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At the Margin's Edge: Women's Activism in Ecuador

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We are telling our stories and sharing lives
so that never again can the truth be denied
We've untied our tongues and we're speaking out loud
we've unbound our feet and we're marching toward freedom...
—Sweet Honey in the Rock, “Sound Byte from Beijing”

Introduction

“Sound Byte from Beijing,” a song by the a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, is about the Fourth World Conference on Women that took place in Beijing in 1995. The song movingly recounts several issues women around the world deal with, and is ultimately about women’s empowerment—women who come together, share their truths, and move forward together. It rests on the assumption that women can empower themselves by finding their voices. It is, unfortunately, an ideal that is not realized in many women’s realities. This article examines women’s movements in Ecuador, a small, ethnically diverse country reaching from the northwestern coast of South America across the peaks of the Andes mountains into the Amazon rainforest. We argue that the perceived strength of a group or social movement organization differs depending on the scale or level of analysis of the study. By looking at women’s organizations in three populations in Ecuador—organized urban women in Quito who are primarily white or *mestizo* (a term referring to mixed-race), Indigenous women in the Andean highlands, and Afro-Ecuadorian or black women on Ecuador’s northern coast—at the local, national, and international scales, we found that women’s empowerment does not transcend the level of analysis. The strength of women’s voices at international levels may not be reflected at local levels, as is the case of Indigenous women in Ecuador. Conversely, women may be very active and vocal at local levels, but not have the strength of their voices heard at national or international levels, as we found with Afro-Ecuadorian women.

We also found that, as with social movements more broadly, there are many different women’s movements in Ecuador. They do not share the same

goals or the same understandings of feminism, nor do most of the women participating consider themselves feminists. Although the actions and beliefs of the vast majority of women we interviewed fit within the tenets of feminism—belief in equality, fighting for gender parity, and so on—there was a quite strong rejection of the term feminist. The term feminism is quite politicized. Part of the rejection stems from the political connotation and the pro-abortion rights stance associated with leftist political parties (M. Torres). The rejection also stems from the perception that to be a “feminist” is the female equivalent of being “*machista*,” which connotes a feeling of superiority and domination of women over men.¹

Women’s movements in Ecuador are for the most part autonomous from one another. While there are some valiant attempts to bring together women across demographics,² in practice, organizations do not coordinate with each other. The divisions are across geographic, class, and ethnic lines. Rural women believe that urban women have no conception of their reality and so continue to organize separately. Indigenous women (and this crosses lines with the rural/urban divide as well) believe that others cannot understand their issues, while Afro-Ecuadorian women believe that no one else can really understand their issues. These beliefs are based on past experience. Many non-white and non-urban women claim that their voices tend to be drowned out when they work together with other organizations.

We develop each of these findings in greater detail below. We begin with a discussion of our methods, measures, and terminology. In the third section we provide a brief historical overview of women’s movements and activism in Ecuador—with a focus on current activism. We discuss Ecuador’s report to the United Nations’ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the issue of domestic violence and state response to it, and empowerment programs. We then examine a selection of women’s movements in each our categories of Afro-Ecuadorian women, Indigenous women, and white/*mestiza* women using the scale lens discussed earlier. We evaluate the movements in terms of local voice, national voice, and international voice. Our conclusion summarizes our findings and analysis and points to further avenues of research.

¹We found this widespread perception to be ironic, given that the global feminism literature often depicts a rejection of feminism in the global south as an imposition by middle-class Western white women. However, the rejection of feminism by most Ecuadorian women is the same reason given by middle-class, mostly white students in our courses here in the United States, who equate feminism with male domination and feminists with femi-nazis.

²For example, we were able to attend a meeting organized by the *Foro de Mujeres* (Women’s Forum), located in Quito, who invited women’s organizations and activists from every demographic to come together in Quito and talk about women’s issues in the country. The purpose of the meeting was to allow women to share their challenges and successes, and to make connections among groups so that they can work together.

Methods, measures, and terminology³

We conducted fieldwork in Ecuador in December 2008 and January 2009. We organized semi-structured roundtable events with women activists at two research sites. The first roundtable took place in the Andean city of Riobamba, the provincial capital of Chimborazo—about three hours south of the capital city, Quito.⁴ Six women participated, all of whom self-identified as Indigenous. These women work or have worked for Indigenous, religious, or women's organizations in the province. The youngest woman was 31 years old. The eldest woman had been an activist for at least four decades. We also conducted preliminary interviews with one of the participants before the formal roundtable.

