Indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-Descendent Women against Violence: Building Interethnic Alliances in the Context of Regional Autonomy

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This essay analyses the contemporary activism of women's organisations of Nicaragua's North Atlantic Coast autonomous region. Its thesis is that the struggle against gender violence has enabled local women to develop a common agenda over and above whatever ideological–political differences and ethnic–racial hierarchies divide them. It argues that the role of Coast women activists has been central to articulating, in a reflexive way, a position as indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-descendent women in order to adapt a human rights approach to the regional political–cultural context, and to use it effectively to achieve a life free of violence.

Keywords: autonomy, ethnicity, gender-based violence, human rights, interculturality, women's activism.

This essay aims to take a reflexive look at the activism of indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-descendent women of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region of Nicaragua (RAAN) during 2000–2009, since this timespan encompasses the most important milestones in the process of linking regional organisations around the issues of women's rights and violence. This essay argues that the struggle against violence has enabled the coming together of Coast women activists of distinct ethnic, racial, and ideological origins. It especially emphasises and explains the collaborative work of organisations that have adopted a rights approach in their training of grassroots women, and how they have built a common agenda to influence the institutionalisation of women's rights in the framework of the autonomous government.

In order to exemplify the above-mentioned process, this essay will describe the context within which various women's organisations came together to form networks in order to wage a coordinated struggle against violence in the RAAN and the role

the Centro de Estudios e Información de la Mujer Multiétnica (CEIMM - Multi-Ethnic Women's Studies and Information Centre) has played to facilitate that process. This paper identifies the networks – the term is plural because of their diversity – as a multi-scaled effort that draws on the entities that funded them, the nature of their actions and the focus of their work.

The works of Cole and Phillips (2008) and Merry (2006, 2009) are the main references guiding this analysis of the formation of alliances against gender violence. They analyse the forming of coalitions among women's organisations in Latin America and Asia and the Pacific, respectively. Cole and Phillips argue that the articulation of national campaigns against gender violence in Latin America has become widespread in recent decades as a result of two processes. One is the influence of the transnational feminist movement, which has understood how to take advantage of the globalisation of the universal human rights regime. The other is the vitality with which local organisations have adopted global agendas, through which they have learned to work through consensus – over and above their differences – to enhance the impact of their work (Cole and Phillips, 2008: 145).

This work begins by echoing the feminist and analytical curiosity of Cole and Phillips (2008) to learn about how the struggle against gender violence has facilitated the forming of alliances and about the nature of the constructed alliances. The methodological approach taken by Cole and Phillips to respond to those questions is to pay attention to the actors and their actions as determined by the context of the local political culture (Cole and Phillips, 2008: 47). This framework assigns special relevance to the involved groups and to the particular agency of Atlantic Coast activists. On the one hand, these activists have found the human rights discourse to be a means to enhance their diverse forms of work; on the other hand, without openly identifying themselves as feminists, they have articulated common actions aimed at two objectives: (a) making violence against women visible as a grave social problem, and (b) exerting public pressure so that government, through its institutional framework, responds to the demands of organised women.

With this regional specificity in mind, Merry's (2006) analysis will be used to examine the role of local activists in adapting and adjusting hegemonic human rights legal discourses to local cultures, taking into account non-Western notions of the law and traditional social structures. In particular, Merry asks about possibilities of change for women of non-Western societies when adaptation of the human rights discourse occurs in contexts where legal pluralism superposes distinct orders of rights – positive and traditional – thus fostering tolerance for cultural practices that violate the physical integrity of women (Merry, 2006: 3).

The mediation role of local actors is complex and requires discursive skill to reconcile power logics among various spaces (community, regional, national, global) and to create local consciousness around the adoption of new lexicons. Mediators must guarantee a favourable opinion about recognition of women's rights despite prejudices against foreign ideologies that threaten the local social order. To do this, activists have to use a double consciousness that guides them in both putting a global discourse into everyday vernacular to make it understandable in the local context, as well as identifying their own local elements that harmonise and correspond with global concepts (Merry, 2006: 137).

