero, 2017); they also have plots of arrow cane for the production of braids and handicrafts that generate economic contributions (Escobar et al., 2005). Therefore, it can be affirmed that indigenous women participate in 90% of their community's economic activities, generating goods and monetary income that help meet basic needs (López-Ocaña & Aguilar-Flores, 2016).

On the other hand, although the education of indigenous peoples prepares them for life (Community Educational Project. [PEC], 2015), it is pertinent to recognize that educational systems have been imposed on the indigenous population without considering the traditional and cultural values of these populations (United Nations Organization Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995). Indigenous peoples cannot be expected to live dreaming but to face the challenges of today's world without losing their culture (National Commission for Work and Coordination of Education for Indigenous Peoples [CONTCEPI], 2013) since ethno-education rescues their own culture, configures methodologies, contents, learning strategies and the educational system (Molina & Tabares, 2014).

Education for indigenous peoples is a right and an essential tool for shaping a society of solidarity and respect for cultural diversity (ECLAC, 2014), achieving equitable development through social change (López, 2019). With all this, education for and with indigenous peoples forms leaders, cultural permanence, and the materialization of each person's life plan (Guido et al., 2013). Thus, the ideal should be that indigenous women enjoy the same rights as men and, without question, have the same guarantees and educational opportunities. Therefore, to promote academic inclusion programs for indigenous women, it is necessary to discuss ethnic-racial and gender inequalities (Gnecco-Lizcano, 2016).

Evidently, for indigenous women, the lack of job opportunities, geographic and economic difficulties in accessing social programs and services, education, and health help to increase illiteracy rates, low participation in political processes, and, on many occasions, social marginalization (IACHR, 2017). However, education and economic autonomy are fundamental to combat violence against indigenous women; therefore, spaces for empowerment based on uses and customs should be promoted, empowering girls and adolescents to protect themselves from all types of violence and transforming masculinities (Indigenous Peoples Development Fund of Latin America and the Caribbean [FILAC], 2022).

### **Conditions of the Campo Mirella Minor Council**

According to the results obtained, the households in the Campo Mirella Minor Council are mostly made up of women and children (50%); they are relatively young and have an average of 5 children; more than half (52%) of the women own their own home. Others live in family houses (45%), and a minority live in rented houses (5%). Almost all of the houses have electricity service. Despite this, it is evident that few have drinking water supply (5%) or sanitation services (1%); there are even families that lack all services, which denotes the precarious situation in which they live, see Table 1. This situation reflects the need to determine the minimum subsistence guarantees that women and their children should have (Carreño et al., 2017), taking into account that in rural areas, the poverty rate of female-headed households is higher, and they have lower incomes compared to the male-headed population (Lancheros & Arias, 2017).

In addition, the study found that most of the women in the resguardo are engaged in household chores. However, many others, to obtain their own and family benefits, dedicate themselves to producing and selling handicrafts based on caña flecha (37%) as an economic activity, which is also recognized as cultural heritage. About this activity, it is essential to recognize that arrow cane weaving dates back to the pre-Hispanic practices of the Zenú (Casas & Lozano, 2018), being an expression of biological and cultural wealth, source of income and employment (Campos-Cabral & López, 2019). However, unfortunately, the artisans of this ethnic group live with problems that generate barriers to production and stagnation in improving the quality of life (Casas & Lozano, 2018).

**Table 1.**  
*Characterization of households*

	<b>Description</b>	<b>%</b>
Household composition	Woman and Children	50
	Couple, children and parents	30
	Others	20
Age range of household members	18-30 years old	35
	30-40 years old	27
	40-50 years old	13
	50-60 years old	13
	60 years and older	12
Average number of children per family	0-5	78
	5-10	22
Type of housing	Own	52
	Family	45
	Leased	3
Public services in housing	Electricity	90
	Drinking Water	5
	Sanitary Service	1
	No Service	4

Other women, on the contrary, thanks to their knowledge of harvesting, production, collection, and commercialization of products, obtain economic resources from the land by planting crops (24%) such as corn, yucca, yams, beans, eggplant, auyama, sweet potatoes, fruit trees, vegetables, as well as caña flecha. Only 15% of the women surveyed own small livestock such as pigs, chickens, chickens and turkeys. In this regard, the women mentioned that these activities are generally intended for the family's domestic consumption and sometimes for commercialization; they are also carried out on their land or farms in the territory. Commercial activity in the cabildo is mainly in the hands of women who have dedicated themselves to owning their businesses, such as stores (10%), which becomes an opportunity to extend the productive systems within the community (De La Cruz et al., 2016). Table 2 summarizes the types of economic activities in which the women of Campo Mirella Minor Council participate.