The second research site was San Lorenzo, a coastal city about seven hours northwest of Quito, just a few miles south of the Colombian border in Esmeraldas province. There we conducted a roundtable with three women activists who are members of the local women's organization. We conducted informal preliminary interviews with one of the participants prior to the roundtable.⁵

In Quito, we attended a national *Foro de Mujeres* (Women's Forum), where women from all over the country came together to discuss their issues for two days. The event ended with a trip to the national legislature so that the women could address Congress. We interviewed women activists from governmental and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Ecuador's capital, Quito, as well as attended events hosted by women's organizations. We conducted informal interviews with women who do not self-identify as activists. We also consulted secondary literature, governmental, and inter-governmental reports.

We recognize that the arguments made below are based on a small number of interviews. More research must be done to establish whether or not these findings are generalizable to the broader population of Ecuadorian women. Regardless of whether our arguments are generalizable to other women's organizations in the country, we were continually struck by the incongruity of the power of a woman's voice at the various levels of analysis. We recognize that although we use broad categorical terms like Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian, our arguments pertain solely to women in the areas we visited.

An overview of women in Ecuador

Women comprise about 51% of Ecuador's population of fifteen million. An exact breakdown along ethnic or racial lines is difficult, but about 30% of the

³This research was made possible by a Student-Faculty Collaborative Research Grant from SUNY Oswego's Provost, Dr. Susan Coltrap-McQuin, a grant from the Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences Rhonda Mandel, and the Women's Studies program.

⁴The authors thank Dr. Manuela Picq for generously sharing her time, expertise, contacts, and for organizing the Riobamba workshop.

⁵The authors thank Peter Redvers-Lee for graciously sharing his contact information regarding San Lorenzo.

population are Indigenous (Glidden 22), 3% are of African descent, and about 65% are *mestizo* or white (The World Factbook). Ecuador's population is becoming increasingly urban, with about two thirds of the population residing in cities (The World Factbook). This last statistic has important implications for women's organizations, as well as municipal organizations that purport to serve women's needs but have a difficult time meeting the needs of Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women.

Historically, women were active participants in the country's social movements, although their actions are not always reflected in mainstream history. Nonetheless, women's participation in social and political movements has transformed Ecuador. The official history and schoolbooks discuss the same few women—Manuela Saénz, Manuela Cañizares y Alvarez, Manuela Espejo (women connected to well-known male figures in Ecuador at the turn of the nineteenth century during the fight for independence) and Dolores Cacuango (one of the founders of the Federation of Ecuadorian Indians at the turn of the twentieth century)—but there are many others. Literate women attained suffrage in 1929, although it can be argued that this was more the result of a conservative strategy to increase its voting bloc than it was a result of women's activism. From Ecuador's May Revolution in 1944, which overthrew President Carlos Arroyo del Rio, to the January 2000 uprising that deposed President Jamil Mahuad, women's activism has been a key factor in the success of many sociopolitical mobilizations due to women's ability to rapidly mobilize within local and regional organizations.

In 2002, Ecuador submitted its fourth and fifth periodic report of the government's implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, which Ecuador ratified in 1981, to the United Nations' Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Introduced by Sonia García Alvarado, Ecuador's Director of the National Council of Women, the report documented the status, achievements, and challenges Ecuadorian women confront. While the report incorporated data for Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women, the UN committee raised many questions as to the status of these populations within the report, specifically on the subject of violence—a violation of women's human rights under the Convention.

The report's notable absence of violence is especially surprising given recent evidence. A national study connecting childhood and adult domestic violence found that 40% of women surveyed reported intimate partner violence over the course of their lifetimes (Gómez and Speizer 559, 562; see also Roldos and Corso). The report revealed vast discrepancies among Ecuador's diverse populations. The government reasoned that the inconsistencies arose from the social and cultural norms that prohibit the advancement of Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women. One explanation offered by the government was that the transmission of new social mores related to education and equal rights are hindered by a woman's ethnic identity and

culture, as seen in the case of Indigenous women who “tend to pay more attention and give higher priority and importance to the daily needs of the family” than acquiring education or seeking out programs specifically aimed at the needs women (UN Committee 18). This suggests the government’s understanding that the conditions of Indigenous women are explicitly due to Indigenous cultural norms and are not related to government policies. This may be true (CEPAR; Picq, “Identity Politics in Ecuador;” Picq, “Gender within Ethnicity”), but evidence on the ground provided to the authors by Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women activists suggests that the cultural norms can be and are challenged by those within the communities.