Contrary to what some academics have argued, the process of localising women's human rights discourses is neither mechanical nor superficial; rather, it is reflexive and multi-semantic (Valladares de la Cruz, 2008). That affirmation refers to the form in

which local activists strategise regarding the prevailing legal pluralism. In the case of this region, this manifests itself in the fact that Coast women embrace the defence of their people's cultural identity, while at the same time being critical of community arrangements – such as the *Talamana* (blood payment) – that, instead of protecting the physical integrity of sexually abused minors, are intended to appease the victim's family through compensation for damage caused. Rather than confronting the traditional patriarchal system, indigenous and Afro-descendent women activists consider that it is more appropriate to find ways to deal with violence, taking into consideration cultural particularities and negotiating with and involving *wihtas* (traditional authorities) in this quest (Barbeyto, 2010; Gaviota, 2011).

In their negotiation with the regional power system, indigenous, Afro-descendent and Mestizo women leaders are proactive. They enliven the public arena and enhance debates about systemic and domestic violence through their intercultural perspective. Interculturality is interpreted as an ethical and political commitment to establish constructive and horizontal dialogue among women from distinct ethnic groups. It proposes to reflect on the differences that separate them and on how their right to a life free of violence is trapped in the superposition of the positive and traditional legal systems, as well as by the fact that both systems are patriarchal (García, 1996; Davis, 2006; Davis et al., 2007).

Following this introductory section dealing with the conceptual framework, the body of the essay is organised in the following way. The second section provides socio-demographic data on the Atlantic regions and indicators on violence against women. The third section discusses contextually the formation of the Network against Violence and its member organisations. The fourth section describes the creative and reflexive adoption of a focus on human rights by Coast women's organisations. The fifth section is a concluding reflection on future challenges for the advocacy process to concretise a regional autonomy that fully embraces women's rights.

Regarding methodology, the fieldwork supporting this essay is a product of two things: the investigative work the authors have carried out in distinct periods and the collaborative relationship the authors have cultivated with the CEIMM and other women's organisations in the RAAN from the end of the 1990s to the present. Dolores Figueroa was a professor at the Bluefields campus of the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast (URACCAN) from 1997 to 2001, and is currently a researcher affiliated with the CEIMM. She conducted fieldwork for one year in 2006 for her doctoral research on Miskito women of the indigenous political party Yapti Tasba Masraka Nanih Aslatakanka (YATAMA, Sons of Mother Earth), and the Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas de la Costa Atlántica (AMICA – Atlantic Coast Indigenous Women's Association). Later, during a fifteen-day visit to the RAAN in 2009 to carry out a consultancy on women's organisational processes in the region, she did fifteen in-depth interviews with women community members, legislators and leaders and activists of the Red Ampliada de Mujeres Contra la Violencia (Extended Network of Women against Violence). The connection between her doctoral work and her consultancy resides in her follow-up work on organisational processes that have enabled the emergence of a gender consciousness among indigenous and Afro-descendent women.

Co-author Arelly Barbeyto is a CEIMM and URACCAN professor–researcher at its Bilwi campus. Her doctoral research deals with Miskito women from the Krukira community and their search for access to justice. Barbeyto has done her fieldwork at the community level with human rights advocates and with *wihtas*, the traditional authorities. She has done interviews and follow-up work on services provided to women

by organisations such as the Colectivo Gaviota (Gaviota Collective), Movimiento de Mujeres 'Nidia White' (Nidia White Women's Movement) and AMICA. Her fieldwork research took place from June 2010 to February 2011. Barbeyto has used methods such as in-depth interviews, participatory observation and following public events, forums and conferences organised by Network members.

Demography of the Atlantic Regions, Autonomy and Violence

The Nicaraguan Caribbean (or Atlantic Coast) region comprises 50 percent of the national territory, a 60,360 km^2 area (PNUD-IDHH, 2005). The population is 620,640 – some 12 percent of the national total. The Atlantic Coast region is divided into two administrative regions – the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) and the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS). The two regions are inhabited by six distinct ethnic–racial groups: the Miskito, Mayagna and Rama indigenous peoples; the Afro-descendent Garifuna and Creole groups; and the hegemonic Mestizo community. The Mestizos are a majority in the two Atlantic Coast regions, comprising 89 percent in the RAAS and 57.7 percent in the RAAN. The second largest group are the Miskito people (17.05 percent), followed by Afro-descendants at 3.68 percent. The total RAAN population is 314,130, with the following ethnic make-up: Mestizo, 56.7 percent; Miskito, 36.22 percent; Mayagna, 5.94 percent; and Afro-descendants, 1.14 percent (Williamson Cuthbert and Fonseca, 2007).

