

The challenge of gender equality in the Peruvian Amazon

*Interview by CIDSE (December 2019) with Dominik Szkatula, Lay Missionary of the Peruvian Amazon
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Dominik Szkatula arrived in Peru in 1984, with a guitar under her arm, wearing modern jeans, and convinced that she would stay all her life to serve the most needy and persecuted. And also because it was essential for her to be part of the Church very actively as a missionary, but above all as a lay person, and she made this claim of the work of the laity in the Church part of her mission, as a kind of "holy rebellion".

Throughout these 37 years she has gotten to know the whole Vicariate of San José del Amazonas working in different mission posts, in positions that had never before been occupied by a woman, and visiting all of the posts annually for 11 years when she was the Coordinator of the General Pastoral Ministry of the Vicariate. Today, she is responsible for the Indigenous Pastoral, a position she has held for more than four years. She feels happy living in this corner of the planet and dealing with simple and humble people helps her to be closer to God, "to touch Him" as she says.

Her first assignment as a missionary was in Tamshiyacu, which she considers her "university of inculturation". She was also in San Pablo, where she served the lepers and the people of Mazán, on the banks of the Napo, a tributary of the Amazon. There, together with two other lay women and in collaboration with animators and catechists, they created a new parish. For the past four years she has lived in Angoteros, on the border with Ecuador, and among the indigenous Kichwas in the Napuruna Mission "Pachaya" (which means "Father and Mother of time and space").

What is the social situation of women in the Peruvian Amazon?

According to ECLAC (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), out of the total population of women in Peru approximately 24% are indigenous. The women of the Peruvian Amazon are still subject to multiple types of discrimination, even more so the indigenous women. In a culturally macho environment, the fact of being women, their origin, the indigenous language, the degree of schooling, among others, makes them more vulnerable to discrimination.

According to the 2017 Census, only 24% of native communities have secondary education, with an increase in the number of school dropouts, where women are the first to be affected since in order to continue studying they have to travel or be absent from home, going to shelters that are not adequately supervised, without tutors, without resources, without healthy conditions in many cases, exposing girls and young women to greater dangers. Therefore, families often prefer to suspend the education of their daughters and have them in the community dedicated to other businesses, especially the work of the farm or start a family very early. They often end up as single mothers.

And as for health, the situation is similar because in addition to not having adequate health facilities (only 4 out of 10 communities have it), there are no professionals trained to serve indigenous peoples. They do not know the local language, do not respect ancestral medicine and do not know the culture of the place, which is an obstacle to good care services and prevention measures.

Also with regard to social and political rights, there is a big gap to cover. Women are excluded from communal boards of directors and there is little participation in dialogue spaces and political processes. And as in a vicious circle, the political, social and economic marginalization of indigenous women opens the door to another series of human rights violations. Violence is the greatest threat to all women, but even more so in the case of indigenous women since such violence can often be invisible.

What does your work with women consist of in the face of this situation?

Unfortunately, in the Vicariate there is still a lot to be done in terms of the defense and promotion of women and their leadership. The work with women is constant; I accompany the women of the Mission in Angoteros and of the 35 communities that I visit periodically every six months. I would like to visit them more often, but the lack of resources, the great distances and the reality that I am there alone, makes it very difficult.

When I arrive in these communities and also in Angoteros, I listen to the women and together we look for solutions to some of the problems they face: children imprisoned for family violence or drug trafficking, situations of human trafficking suffered in the community, lack of food for children who have been abandoned by their parents, and their poor health (malaria, cancer, deep malnutrition...). I also offer them help from our vicarious offices of Human Rights, Health Department and the state offices such as: Ombudsman's Office, CEM (Centro Emergencia Mujer), Ministry of Women. But these are not nearby. You have to go to the city of Iquitos, which takes you two days in a very expensive sliding boat or several days of navigation in a cheaper boat.

In addition, in the last four years in Angoteros, I have carried out a training for women with special attention to the rescue of their indigenous cultural identity and promotion of their rights. This training, which takes place between the Vicariate of San José and the neighboring Vicariate of Aguarico, lasts three years and is very complete with four dimensions: Kichwa cosmovision, spirituality, sacraments and Bible.

Finally, we developed practical workshops for the "warmi kuna" (women in Kichwa): Kichwa identity, handicrafts, bread for Christmas, painting of bags of tocuayo fabrics with their pictographic signs, sewing of "chaucha wawa" which is a traditional rag doll used in the ceremonies of "kasarana" (wedding), baptisms and Christmas. And while our hands are busy, we talk about everything, laugh about what they like the most and transmit our energy and values like hope.

Tell us some examples of women's achievements in the Peruvian Amazon

I know two women who are "Apu" or chiefs of the Kichwas Indigenous Communities, and although this happens very rarely, since the position is usually given to men, they were elected in their assemblies by all the people. Now they preside over the community, convene, gather, represent and decide for it.