Gender parity is guaranteed by the Constitution of 2008, although in private and public spheres gender parity has not been achieved. We argue that parity is not likely to be achieved any time soon, as the voices of the various women’s movements are not equally heard. Women’s movements in Ecuador are fractured by perceived cultural differences, both geographic and ethnic, which continue fractionalization, thus ensuring marginalization. In Ecuador, women’s activism and mobilization is comprised of local women’s organizations that are dependent on a gender identity determined by cultural, religious, social, and political constructions that vary within Ecuador’s distinct regions. It is these same constructions that remain a barrier to the unification of the diverse populations of women in Ecuador—specifically white/*mestiza*, Indigenous, and Afro-Ecuadorian women. We are not arguing for a unified movement organizationally, but suggest that the disparate women’s movements need to communicate if cultural, social, and political norms are to change. Instead, it seems as though the various groups continue with their assumptions about others and so do not broaden the scope of their claims.

The following three sections provide case studies to support the claims we make above. We examine each of the cases—Afro-Ecuadorian women’s organizations, Indigenous women’s organizations, and white/*mestiza* women’s organizations in terms of the power of each movement’s local, national, and international voices.

Afro-Ecuadorian women

Ecuador’s Afro-Ecuadorian community is a relative latecomer to organizing. The first organizations appeared in the early 1990s, after Indigenous communities achieved a measure of success by mobilizing nationally. Women were involved in Afro-Ecuadorian mobilization from the beginning, yet, unlike Indigenous women activists, chose to form their own organizations to deal directly with issues pertaining to them as Afro-Ecuadorian women. The broader Afro-Ecuadorian organization, also—unlike their Indigenous counterparts—supported this move because they saw women’s organizations as strengthening the overall movement (Morales).

Ecuador's black population is marginalized—geographically, politically, socially, and economically. The majority of Afro-Ecuadorians live in Esmeraldas province, in the northwest corner of the country bordering Colombia and the Pacific Ocean. The coastal province is in an ecologically sensitive area, and is home to rapidly disappearing mangrove forests, shrimp farms, and palm plantations.

International voice

MOMUNE, the Movimiento de Mujeres Negras del Norte de Esmeraldas (Black Women's Movements of Northern Esmeraldas), like the national-level black woman's organization, has connections with international NGOs and intergovernmental organizations. The World Bank, for example, has funded projects for rural development among minority populations. Afro-Ecuadorian women are not as visible as Indigenous women on the international stage, yet they have become increasingly visible in domestic politics.

National voice

According to the World Bank, 83–100% of the population of San Lorenzo, Esmeraldas province lives in poverty (Araujo 22). Afro-Ecuadorians were not a strong political presence until their mobilization in the 1990s. The 1998 Constitution established Ecuador as a pluri-ethnic state: “guaranteeing the rights of both indigenous peoples and Afro-Ecuadorians” (Minority Rights Group International). After the 2007 elections, there was one Afro-Ecuadorian elected to the one-hundred member legislature (Minority Rights Group International). Socially, even with constitutional guarantees, Ecuador's black population continues to face social and educational discrimination (Minority Rights Group International; Robinson). Recent changes in the 2006 Constitution—for example, the creation of a Council of Participation—may expedite Afro-Ecuadorian women's entrance into national politics at a greater level.

Local voice

The women's movement of San Lorenzo seeks to empower women who live in the three municipalities that make up MOMUNE. The goals of the movement are similar to other women's organizations in the country. These women educate their communities about domestic violence, aim to end impunity for perpetrators of violence against women, promote the history of black women that is absent from school curricula, and improve the position of women in their communities through capacity-building—that is, empowering women through rights education and leadership training. MOMUNE runs the Casa de

la Mujer (Woman's House), a space for women to convene, learn, and organize. Afro-Ecuadorian women believe they face distinct challenges as black women in Ecuador. For this reason they choose to maintain self-run organizations, as opposed to affiliating with larger, national women's organizations.

The activists of MOMUNE achieve their goals by implementing local initiatives, such as domestic violence interventions and organizing capacity-building workshops to empower women. MOMUNE members simultaneously empower women and raise community awareness about Afro-Ecuadorian women's issues through the organizations member produced magazine, *La Voz de la Mujer* (*Women's Voice*). These actions also reinforce the Afro-Ecuadorian cultural norm of women's strong social connections with one another. As one of the women we spoke with told us, by the time they are in their late teens, women have strong friendships that continue into adulthood (Lastra). Our interviewees repeatedly mentioned the power of these relationships, particularly in times of economic or personal problems such as domestic violence or personal illness.