The capital of the RAAN is Bilwi. The majority of women's organisations of the RAAN described in this essay are located in Bilwi, but they have decentralised offices in rural municipalities where they carry out community extension projects. The coalitions analysed in this writing are located in the North region, but some Afro-descendent organisations are also referred to whose main presence is in the RAAS. The narration of this essay centres on describing women's organisational processes in the Atlantic Coast regions without any direct reference to the feminist movement on the Pacific side of Nicaragua. However, it should be noted that, although Coastal women's activism and Pacific Nicaraguan feminism are related, tensions exist over distinct conceptions of gender and agendas for action. For that reason, comprehension and analysis of this relationship require a separate space for reflection.

The specificity of the autonomous regions lies not only in the multi-ethnic, multiracial and multilingual nature of their social composition, but also in their historical development – which is different from the forms of socio-economic organisation of the inhabitants of the Nicaraguan Pacific – and the decentralised administrative model the regions enjoy through the framework of regional autonomy. In historical terms, the region was once a Miskito kingdom protected by the British (1600–1860) and later an economic enclave of US extractive companies (1920–1960). Diverse forms of Anglo-Saxon commercial and political influence in the indigenous territories, coupled with the introduction of a slave population, led to a development model based on extraction of natural resources and a socio-political order in which the local populations enjoyed a wide margin of autonomy and self-determination. In contrast, and somewhat schematically, it could be said that the Pacific side of Nicaragua was a territory under Spanish influence, where Christianity and the Spanish language and culture were forced on the original inhabitants, as well as agricultural production in haciendas (González Pérez, 1997; Frühling et al., 2007). By the time of independence, the Spanish-speaking Mestizo power elites aimed for the political–administrative integration and expansion

of the Nicaraguan nation into the Atlantic territories. They imposed a process of forced integration, both political and cultural (Pineda, 2006). That historical contradiction continues to influence the political and administrative relations between inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast and the central powers of the Nicaraguan nation.

Given that background of tension and estrangement, it is vital to take a measure of the establishment of the autonomy regime in the Atlantic Coast, mandated by the autonomy statute or law 28, passed by the Nicaraguan National Assembly in 1987. The autonomy regime was a political means to resolve the armed conflict that emerged in response to the incorporation of indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples into the Sandinista nation-building project (González Perez, 1997; Pineda, 2006). The multi-ethnic autonomous regime was created as a channel for the political representation of all socio-cultural groups of Coast society, and to decentralise the central government's functions and resources.

The political–administrative structure of the autonomous regime involves two regional councils for the two autonomous regions, the RAAN and the RAAS. There is an executive branch in each, called the Regional Government. Each has secretariats and offices for coordination with external cooperation on development themes. The regional councils, it should be mentioned, are the key arena for debating proposed laws, government plans and resolutions concerning regional and community development (González Perez, 1997; Frühling et al., 2007).

Regarding the RAAN's socio-demographic make-up, it is important to note that its population is 72 percent rural, a fact that relates to the poor access to basic services, health and education (INEC, 2005). This region is divided administratively into eight municipalities, the most densely populated being Puerto Cabezas, with 66,169 inhabitants. The main economic activities are agriculture, logging and lumbering, cattle rearing, artisanal mining and both artisanal and industrial fishing (Williamson Cuthbert and Fonseca, 2007). The family economy of poor sectors of the Caribbean Coast depends heavily on natural resource extraction and/or agricultural production – a situation in which temporary hunting or fishing bans, floods, hurricanes or falling market prices can significantly damage community living standards. Added to the fragility of the Coast subsistence economy is the negative impact of drug trafficking. Drug running and consumption are illegal activities that tend to augment other illicit practices related to the climate of insecurity afflicting women's lives (Dixon and Torres, 2008; Barbeyto, 2010).

