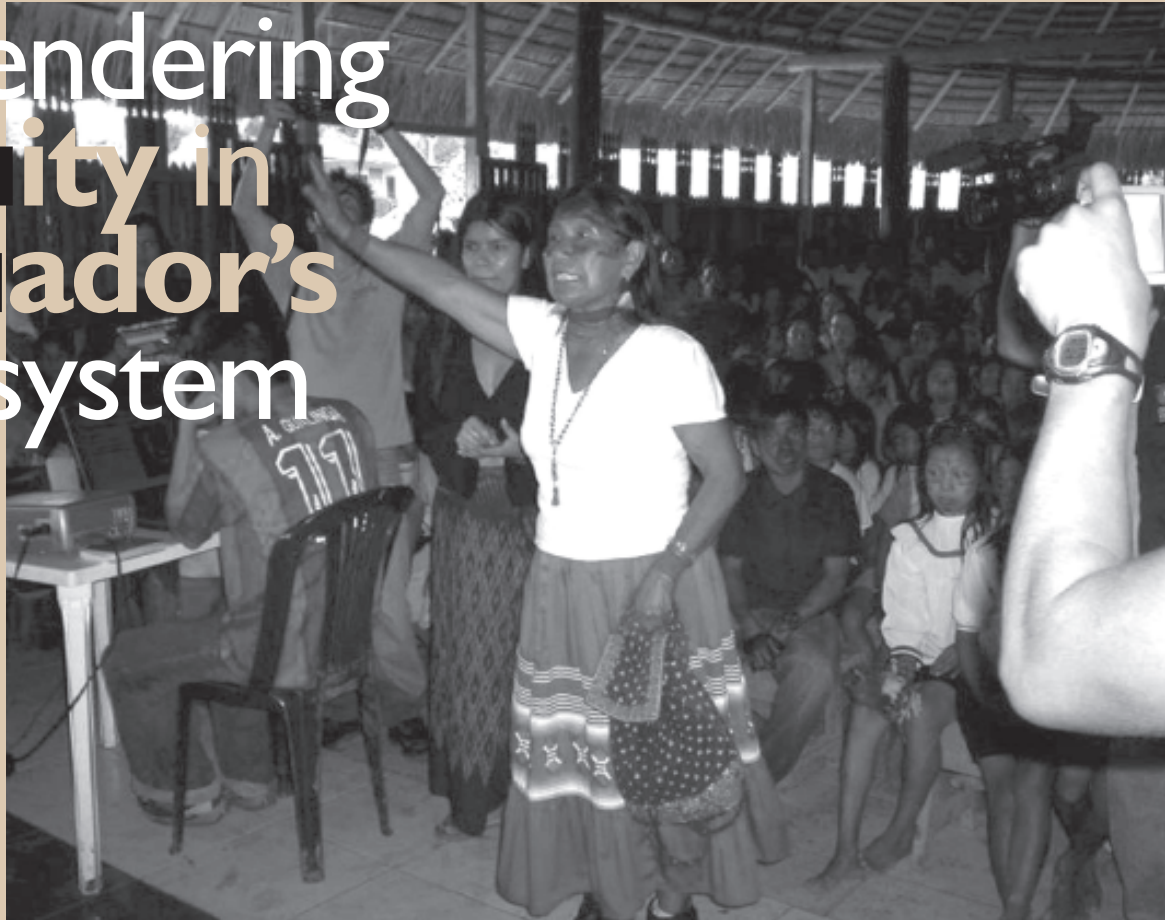


# Engendering Equity in Ecuador's Ecosystem

by Ivonne Yanez



*Climate change has increasingly been on the national and international agendas. While it has always been a part of people's daily lives, climate change has ceased to be perceived as a matter of speculation or an ominous threat. It has become a reality that demands immediate and concrete actions.*

## **Leading the Way.**

*The Sarayacu women are among those who pioneered campaigns for energy sovereignty in communities. Regardless of the political regime, they have been aggressive in keeping the country's rich oil reserves in the soil, preventing them from becoming a boon for a few local and foreign elites and a bane for Ecuadorian Amazon.*

Photo by the author.

**While** the causes of climate change are straightforward, its impacts are quite disproportionate not only between developed and developing nations but also between urban and rural areas, local and indigenous communities and men and women, among many others. That in order for us to reckon our future, we need to account for the finer residues of our colonial past and manifestations of the neoliberal present.

Oil is one of the constant cornerstones of these dynamic and oppressive political and

economic eras, whose implications deeply penetrate the division of labour down to the community and the household. It is also a site of struggle towards climate justice and ultimately gender justice.

While the North is largely responsible for climate global warming, the latter punishes the South more. Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia and the entire Andean Amazon region as well as Africa and Southeast Asia are bearing the brunt of higher temperatures and rising sea levels. These countries and region have fewer

economic resources to adapt to the changes in the environment.

In the Andean region, people have become even more pressured to earn even with destructive ecological livelihood activities. Massive infrastructure projects and extractive activities such as mining have caused deforestation, soil damage and flooding, which in turn have had a higher social cost. Worse governments lack the political leverage to effectively control and manage such damage.

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The United Nations (UN) has acknowledged climate change's disproportionate impacts especially to women but its documents such as the Kyoto Protocol have been quite silent on women and gender. They are also mum on the disproportionate economic gains derived from the environment by developed nations via colonisation and neoliberalism. Yet this injustice has a huge gender component.