Analysis

Afro-Ecuadorian women's local voice is strong in that they will stand up for themselves and have strong relationships with other women, but weak in that they have very few resources and little power. One of the most commonly reported complaints we heard from Afro-Ecuadorian women was about the lack of work opportunities. Many of the women with paid employment in San Lorenzo work for palm oil plantations doing very hard, low paid work. Large numbers of women make their living by working in the mangroves, extracting crab and conch both for subsistence and to sell. Working in mangroves involves long hours of digging in feet-deep mud around the mangrove tree roots to find enough shells and crabs for the day. These women do not have the time to attend capacity-building workshops. They lack the time to either improve their educational status, or help their children with homework. They also do not earn enough money to be able to improve their economic situation. A second challenge revolves around slowly changing racial attitudes. Dark-skinned Ecuadorians face daily discrimination in employment, education, and in social attitudes—although some argue that discrimination has diminished over the last decade.

Indigenous women

Indigenous women, like other Ecuadorian women, contend with domestic violence, machismo, unpaid labor, rape, double or triple workdays, and low status. Indigenous women face additional problems, including the highest rates of illiteracy in the country, low levels of school enrollment, and higher

infant and maternal mortality rates (Witt and Fund). While 85% of Ecuador's Indigenous children attend primary school, only 65% of Indigenous girls attend. Fewer than 22% of Ecuador's Indigenous children attend secondary school. As a result, Ecuador's Indigenous population has an average formal education level of 4.3 years compared to seven to eight years for non-Indigenous Ecuadorians. More than 30% of Indigenous women fifteen years and over have no formal education experience and 53% are illiterate, compared to 35% of Indigenous men (Hughes 6). Because of these educational disparities, Indigenous women have higher risk for domestic violence and higher maternal and infant mortality risk than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The Indigenous maternal mortality rate is 250 per 100,000 compared to the national average of 74.3 per 100,000. Indigenous infant mortality rates are 83–100 per 1,000 in contrast to the national average of 23 per 1,000 (Montenegro and Stephens; Fretes-Cibils, Giugale, and Somensatto).

International voice

Ecuadorian Indigenous women have been active on the global stage, sharing their voices and experiences with transnational NGOs and the United Nations. Ana Maria Guacho, one of the leaders we interviewed, is a member of the UN's International Working Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA). The women we spoke to are active in national politics as well. For example, women like Cristina Cucuri and Sandra Patarón of the *Red Provincial de Organización de Mujeres Indígenas de Chimborazo* (Provincial Network of Indigenous Women's Organizations of Chimborazo) are responsible for several articles on gender parity, equality, and rights for Indigenous justice in Ecuador's new Constitution.

National voice

Indigenous groups comprise somewhere between 15–37% of Ecuador's population today (Picq; Wilmer; Zamosc). From the time of the Spanish Conquest, Indigenous populations were marginalized, subjected to harsh labor practices, and were ruled by a different set of laws than the Spaniards (Larson). Indigenous uprisings occurred throughout the colonial and republican eras (Becker; Hemming), yet the dominant discourse established that "Indians" were docile and apolitical.

Leftists mobilized Indigenous peoples, especially in the highlands, into the Federation of Ecuadorian Indians (FEI) in 1944. Women were involved in leadership roles of the FEI (Becker 141). Prominent women activists during this period were Indigenous women activists like Dolores Cacuango and Tránsito Amaguaña. The FEI lost much of its momentum by the early

1960s because many Indigenous members felt that they had demands as Indígenas that were not being met in an organization that viewed the world through a class-based lens.⁶

Today Ecuador's Indigenous population is organized from the local to the national level. Community-level organizations created in the 1960s worked together over the following two decades to form regional organizations like Ecuarunari (1972) and finally a national organization, CONAIE (1986), among others. The organizations created in the 1960s were ethnically based and promoted Indigenous identity at a time when that identity was still subjected to derision, prejudice, and marginalization. Some of these groups came about because of the experiences of Leftist organizing while others were influenced by liberation theologians of the Catholic Church (Glidden; Guacho). Although there has been much romanticization of the Indigenous movement (Picq), by the 1990s Indigenous groups were mobilized to the extent that they had the power to shut down the country during their levantamientos (uprisings).