Various reports on violence against women in the Atlantic Coast regions show that intra-family and sexual violence and femicide have today become a problem of alarming dimensions (Dixon and Torres, 2008; Alvarez and D'Angelo, 2013). As one measurement of the magnitude of violence and access to justice in the RAAN, the Comisarías de la Mujer y la Niñez (WPS – women's and children's police stations) received a total of 761 complaints between January and August 2010, 8 percent of the national tally. Some 453 cases correspond to sexual crimes, and there were 303 cases of intra-family violence.) Of the cases of sexual violence, 55 percent (251) were committed against minors (under fourteen years old), where the perpetrator was a father or other close family member who had some direct responsibility for caring for the victim (Dixon and Torres, 2008: 11). In many of cases of intra-family violence, there are various obstacles that impede a case going to trial, and so a mediation is done instead (Vado, 2010); or sometimes the judge imposes a mediation procedure to make the victim desist from continuing a criminal justice process. One of the dangers of mediation is that some reported femicides, or the killing of women for gender reasons,

have involved cases in which mediation had failed to redress the situation of violence faced by the woman, and her (ex) partner's aggression eventually escalated to femicide (Alvarez and D'Angelo, 2013).

For civil society and women's organisations involved in following up this phenomenon, the statistical data only reflect the tip of an iceberg of much greater dimensions. The panorama is disheartening given that the actual number of sexual violence victims is estimated at four times the reported figure (Gaviota, 2011: 12). A large part of the work of regional organisations is focused on strategising about social, legal, geographic and structural elements that restrain victims from going to relevant entities in search of help, and effective and sensitive ways for these institutions to respond to their complaints.

Finally, it should be mentioned that Nicaragua is a signatory to various international women's human rights instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). In that framework, the Nicaraguan government has energetically taken up the struggle against violence through Law 779, the Integral Law against Violence towards Women and Reforms to Law 641, the Criminal Code, passed in 2012. There is undoubtedly a relationship between the spirit of this law and the programmatic character of the Atlantic Coast women's movement. However, it is important to note that the particular agendas of regional-level networks largely depend on the local imaginary of gender justice and the local political context.

Building Alliances Among Network Organisations

This essay, following the approach of Cole and Phillips (2008), argues that the struggle against gender violence has facilitated the disposition of diverse actors to coordinate joint actions. Specifically, by defining violence against women as a human rights violation, and by adopting a human rights approach to development issues, women's groups have been able to experiment with new approaches in their grassroots work. Also, this framework has enabled them to agree upon a gender agenda that is persuasive and politically efficient in contexts where there is scant will to recognise women's rights (Molyneux and Lazar, 2003; Merry, 2006, 2009; Cole and Phillips, 2008).

These analytical elements will be applied to review the case of civil and women's organisations in the RAAN, most of which emerged after the armed conflict of the counterrevolutionary war – they follow different ideological or party orientations, but see themselves as part of the same project of regional autonomy. Promoting actions around the theme of violence has captured the attention and commitment of different regional actors who previously had trouble working together. The reasons for this are related to the following elements. First, and perhaps most important, is the concern among regional organisations about the impact of violence in communities, and widespread awareness that this is a growing phenomenon. The organisations' precarious economic situation has led them to pool resources and knowledge to deal with this problem and to work with outlying communities. International cooperation has come into the region to support work on this theme, providing the necessary funds for directly attending to victims of violence, and to complement the community-level work by regional organisations that had pioneered human rights training following the war. Second, institutionalisation of regional political autonomy has been hegemonically led by a masculine elite poorly disposed to building a democracy that includes women from ethnic minorities. Marginalised from power centres, Coast women leaders have set

up networks to accumulate political capital to apply pressure and to influence various levels of power to win recognition of women's demands. In this effort, the problem of violence has been effectively articulated to attain a common interest for action among distinct women's and civil society organisations.

Each of the organisations described here has a different mandate and origin. However, all have now adopted a human rights framework to carry out their educational and/or lobbying work. Not all of the mentioned groups are women's organisations. Some are civil organisations offering a spectrum of general services to the Coast population, but always with special focus on vulnerable sectors such as youth, children and women. Some organisations maintain close ties to regional political organisations although they say they are nonpartisan. Regarding ethno-racial identification, only one self-identifies as an indigenous women's organisation. The others, while not having an official ethnic identification, tend to have a preference for working with indigenous, Mestizo or Afro-descendent populations.