**Table 2.**  
*Economic activities.*

<b>Typology</b>	<b>Description</b>
Artisanal	Production and sale of handicrafts made from arrow cane (37%).
Agricultural	Planting corn, yucca, yams, beans, eggplant, pumpkin, sweet potato, fruit trees, vegetables and arrow cane (24%).
Breeding of minor species	Raising pigs, hens, chickens and turkeys (15%)
Commercial	Stores (10%)
Others	Miscellaneous activities (14%)

Women play a fundamental role in rural society and its economy, albeit more limited than men (International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD], 2011). Likewise, women's participation is necessary for economic development, the conformation and organization of the territory, and avoiding displacement. Thus, although the women of the Campo Minor Council take advantage of Mother Earth's food and obtain income for their own and their families' sustenance thanks to the economic activities carried out, these are few and do not meet their basic needs. This reflects that the necessary steps have yet to be taken to benefit women through the economy (Oxfam, 2017).

It is also true that rural poverty is concentrated in remote and fragile areas in each country (FAO, 2018), which

is why indigenous territories are characterized by facing inequalities and social problems, where the resources they have or assistance provided by the State do not guarantee their well-being (DANE, 2018). Indigenous women's economic participation and labor insertion are also limited (ECLAC, 2014). On the other hand, according to Sandoval-Forero and Montoya-Arce (2013), the education of indigenous peoples is experiencing a problem that can easily be classified as a historical debt. Thus, the communities present unfavorable conditions in the educational field, such as inequality, backwardness, segregation, and exclusion from the educational system (DANE, 2018); even in Colombia, ethnic groups experience a high degree of illiteracy compared to the rest of the population (Dejusticia, 2020).

In this regard, the consolidation of the data showed that the indigenous women of the Campo Mirella Minor Council face a problematic situation at the educational level, which denotes little participation and opportunity to enter the system, complete their studies or continue with their academic training at the professional level. About the results, regarding educational level, it is evident that 75% of the women surveyed attended school. Of these 75%, 20% were able to complete their primary school studies, while 57% completed their secondary and middle school studies or some secondary school grades. On the other hand, 25% of the total number of women did not have or have not had access to any level of education, including university, and only 8% are currently pursuing technical or technological training.

It is notorious that, although the Colombian State recognizes the rights of indigenous communities, the mandates that are dictated are not guaranteed and are not fulfilled (Vergel & Martínez, 2021); therefore, it is pertinent to double efforts to identify the gaps of race and ethnicity and intervene in the search for prompt solutions (Bustelo et al., 2020). The women of the Campo Mirella Minor Council are affected by the problems and needs of their families, economic factors, the lack of job and educational opportunities, the low social investment of the State, and the loss of culture. In particular, it is a challenge for there to be equal educational opportunities since indigenous female students have fewer possibilities of completing their studies. Even if they do so successfully, the work and effort are more significant (Avena, 2017), even though education is a tool for strengthening themselves and the territories (Hecht et al., 2018). In addition, the opportunities that indigenous women can count on are ideal for their empowerment and personal growth.

## CONCLUSIONS

The economic and educational problems, as well as the social oblivion in which the territory of the Zenú indigenous women of the Campo Minor Council finds itself, motivates them to strive every day to take advantage of the resources they have and supply their needs, in order to combat poverty, displacement and discrimination, including not losing the desire to preserve the cultural legacies, take care of their families and educate themselves, in addition to contributing with their experience and knowledge in the progress of their ethnic group. Carmen Tirado, leader of the territory, confirms this: "Zenú women are mothers, grandmothers, doctors, teachers, and literacy teachers; their struggle for the recovery of the territory was born out of the need to have a place to live with their children, to grow crops and have animals" (C. Tirado, personal communication, September 15, 2021).

Therefore, until the women of the Campo Minor Council are recognized the right to make decisions, participate in political processes, educate themselves, become independent, and empower themselves through sustainable enterprises, there will not be equal opportunities for this population; when an indigenous woman is a leader, she helps to promote democratic spaces that reduce poverty and exploitation, leaves aside discriminatory cultural beliefs and eliminates the barriers of exclusion, creates and strengthens inclusive spaces. This is ratified by Ana Cristina Riondo, political leader: "Indigenous women struggle to get ahead, being free from many pressures and mistreatment within the territory, besides being able to gain spaces in the indigenous organization" (A. Riondo, personal communication, September 20, 2021).

Thus, indigenous women need to continue defending their rights and territory. Through their perseverance, effort, and commitment, it is possible to demand from the State the implementation of policies that promote the execution of projects according to the needs of the community, equal employment opportunities, the ability to enter an educational institution, receive their comprehensive education, finish their studies and become professionals without losing their cultural heritage. In the end, all this becomes a benefit that motivates women to move forward and allows them to make the right decisions to transform their brutal reality.

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Conceptualization: Erika Astrid Araque Geney.

Research: Erika Astrid Araque Geney.

Methodology: Erika Astrid Araque Geney.

Writing - original draft: Erika Astrid Araque Geney.

Writing - revision and editing: Erika Astrid Araque Geney.