Local voice

Women were involved in Indigenous organizations from inception, but the degree to which they were allowed to lead or discuss issues important to women was low. Women like Dioselinda Iza Quinatoa, the President of the Organización de Mujeres de UNO-CANC-Toacazo-Planchaloma (UNO-CANC-Toacazo-Planchaloma Women's Organization), took part in early organizational meetings of regional groups in the late 1960s, "even though women's participation was low," and today calls on her former regional group "to include women more in their meetings, because an organization where men and women are unequal is an incomplete organization" (Tibán, Ilaquiche, and Alfaro 31). It was also difficult for women to overcome their subservient social positions to be treated as equals in some Indigenous organizations. Women were expected to serve their male counterparts at meetings, for example (Lind, "Gendered Paradoxes" 32). For reasons such as these, women decided to organize apart from local and regional Indigenous organizations into specifically women's organizations.

The Red Provincial de Organización de Mujeres Indígenas de Chimborazo is one such example. Comprised of about thirty local women's organizations, it was formed by women who had been involved with provincial-level organizations. As with women in movements around the world, the women were told the organizations had to focus attention on the broad demands of the group, in this case general Indigenous issues, before the group should make more gender-specific demands. Therefore the women decided to create their own organizations that are linked together by Red Provincial (Cucuri).

⁶See Becker for a detailed history of FEI and leftist activism.

We spoke to several women leaders in Chimborazo province, a highland province about 150 kilometers south of Ecuador's capital. They ranged from self-employed entrepreneurs, to potential political candidates, to movement activists. None of those categories are mutually exclusive. All of the women considered themselves activists of some sort. None of the women considered themselves feminists, as their understanding of feminism is essentially that it is the opposite of machismo, and these women all said they believe men and women should be equal.

Analysis

Interviews with women activists from Chimborazo brought to light several paradoxes. First, the right of Indigenous communities to operate under local conceptions of Indigenous justice is an important component of Indigenous (including Indigenous women's) demands on the Ecuadorian state. However, Indigenous justice is mute regarding issues important to many women like domestic violence, rape, and forced marriages. In many ways, the provisioning of Indigenous justices has made it more difficult for Indigenous women to obtain justice within their communities. A study of Indigenous justice in Guatemala found "women are effectively being judged by the men of their communities, or on occasion of their own families, in accordance with patriarchal structures and ingrained gender ideologies" (Seider and Sierra 19). Although some government workers believe that Indigenous women have a strong community support system to deal with cases of domestic violence (M. Torres), our interviewees said this had not been true for decades. Meanwhile, few rural Indigenous women will involve the state in cases of domestic violence. Even without these obstacles, as noted by both an activist from Manabí province and a female judge in Quito, a culture of impunity in state- or community-run legal institutions makes it very difficult for women's organizations to achieve justice for women.

The second paradox is that although Indigenous women activists are vocal at national and international levels, their voices are not heard locally, and they are not likely to speak up locally about problems important to them as women. We argue this is due to social controls that serve to keep women silent. Forms of social control and appropriate female behavior discourage the types of behavior required by women to confront their problems and change their reality. Gossip is a powerful form of social control (Seider and Sierra 16) that serves to ensure that women who might complain stay out of the gossip radar. No woman or girl wants to be the subject of gossip, bringing shame to her family by going against their wishes, with the end result that she will marry the man who raped her, for example.

The third paradox is that although Indigenous women are well organized at a professional level, there are very weak notions of friendship among

Indigenous women (Guacho). There is a lack of a support system within Indigenous communities to deal with issues that Indigenous women believe are important. In an urban setting, women might organize or mobilize informally—over coffee, laundry, lunch (M. Torres). During these informal moments a woman sharing a story of domestic violence might be encouraged by her friend to speak out, reach out to a support organization like *Las Tres Manueles* (discussed below), or will hear that it is not her fault (M. Torres). These types of conversations do not take place among Indigenous women of the highlands.

Taken together, these three paradoxes ensure that the fundamental issues important to Indigenous women in their day-to-day lives are not addressed. Indigenous justice has no mechanism and cannot adjudicate on these types of issues, and it is now the legitimate source of justice within communities. Women activists, so vociferous to those outside of their communities, will not—and perceive that they cannot—speak up within their communities to challenge the subjugation of women. If women had intimate friendships, there would be a space to speak up and the support to speak out. However, if a woman beaten by her husband considers herself lucky by the fact that “she can go out alone up in the hills with her animals for the day and not have to deal with her husband or others” (Guacho), then daily conditions are unlikely to change despite the strong mobilization of Indigenous women.