The first point is to say that what is today known as the Red Ampliada de Mujeres Indígenas y Multi-étnicas contra la Violencia Intrafamiliar, Social y Sexual (Extended Network of Indigenous and Multi-Ethnic Women against Intra-Family, Social, and Sexual Violence) is an organisational expression of women and NGOs in the North Atlantic region. The work of their predecessors can be traced from the mid-nineties onwards as various women's organisations carried out activities around economic empowerment and human rights promotion. However, it was not until 2006, through the implementation of a project called Services to Victims of Intra-Family and Sexual Violence in Puerto Cabezas, also known as CAIMCA (Centro de Atención a la Mujer Caribeña – Centre for Services for Caribbean Women), that regional women's organisations began to work together collaboratively against gender violence in the RAAN (Barbeyto, 2010).

The main goal of CAIMCA was to train community promoters to service gender violence victims. In 2006 a network of ten partners was formed around the CAIMCA project, called the Network for Attention to Victims of Intra-Family and Sexual Violence, in the Puerto Cabezas, Waspam and Prinzapolka municipalities. This network attained funding from the Agencia Andaluza de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo (AACID-Andalucian Agency for International Development Cooperation) and the French Foreign Ministry. The civil organisations that originally formed this network are the Nidia White Women's Movement (AMICA), Voces Caribeñas (Caribbean Voices), the Colectivo Gaviota and the Centro de Derechos Humanos, Ciudadanos y Autonómicos (CEDEHCA – Centre for Human, Citizen, and Autonomous Rights). Later, in 2009, this network was broadened to include representatives from governmental entities (such as the health ministry, the women's and children's police stations, the autonomous government and the judiciary), local women's organisations (such as the RAAN Women's Forum and the Wangki Tangni collective), churches (such as the Moravian Church Women's Pastorate) and the two regional universities (Montes and Woods, 2008).

The organisations independently carry out their tasks, responding to different approaches, mandates, capacities, geographic location, and work agendas. However, in the Network's context they take on a complementary and articulated nature. At first, the work of Network member organisations was focused on after-the-fact services to victims of violence, administration of shelters and accompanying victims throughout the legal process. Later, with the recognition of the importance of prevention, elements of advocacy have been incorporated as a new approach aiming to involve a broad

spectrum of actors for the eradication of violence and integral services to victims. This line of work also involves efforts to work persistently with district judges and traditional authorities to get them to become more knowledgeable about national and international norms for women's protection, and to recognise themselves as key actors to bring about an end to the cycle of impunity.

The articulation of the Network's actions is operationally based on planning joint activities for key political moments, such as anniversaries or any crucial conjuncture, in order to raise Coast women's collective voice. The network president's post is rotated. Monthly meetings take place to follow up on coordinated work plans. It should be explained that this articulation is not easy to achieve because of snags regarding administration of resources, institutional limitations, political advocacy, and above all because rival interests always create tension among network members. It is important to emphasise here that, over and above their differences, organisations maintain a commitment to dialogue and a political will to be regional actors who stand up for lives free of violence.

Indigenous and Afro-descendent women's organisations not only serve distinct sectors of people, but their expertise also leads them to cover distinct social dimensions of the phenomenon of violence. For example, Afro-descendent organisations help to raise consciousness against sexism and objectification of the Black woman's body (Woods Downs, 2002; Morris, 2011). Negative values about negritude help to justify sexual violence against Afro-descendent women. The Afro-descendent population of the RAAN is numerically small, but the activism of professional Afro-descendent women is very dynamic in urban zones such as Bilwi. They have effectively managed to project their racial presence and identity into the regional imaginary of multiculturality. This Afro-descendent activism echoes the political relevance of questioning the ethno-racial hierarchical classification that in a regional framework has served as one of the most important pillars of social stratification, placing Mestizos in a hegemonic power position over the other ethnic groups.

Organisations working in indigenous zones especially emphasise community-level work to enable women to become aware of their rights. This kind of training aims to have a direct impact on empowering women victims of violence and making them more aware of the ways to find justice (Ibarra, 2007; Barbeyto, 2010). The main barrier to working in indigenous communities is related to the hegemony of the struggle for the collective rights of indigenous peoples, and to the difficulty of raising women's issues that challenge the traditional patriarchal order. This is why organisations working with indigenous women are faced with the dilemma of questioning the decisional role of the *wihtas* (traditional authorities) and/or of raising their consciousness so they will act on behalf of victims rather than applying restitutive law.