Mrs. Betty, for example, has been for several years the president of the Kichwa Indigenous Federation FECONAMNCUA, which includes many communities in the middle Napo and two other basins: Curaray and Arabela. But there are also women who preside over organizations of social programs that are carried out in the communities. In other words, they are entrusted with the organization of the groups and the administration of food and money. And these women bravely talk about problems of daily life. For example, in one of the Assemblies, the women publicly raised the problems of family violence directly to the men responsible for that violence. With them we have also contributed to the preparatory work for the Synod of the Amazon. Among their contributions, for example, they told us that in the masses the clothing of the priests frightened them and that the liturgy was very complicated to follow.

Mrs. Lésica is a courageous "warmi" and mother of four, who decided to finish her secondary school by distance education. Today she is working in one of these early education schools in a community near Angoteros. Her example was followed by some other women.

Mrs. Selmira, a Kichwa Indian, mother and grandmother, is a translator in Kichwa - Spanish, and a teller of stories and myths, as well as biblical stories, who contributes with her valuable work to many publications. Her faith and perseverance saved her husband from alcoholism and today gives him the courage to continue giving testimony of how to live with dignity again.

And also Doña Yadira, very committed to the Church, to which she dedicated a lot of time. Her 'cari' (man in Kichwa) "knows that I have committed myself and I have to fulfill my tasks". This kind of commitment causes women to be respected and also to be valued more by their husbands.

How could the Church help achieve gender equality in this region?

In general, the Meetings for the Training of Animators in the headquarters of the mission post are usually animated by men, since women do not manage to free themselves from the many tasks at home and the care of children (an average of 7 per family). That is why I decided that, given that in the "kichwa" culture the man without the woman is not complete and vice versa (so much so that in one's own language there is no pronoun he or she, only "pai", which is the same for both) I began to invite the animators with their partners to all the meetings. Just the fact of receiving a letter in which they were personally invited touched them very much as they felt visible, taken into account and respected. The important thing is to always invite them. They will see how they organize themselves and how they decide upon it, but it is the obligation of the Church to invite them. Women's participation should be encouraged as this is the only way through which they will achieve leadership both in public environments (economic, educational, health, political and ecclesial participation) as well as at home.

If the Church wants to set an example and be a leader in promoting equality among people, it is essential to create a culture in which this gender equality is practiced daily and in daily life.

The Church cannot lose sight of the fact that indigenous women play a very important role in the survival of their communities. It is them who transmit language, customs and myths to other generations. And the Church must recognize and support women in this task, since defending culture will not dissolve their traditional harmony, the distribution of tasks between men and women and their complementarity.

In addition, the Church could give better and more effective attention to women victims of physical, psychological and sexual violence and accompany the processes of recovery. The majority of the women who suffer violence in our region are minors and the perpetrators are often teachers and relatives.

Finally, the Church has a great opportunity in terms of education to promote gender equality, because among Kichwa women 15% are illiterate because they always have fewer opportunities to study and let us not talk about higher education. Many are single mothers at the age of 13 and because they are pregnant they are discriminated against and feeling ashamed they do not finish their studies or reintegrate after giving birth due to lack of family, school or institutional support. And if the Church does not support there, the gender gap will continue to widen.

What did you think of the role of women in the Amazon Synod?

It has been very important that the voices of indigenous and Amazonian women have had a special space in the last Synod, but it is important that all women in the world are heard and made visible. Women have a key role in the development of their communities, in the defense of life, of faith, of territory, for the health and in the education of children, etc.

I hope that in future Synods women will be increasingly invited, not just the nearly 40 that were invited this time. Without looking at women, without taking them into account, the Church will be more rigid, it will lack flavor, joy... It is necessary that the Church sides with women in defense of their rights and supports them and walks with them as Jesus walked with women and accepted their company and collaboration, giving them an enormous role in a society that with its patriarchal values rejected them almost completely at the time.

The idea of new ministries for women proposed by the Synod at first frightened me because I thought that it would mean even more work for women in addition to the work that they already do in maintenance, cleaning, care, catechism for children, errands... But if these new ministries involve positions of responsibility, recognition for theologians and easier decision making, they are welcome. Here in the Amazon many women are already substitute the "parish priests", (in quotation marks because of course this ministry does not exist) and in some cases, as was very much explained during the Synod, in the absence of so many priestly vocations, it is the women who baptize, hear confessions, attend marriages, distribute communion, assist at funerals... etc.

Also the "famous" question of the ordination of "viri probati" has left open some questions as to whether this commitment to ordination does not imply a little clericalism, and, as the pope said himself with great emphasis, a lack of confidence in the role of the laity. On the other hand, by ordaining these married men, one is in some way ordaining also his wife, because in the Catholic tradition Marriage is understood as no longer being two persons, but only one flesh. In this same way the indigenous conceive life as a couple.

This Synod has put on the table many issues that must be listened to and taken into account. But after the Synod we continue to seek solutions so that God may continue to inhabit this flourishing Amazon and its people may continue to communicate with Him in their culture and in their style.