White/mestiza organizations

Of Ecuador’s more than fifteen million citizens, almost half are women and female children who confront the gendered challenges of poverty, discrimination, and violence. The majority of these women are *mestiza*. *Mestiza* women’s ability to address gender issues within Ecuadorian society is due to their strategy of incorporating international legislation and their willingness to institutionalize women’s organizations within the state apparatus. Their success in these endeavors is due to their self-portrayal as Ecuador’s Women’s Movement, which has allowed *mestiza* women to garner greater international and state support for their goals. This technique benefits a majority of Ecuador’s women, but it has marginalized others, such as Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women.

International voice

Despite institutionalization, gender remained a semi-stagnant political and social issue until the 1990s with the culmination of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Beijing’s Platform for Action put forward an agenda to “remove all the obstacles to women’s active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic,

social, cultural and political decision-making” (United Nations, “Platform for Action” 4), which accelerated Ecuador’s women’s movement. Within a year, the state consolidated gender-focused institutions under the *Consejo Nacional de Mujeres* (National Women’s Council) (CONAMU) to oversee all gender-focused government policies.⁷ In 1997, the women’s movement saw the largest number of single candidacies to the national Congress in the country’s history, which in part resulted in the inclusion of women’s rights within the 1998 Political Constitution (Minority Rights Group International 6). These developments aimed to guarantee women’s equality and full participation as Ecuadorian citizens not only as a means to address the demands of Ecuadorian women, but also to meet the conditions of international legal frameworks.

International law, such as the Convention to End Discrimination Against Women, has provided women’s movements an important means to demand continuation of gender-focused state policies. The co-optation between the women’s movement and the government is further reinforced by international sponsorship and funding for gender-focused development projects releasing the state from further economic burdens entailed in meeting these demands. Ecuador’s women’s movements use this dynamic to address their concerns through developing gender-focused policies on gender issues from poverty and education to health and economic development.

National voice

Ecuador’s *mestiza* women mobilized through Ecuador’s tumultuous history of sociopolitical unrest. Perhaps the most historically well-known example of women’s mobilization is in the “Glorious May Revolution” of 1944 when women leaders such as Nela Martínez and Señora Alba Calderon de Gil organized for the removal of Carlos Arroyo del Río and his government (Lear). In 1944, *mestiza* women organized with Indigenous women such as Dolores Cacuangó of the Federation of Ecuadorian Indians to demand better education for their children, economic solutions to prevalent food shortages, and better pay. After this mobilization, women formed the *Acción Femenina de Pichincha* (Feminine Action of Pichincha) and continued organizing for women’s rights (Lind, “Gendered Paradoxes” 32). As with women’s movements all over the world, Ecuador’s women continued to organize although their mobilization often remained in the supporting role of Ecuador’s socio-political movements related to land, labor, and urban struggles in the 1970s and 1980s. During this period, women’s organizations began to be institutionalized through the appointment of leading women’s activists and organizations within state agencies such as Ministry of Social Welfare and the creation of

⁷Although now that CONAMU has been dismantled it remains to be seen whether or not other government ministries incorporate women’s issues into their operations, which was the purpose for the action.

the National Women's Office in 1980 (Lind 189).⁸ Women's organizations achieved several key victories in the 1980s through international policies and legislation, which directly impacted women's ability to place greater demands on the state for gender-inclusive policies. The government's ratification of the Convention to End Discrimination Against Women in 1981 increased the creation of national legislation to address the needs of women.

While progress was initially slow, by the late 1980s the women's movement had made several inroads. For example, Article 41 of Ecuador's 1988 Constitution established the state's obligation to develop and implement policies aimed at gender equality and focus within state programs. Another achievement within the constitution was Article 254, establishing a national system in which all "planning shall take age, ethno-cultural, and local and regional differences into account and shall incorporate a gender focus" (Vega 4).

Despite the achievements made in the past twenty years, Ecuador's women's movements remain challenged by these issues as the gender-focused policies continue to benefit the needs of one segment of the female population. This exclusion can be seen in two areas one which the women's movement focuses its gender mainstreaming efforts, those of poverty and education. An estimated 7 out of 10 of Ecuador's citizens are living in poverty (The World Factbook). In 2005, 63% of the population lived in poverty with 31% in extreme poverty—defined as living on less than a dollar per day (Harari and Harari). As of 2005, the World Bank found that despite political gains, more than half of the Ecuadorian population continued to live in poverty. Eighty-seven percent of the Indigenous population lived in poverty, and in the rural highlands that number rose to 96%. Fifty-six percent of the Indigenous population lived in extreme poverty (World Bank, "Ecuador Highlights" table 4). By the end of the second half of the 2010s, the percentage of Indigenous people living in extreme poverty fell by 31%, although the poverty gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous population increased by 13% (World Bank, *Indigenous Latin America* 59). Seventy percent of the Afro-Ecuadorian population lives in poverty (Minority Rights Group International), while 30% of the *mestizo* population lives in poverty, and 8% of the *mestizo* population lives in extreme poverty ("Health System Profile Ecuador").