Those two different lines of work – advocacy in indigenous zones and Afro-descendent anti-racist activism – have been converging, beginning with an intercultural dialogue that activists and professionals have encouraged in order to bring about a consensus among women from distinct strata and regional political actors. As already mentioned, the concept of interculturality is a principle that guides any resetting of interethnic relations between individuals kept apart by class inequities and linguistic–cultural and racial hierarchies. Higher education centres such as URACCAN have undertaken a commitment to conceptually develop a perspective for building a politically autonomous and culturally diverse community that aims to overcome structural inequities and internalised racisms (Davis, 2006).

URACCAN's academic body is composed of important women leaders – Miskito, Garifuna, Creole and solidary Mestizos – who have carried out reflexive work about

women in the region. This collective of professors founded the CEIMM, a centre whose mandate is to interpret and take a critical approach to women's gender and rights discourse from a multi-ethnic and racial perspective. For the CEIMM, the construction of gender relations as conceived through hegemonic Western feminism has not taken into account different geopolitical and cultural contexts within which Afro-descendent, indigenous, poor and rural women live (Dixon and Gómez, 2005; Hooker Blandford et al., 2010). Based on that multi-ethnic position, CEIMM women have pointed out that there are distinct ways to experience gender and undergo oppression and violence that have not been dealt with and/or envisioned from an intercultural feminist perspective. From this critical perspective, the issue of domestic violence in the region has required various efforts of interpretation, mediation, and reflection about cultural diversity and the kind of violence that is carried out in community contexts in which traditional law prevails in handling internal conflicts (Dixon and Gómez, 2005; IIWF, 2006; Merry, 2009).

Complementing the above-mentioned work, the CEIMM has taken on an active role in obtaining resources to promote spaces for political and programmatic articulation of Network member organisations, where themes such as interculturality, rights and gender violence are extensively debated in order to acquire a common, consensual language. A common language refers not only to familiarisation with conceptual terms, but also the critical adoption of a lexicon that enables articulation of local demands in a politically effective way. That is how the CEIMM has in many senses impelled the emergence of a regional consciousness around recognition by diverse Nicaraguan governmental entities of the specificity of Atlantic Coast women's rights, which has fostered a vibrant activism that strives for its own multi-ethnic, multiracial voice and for a feminism of difference: that is, a feminism that reflects upon the diversity among women, especially women who endure multiple forms of oppression.

Vernacularising the Human Rights and Gender Approach

This section will develop some key ideas about the work of appropriating and vernacularising the human rights discourse undertaken by regional organisations such as the CEIMM. First, Merry's thesis (2006) is that human rights training programs in non-Western settings must be culturally situated to make them understandable to local people, but situated so as not to lose or distort the focus on individual protection of the body, as well as individual capacity for choice and the right to equality (Merry, 2006: 137). Merry argues that if the heart of individual rights is distorted in the translation, then the possibility of eradicating gender violence and changing patriarchal hegemony is lost. In the light of activist work carried out in the region, it is possible to argue that fitting the rights approach into the regional reality has not been superficial and, above all, has especially not been uncritical. Coast women's support of this translation process focuses on efforts to harmonise the individual sphere of women's human rights with the fundamentally collective nature of indigenous peoples' rights.

Human rights are endowed with a powerful ethical reason to mobilise consciences and resources to raise voices against social injustices. And, although human rights stemmed from a universal vision, little by little they have been enriched through the political influence of marginalised social voices. In fact, the global feminist movement and globally organised Afro-descendent and indigenous peoples have been spearheads of the enrichment of the framework of universal rights, enhancing this paradigm through

important reflections from the perspective of the ethnic and racial diversity of peoples who have been impacted by various forms of colonialism (Figueroa Romero, 2006; Hooker Blandford et al., 2010; Mendez-Torres, 2009).

The human rights approach taken by activists and indigenous and Afro-descendent leaders has yielded fruit in many ways; perhaps the most important is the vigour and disruptive force of the process of acquiring consciousness of having 'rights', and the capacity to act for change on behalf of both the individual and the collective. This approach has been widely adopted by organisations that do strong training work so that they can become more accepted and better received among community members (Molyneux and Lazar, 2003; CEIMM, 2004; IIWF, 2006; CEDEHCA, 2008). What does that mean? Community women come to perceive that a human rights paradigm endows them with a convincing way to demand equality before the men of their community. The message of the training workshops is that women 'also enjoy rights'; therefore, they are equals of men. This notion of equality helps women to fight for dignified treatment within their communities without shattering internal indigenous unity, a condition necessary to the struggle for collective rights. The human rights paradigm disseminated in the training workshops includes both the human rights of indigenous people and discussion of forms of discrimination against women. It should be added that the two paradigms are seen to be compatible in so far as elimination of one aspect of discrimination has a positive impact on the other (Figueroa Romero, 2006).