Women are responsible for the collection of firewood and water. They provide food for their families. Their dependence on the environment has made them among the worst hit when drastic changes happen to the forests, rivers and other natural resources. Women are also the most affected in cases of disasters

Moreover, women are among those who have become quite familiar with the

environment. They are also the most concerned with saving water and energy. Their stewardship has transformed these women into repositories of knowledge on the strengths and limits of the environment. It is for this reason that their inputs must be heard and heeded at this point.


But women have only been seen as victims rather than stakeholders in decision-making processes, especially on plans around climate change mitigation and adaptation.

The ground operations of the oil industry illustrate the irony that developmental projects pose for women and their communities. Although these projects promise progress, they have merely been a burden to already marginalised communities especially women.

The areas where most oil is found and exploited are traditional territories of indigenous peoples. These oil-rich areas have been subjected through a strong colonisation process that has determined the competition over resources among indigenous communities, local communities and oil corporations. While there have been various efforts to protect the rights of communities in these areas, most communities have been sacrificed in the end.

People's food sovereignty has been compromised as people begged oil companies for basic needs. It is also quite ironic that while these areas have been the source of energy, the communities lack access to such utility service. With such drastic changes in social relations through time, women have been the most affected.

Like everybody else, women suffer from the pollution coming from the extraction of oil. But given the traditional roles of women as food providers, women can easily pass on their ailments to the members of their family. They are in permanent contact with water



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**Progressive Proposal.** *Despite the tempting financial bounty underneath the Yasuni National Forest, the Ecuadorean government has decided to leave the ground untouched. Moreover, it demands that the international community pay the country 50 per cent of the foregone oil revenues or about US\$350 million annually for ten years. Preserving the Yasuni National Forest would not only allow Ecuador to sustainably manage the place but also dramatically prevent more greenhouse gases emissions.*

**Source:** Kisner, Corinne. (2009). "Ecuador: A Sustainable Development Model." URL: <http://www.climate.org/publications/Climate%20Alerts/Summer2009/Ecuador.html>

Photo from Amazonia Por La Vida. <http://www.amazoniaporlavida.org/es/Noticias/El-Yasuni-es-filmado-por-un-experto-camarografo-de-EE.UU.html>

that is used for drinking as well as the preparation of the maize-based beverage, *chicha*. They accompany the children to the river to bathe. Women also tend to perform more tasks as the men are increasingly integrated in the industry as workers. This is also why women tend to spend more time in taking care of the land.

People in these oil-rich areas are also in deep poverty. These areas have had a high percentage of chronic and structural poverty because of massive deforestation and oil activities impacts. And among the poor, women are the poorest.

Given the impact of oil exploration in these areas on them, women have been among the first to wage campaigns to stop new oil wells from being opened. Moreover, they have initiated larger campaigns that call for social restructuring in defense of their survival and the environment's sustainability. The Quechua women of Sarayacu in the

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Ecuadorian Amazon, for instance, have been building energy sovereignty communities.

While there have been hundreds of campaigns against environmental destruction, the approaches of communities and social movements vary. In many cases, the entry of multinational corporations is physically blocked, that face to face confrontations happen. In some cases, indigenous communities have demanded that the blood of the earth not be removed.

But Ecuador has made a radical shift in campaigns, surprising many others within its league. In fact, its proposal has ruined attempts of so called green negotiators who wanted to make a business out of air pollution based on carbon trading.

Ecuador has proposed that its most important oil reserves be left in the subsoil. More importantly, it has demanded a solidarity fund, coming from the industrialised countries that have caused climate change and have accumulated ecological historical debt. The fund is geared towards four objectives: renewable energy development, conservation, social rights satisfaction and reparation for past oil extraction.

The Ecuadorian proposal sets clearly the idea of common but differentiated responsibilities and the principle of “polluter pays” in the international arena. It is Ecuador’s way of exacting accountability from Northern countries, especially for the latter’s ecological debt. It is also in line with the country’s responsibility to protect our forests and avoid producing new greenhouse gas emissions.

This proposal indeed began and evolved from the social struggles especially that of the indigenous communities in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The transition from oil has become a fundamental agenda for hundreds of organisations.

A post-oil model entails a tighter state control of strategic sectors such as energy, but with a democratic process, considering the plurinational status of our country. This also means that critical issues must be incorporated into the new Constitution. Among these issues is the promotion of various energy sources, whose appropriation must be decentralised and must cause the least impact on communities. Meanwhile, civil society must continue pursuing a participatory process that will eventually decide on the management of the funds.

To work towards energy sovereignty and in the process, a progressive climate change solution necessitates a deep criticism of an economic model that is based on productive labour and the exploitation of the environment and humankind, especially women’s reproductive labour. In Ecuador and some parts of Latin America, the groundwork is being laid for an “economy of care” as an axis that must be protected and recognised.

An agenda that builds sovereignty from within communities is the only way to achieve true economic transformation. More importantly, any proposal that aims to adequately respond to climate change can only succeed if it is born with a female print. ■

***Ivonne Yanez worked for 10 years on the proposal for an oil moratorium to keep the oil underground. A staunch supporter of local struggles against oil exploration and other related operations, she is part of the Ecuadorean environmental group Accion Ecologica and Coordinator of Oilwatch South America.***