Poverty is not determined by economic status alone, but exclusion from resources such as adequate and affordable food, housing, health care, education, and basic services. Stunting or limited physical growth is one comprehensive indicator of poverty as it is a direct outcome of a population's overall standard of living including environmental conditions and access to food, housing, education, and health care. Nearly 21% of Ecuador's children under

⁸The National Women's Office has had several names as a state institution. During the late 1980s the organization was titled the National Women's Bureau (DINAMU). Since 1997, the state institution has been titled CONAMU or the National Women's Council. For more information see <http://www.conamu.gov.ec/CONAMU/portal/home.do>.

age five are stunted. Indigenous children comprise 62% and Afro-Ecuadorian children comprise 22% of the children under age five who are stunted (World Bank, "Indigenous Latin America" 43).

Women are noticeably absent within such poverty statistics, revealing the prevalence of gender discrimination in the government policies. However, statistics related to head of household suggest the reality of women's poverty in Ecuador. Nationwide only 643,359 of Ecuador's 4.4 million women own or pay for homes of their own (Vega 8). In 2004, CONAMU's solution was to sign a cooperative agreement establishing the Inter-Institutional Cooperative Framework for "gender-mainstreaming and comprehensive protection of women's rights in national poverty reduction policies" as a means of addressing gender gaps in unemployment and poverty reduction policies (Vega 11). Gender-mainstreaming is a tool to promote gender equality, where gender becomes a factor to be considered in policy creation and analysis throughout the government. Under gender-mainstreaming, every government agency would analyze a proposed policy or the effects of a policy in terms of the economic, political, scientific, and gender impacts, instead of relegating women's issues to a separate Ministry of Women's Affairs. However, the rates of success for gender-mainstreaming state policies to reduce women's poverty rates are curtailed by a continuation of discriminatory practices within the public sector in regards to equality in the areas of employment and property for women.

Women face a triple workload beginning in their youth, making it difficult to continue their education, particularly after age 14. Female children responsible for contributing to the family income will not be able to achieve their educational potential. Ecuador's national illiteracy rate is 9% with an average length for schooling at 7.3 years with more educational funding placed toward Spanish-speaking/*mestizo* populations (Vega table 6). Regardless of this funding, women comprise 55% of the illiterate population (Vega table 5). Women's illiteracy rates are higher in rural areas as 66% of rural women (18% *mestizo* and 48% Indigenous) are illiterate ("Portrait of Indigenous Women").

One of the solutions offered by the women's movement was the 1998 creation of the Pro-Gender Equity Network, which aims to incorporate gender perspectives within Ecuador's educational policies. However, these policies more often than not fail to be implemented due to the government's reluctance to consider women's illiteracy a priority and the educational system's insensitivity to gender issues and women's rights (Vega 15).

Local voice

The women's movement's relationship with the state is based on their participation in strategic negotiations to gain the power to "name and define policy agendas as much as the power acquired through access to the economic and social benefits of modernization and citizenship" (Lind 22). However, the

movement's institutionalization has not been an ideal situation as its endeavors to create and implement gender inclusive policies have been hindered by administrative and legislative practices that are "shaped by a culture of exploitation and discrimination" perpetuating gender gaps and inequality (Lind, "Gendered Paradoxes" 11). More importantly the movement's institutionalization has increased fragmentation within Ecuador's women's movement in that all women's voices are not heard. Institutionalization hinders women's organizations such as *Las Tres Manueles* to communicate with non-institutionalized women's organizations such as *Casa Feminista de Rosas* (the Roses Feminist House) and women activists that offer different perspectives related to women's lives particularly on the issues of abortion and domestic violence.

Analysis

Ecuador's institutionalized women's movement has enabled the exclusion of minority women from the benefits of the movement's successful gender policies. This exclusion is due to misperceptions of Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women and their cultures by the predominantly mestiza women's movements and organizations.