Taking this stance has a lot to do with the way in which indigenous women place themselves within the ethno-political project of their peoples, and how they have rejected the hegemonic feminist notion of conflict between genders. These two elements can be found in documents elaborated by the same organisations that are the voices of indigenous activism. For example, in 2002 the CEIMM elaborated an analytical document entitled *Género desde la Vision de las Mujeres Indígenas* (Gender Through the Eyes of Indigenous Women). It was widely discussed and analysed by indigenous and Afro-descendent participants in the First Continental Summit of Indigenous Women of the Americas, held in Oaxaca, Mexico. The document highlights a criticism of transcontinental feminist activism for its emphasis on the individual sphere of violence against women while depoliticising the structural violence that generically assaults indigenous peoples (Dixon and Gómez, 2005: 225). From the perspective of indigenous women, the struggle to eradicate gender violence has to be comprehensive and inclusive of all aspects of discrimination that affect indigenous women and the peoples to whom they belong. In this sense, the document helps demonstrate that racism, poverty and ethno-racial discrimination come together in a particular way in the experience of indigenous women – something that escapes the universal definitions of violence elaborated on the basis of the experience of white feminist women.

Indigenous activists have been most emphatic in criticising another important aspect of the national and transnational feminist debate against gender violence – the element that identifies non-Western cultural traditions as per se violating women's rights. According to this take on the matter, traditional cultures damage women through their abusive social practices, and must be changed (Merry, 2006, 2009; Valladares de la Cruz, 2008). There have been various fruitful counterarguments to this view that have revealed the colonial perspective of feminist appreciations of non-Western cultures and that have also forced indigenous activists to elaborate a critical position regarding internal violence in their communities and the role they play in their peoples' cultural reproduction.

For activists of the CEIMM and other network member organisations, it is important to point out that it is erroneous to assume that non-Western cultures fundamentally

violate women's rights. Certainly, violence against women in the communities is a reality, but its origin is not limited to what the local culture dictates regarding gender roles. Rather, it is also due to the way in which poverty affects unprivileged social groups, the destruction of the subsistence material base of Coast peoples and drug trafficking (Dixon and Torres, 2008; Barbeyto, 2010).

The ways in which violence is experienced in indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-descendent communities varies from group to group, and the mechanisms used to struggle against it have to respond to this diversity and to the contextual complexity in which those events unfold. For example, a study carried out in the municipalities of Waspam (RAAN), with a Miskito majority, and Pearl Lagoon (RAAS), with a Creole and Miskito population shows that it is necessary to construct a model of services suited to the region's multicultural nature; one that takes into account the linguistic particularities of the complainants, and cultural notions about violence (Antonio, 2008). Traditional authorities are used to resolve all kinds of community conflicts, which encompass cases of *estupro* (rape of an adolescent aged 14–16 years), sexual assault and any other kind of physical or sexual violence against adult and underage women. The traditional system prevails in those communities, with little presence of the police. The logic of traditional law dictates measures that tend to favour community bonds over any pursuit of aggressors. That is why the cited study points out that extending the reach of women's and children's police stations to isolated communities could help to mitigate violence. But greater intercultural and local knowledge is required of the gender regimes that determine the disposition of abused women to seek justice, and leave men prone to acting with impunity (Ibarra, 2007; Antonio, 2008:22).

Indigenous and Afro-descendent women's organisations are aware that the struggle against violence is not limited merely to the legal and punitive handling of aggressors. Rather, it also includes raising awareness, in all sectors of the population, about women's human rights. This is vital because the prison system and the police and WPS only have geographic reach over 30 percent of the region, which indicates a very limited role in prosecuting violence against women (Ibarra, 2007). In this setting, the indigenous women's network has sought to emphasise training work in rural zones both with community women and with authority figures (who are mostly men). There is a strong sense of prevention behind the involvement of district judges in the training sessions, because they may be the first to receive women's complaints (Ibarra, 2007; Barbeyto, 2010). The training of community women aims to spark proactive agency on their part to defend their individual selves. A critical observation would be that encouraging aggrieved women to have the will to seek justice when traditional authorities refuse to hear their cases must be complemented and accompanied by a profound reform of the judicial system handling those accusations.

