

A silhouette of a woman and a child holding hands, looking out over a landscape at sunset or sunrise. The woman is on the left, and the child is on the right. They are both facing right. The background is a dramatic sky with purple, pink, and orange hues, and a dark horizon line. The overall mood is contemplative and hopeful.

Abuse is a common denominator in the lives of thousands of Colombian women. Indigenous women know it well, but their valiant struggle and resilience in the face of violence is now aimed at finding ways to develop themselves, nurture their territory, and watch over their traditional knowledge. The Intercultural School for Indigenous Certificate Programs is strengthened by their participation and illustrates their capacity for the construction of a new Colombia.

INDIGENOUS WOMEN LEADERS RAISE THEIR VOICES AGAINST VIOLENCE

“I think that we Huitoto women get our strength from our elders. My mother is both very religious and very traditional. She keeps calm at even the most difficult times, for example when my father was killed,” says Nazareth Cabrera. “Based on her example of invoking faith, prayer, and incantations, all you can do is keep moving forward.” Cabrera is a survivor of guerrilla violence in Araracuara, where she began to use her role as a teacher to build peace more than 20 years ago.

At just 13 years of age, Leopoldina left school to live in Cali as a domestic worker. She had firsthand experiences of labor exploita-

tion and abuses in a series of events that forced her to return to her community in El Charco, Nariño, a municipality plagued by violence. Undaunted by the abuses she continued to suffer there, she went to work with local and international organizations, including the United Nations, in social movements fighting to uphold the sexual and reproductive rights of the women of her ethnic group, the Emperara, and to denounce abuses committed against the victims of the armed conflict.

Leopoldina and Nazareth are just two of the hundreds of indigenous women whose strength, resistance, and resilience have stood out during work supporting intercultural certificates in programs organized by the Intercultural School for Indigenous Certificate Programs (EIDI) at the Universidad del Rosario. The School offers educational programs for female indigenous leaders without them needing academic degrees

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to receive training in legal, political, and economic skills. The programs organize the study of specialized subjects, planned and coordinated with indigenous students to provide the greatest possible conceptual and technical tools for self-directed progress.

The EIDI has been developing programs for 10 years, but in the last three years it has focused particularly on training indigenous women and learning from them to understand and document their experiences and how they have contributed to the construction of peace in their communities.

“We want to understand and highlight the role these stories play today in society, to show how they have resisted, contending with these painful experiences and transforming them into an affirmation of life,” says Ángela Santamaría, EIDI Director.

“With the help of the University, different indigenous organizations, and agreements with organizations such as Oxfam, Opiac, CIT, and the German agency GTZ, we go to different regions with a group of professors. There, we run one-week programs with long working days, and we invite community elders to attend and contribute their knowledge,” explains Santamaría.

Bastien Bosa, of the School of Human Sciences and teacher on some of the intercultural certificate programs, says that the challenge for the team is to exhibit a new form of instruction, since education in general –and higher education in particular– faces the great challenge of embracing the multicultural dimension.

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→ Five intercultural certificate programs have been held in Amazonas, and seven have been held in the Sierra Nevada with indigenous women who live in those areas.





When an indigenous person wants to study for a degree, he or she must do what any other student does, adapting to the characteristics and the requirements of the program. Universities have not taken the idea of multiculturalism seriously; they have not designed new programs or changed their educational models,” says Bosa.

So far, more than 2,500 students have graduated from these intercultural certificate programs. Five have been held in Amazonas and seven in the Sierra Nevada with indigenous women who live in those beautiful areas.

“These programs are designed to meet the needs of indigenous people and the interest of the University in curricula, research projects, and any action or program arrived at collectively with indigenous organizations. In the context of this process we have literally moved out of the cloister of the Universidad del Rosario, taking professors to the communities to create new spaces for the collective construction of knowledge in indigenous territories,” concludes Santamaría.



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TWO-WAY LEARNING

“The memory bath” is one of many spaces that have been developed within the certificate programs. This is a workshop for constructing collective memory and generating a two-way dialogue for learning and reflection.

It was there that María Benítez, professor at the School for Women’s Leadership in Amazonas and spokesperson for her Ticuna and Jagua community, told how she was left under the care of nuns in a Catholic boarding school following the death of her parents. After escaping from the school, she was cared for by her grandparents and “found herself.” Unfortunately, she was also abused by her second husband, who thought that women were good only for housekeeping and farm work.

One can see that these programs provide spaces for more than just storytelling. Participants also learn from them and begin to question themselves and others in ways that contribute to the construction of a better society. “Those who participate find a space of trust where they feel they can train under a high-quality educational process without any impositions. It is collective learning,” concludes Dunen Muelas, a 10th semester Law student at El Rosario and the youngest daughter of Luz Helena Izquierdo, one of the first Arhuacan university graduates in the country.

The confidence that these participants gain leads to a deeper reflection on life, strengthening and extending the common bonds connecting their lives. It also gives them the tools they need to unite and continue building peace in their communities and, therefore, in Colombia. ■