As an institutionalized women's organization, the case of *Las Tres Manueles* offers insight into this dilemma. Funded by the municipality of Quito and various NGOs, such as the Center for Equality and Justice, *Las Tres Manueles* focuses on the needs of women and their families in the areas of psychological, legal, and medical services, as well as the area of social work. *Las Tres Manueles* offers services for the prevention of alcoholism and domestic violence through family and group counseling, as well as community activities (*Administración Zona Centro*). While the services offered are open to all women and their families regardless of ethnicity, the majority served are mestiza. Inquiries as to the numbers of Indigenous women who had used these invaluable services were limited to ten women in one of the social worker's five years of experience there (M. Torres). Further, by the beginning of 2009, Afro-Ecuadorian women had barely used the services offered by *Las Tres Manueles* at all.

These figures conflict with the statistics and needs of ethnic communities—in particular with regard to domestic violence in the lives of Indigenous women. When questioned about the low numbers for that group, the reply was that women seek support for these issues within their own communities (M. Torres). The presumption by the largely *mestiza* women's movement that Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women remain isolated within their communities because their needs are met within those communities is challenged by organizations such as *Casa de las Feministas* and the *Foro de Mujeres*. These and other predominantly *mestiza* women's organizations seek to bridge the divides between women and women's organizations by offering public forums and women's space to increase communication regarding relevant and shared

topics of gender. Again, this endeavor by the women's movement is influenced by international developments as when CEDAW raised questions as to the status of Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women within the 2003 CEDAW press release (United Nations, "Ecuador's Gender Equality"). The result has been the re-evaluation and design of the Equal Opportunity Plan by CONAMU and other institutionalized women's organizations in order to "strengthen the institutional status of gender at the governmental level in order to increase the chances of having an impact on the government agenda and the National Budget" as a means to advance mandatory recognitions of women's rights (Vega 7). Another result of the Committee's recommendations is that the women's movement has begun to incorporate ethnic minority women and their claims within their discourse. This broadening should increase gender perspectives within governmental policies, especially on the issue of violence against women.

Conclusion

Our research suggests that in addition to looking at the diversity of women's movements, we can gain a deeper understanding of those movements by examining their activism and presence at different scales or levels of analysis. When looking at a country separated by strong racial and ethnic divisions, we cannot understand women's movements in Ecuador without looking at a cross-section of Ecuador's society to include rural and urban women, and Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women. We used the term "voice" as a way to examine the presence and power of women's movements at international, national, and local levels. We found that there are marked differences in women's voices at these difference levels. Afro-Ecuadorian women had strong voices and activism at the local level, which did not translate to national or international levels. Indigenous women had strong voices in international forums, and to an extent at the national level, which was not reflected in local context. Mestiza women in the capital were well organized, although recent research suggests that women in rural provinces lag but are catching up in terms of empowerment (Friederic 20). Rural mestiza women were concerned about a culture of impunity for perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence.

Cultural norms are quite powerful in shaping behavior, as our interviews with Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian women activists pointed out. But in the spirit of "Sound Byte from Beijing," unless women are willing to start talking to one another, they are never going to be able to challenge community and broader social norms, including concepts like friendship that turned out to be an important factor connected to local mobilization in the Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorian communities we studied where women had less access to government programs than those who live in Quito or other cities.

Women in Ecuador across ethnic lines are mobilized, organized, and want their demands to be heard. Past discrimination, the fear of future discrimination, and real and perceived cultural norms keep these organizations relatively separate from one another. While some organizations like the *Foro de Mujeres* are actively working to bridge gaps among ethnic communities, most organizations have a narrow membership focus. We argue that this serves to weaken impacts of women's activism in Ecuador.

We noted above that our field sites and interviews were limited. Still, we think these are meaningful insights and conclusions that speak to activism beyond our small interview sample. Diverse women's groups from all over the country attended the two-day Women's Forum. The concerns, successes, and stories conveyed by the leaders support what we found in our fieldwork. In addition, the Indigenous women we spoke to in Riobamba represented several different organizations and communities. They spoke from their experiences both in their communities and as leaders in their organizations. Future research should analyze Indigenous women and women's organizations in other regions in order to see how generalizable our conclusions are. The Afro-Ecuadorian women we interviewed talked about their own experiences, and also about their work with women in other communities through their regional partner organization. We did not have a rural *mestiza* group in our interviews and had to rely on the positions they presented at the national Women's Forum. As such, we think our limited fieldwork suggests a rich research agenda for scholars interested in gender, social movements, and culture.

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