Conclusion

This essay aimed to make visible the articulation process of civil society organisations of the North Atlantic region, particularly the creation of collaborative networks to fortify the struggle against gender violence. We started with the thesis that Coast women – indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-descendent – have worked out their own stand regarding how to adapt a human rights approach to their own cultural contexts and to the logics of local power. An important analytical contribution of this essay has been to demonstrate how regional activists negotiate contradictions that emerge from

adopting international human rights instruments in contexts where non-Western notions of justice prevail that value collective wellbeing over and above women's moral and physical integrity (Ibarra, 2007; Barbeyto, 2010). The activism of Coast women leaders shows that there are various ways to achieve a life free of violence. They include both external accompaniment of women as they follow the route to accessing justice, as well as sensitisation of traditional authorities' awareness so that they rule in favour of victims and, possibly, even become critical of traditional practices such as the *Talamana*. The strategic vision of this dual approach responds to two things: first, the idea that it is more effective to show community *wihtas* how they can enhance the wellbeing of women, rather than to comfort them for tolerating individuals who damage the individual integrity of women (Gaviota, 2011); second, the fact that when community women become conscious of 'having rights' they acquire greater agency to navigate between different orders of rights – positive and traditional law – and to seek justice regardless of barriers. In this sense, an adequate assessment of the impact of human rights education must not be restricted just to the dissemination of the notion of equality; it should also encompass the political uses of human rights discourse that effectively uplift the dignity of women of all ethnic and cultural groups (Figueroa Romero, 2012).

In the light of the perspective of Cole and Phillips (2008), we would add that this analysis of the work of regional organisations against violence shows that the activism of Atlantic Coast indigenous and Afro-descendent women has been articulated in a complementary and collaborative manner thanks to the multi-ethnic and intercultural perspective through which they have learned to encounter sisterhood over and above their political differences and interethnic tensions. One element developed in this essay is that interculturality is an ethical principle that has facilitated a critical dialogue on interethnic and prevailing power relations in the region that divide distinct Coast civil organisations and women leaders. It has also been pointed out that this dialogue has been instrumental to both coordinating actions and building consensus around a common agenda for all women in the region. A complementary point relates to women's willingness to enter dialogue with each other, which has been a condition for developing a vibrant activism among Coast women whose basic purpose is to question the reproduction of forms of oppression against women at the community level at the same time as it criticises the systemic violence that threatens the social life of indigenous peoples (Figueroa Romero, 2012).

The future challenges for organised Coast women gravitate around various processes. Perhaps the most important is to strengthen the joint work of Network members in order to avoid any crisis in the collective due to damaging power-tripping or conflicts occurring during or after the implementation of projects. In addition, adoption of the new Law 779 has given rise to a new stage in which Coast organisations have undertaken lobbying and outreach work to assure that this law is applied adequately and in harmony with the region's prevailing legal pluralism. For the Network, this implies arduous work in two directions. One is to build awareness for eliminating bad practices in the administrative and judicial agendas of national and local governments. The other is an exercise to harmonise the law's principles with the traditional legal system in order to unblock the barriers faced by women in the autonomous regions. Today, more than ever, coordinated work is needed among women's groups and civil society in order to bring about a change in the mentality of politicians, police officers, district judges and *wihtas*, who usually tend to underestimate the claims of victims of gender violence and favour conciliation between the two parties.

Finally, 20 years ago regional autonomy inspired an organisational process among indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-descendent women in a region where discrimination against women was taken to be natural. The autonomy project emerged with the goal of bringing development and self-determination to the Atlantic region's indigenous peoples and ethnic communities; however, this promise has not been particularly fulfilled for indigenous, Mestizo and Afro-descendent women. It is for that very reason that their voices are vital in casting light on the difficulties involved in the materialisation of these ideas, especially given the poor institutional development of the regional entities mandated to guarantee women a life free of violence.

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