

Alicia Canaviri talks to SAIC about Women...

Young People and Globalization in the Indigenous communities of Bolivia



Alicia Canaviri, Aymara, is a social worker and community organizer. She is the general coordinator of the Center for Aymara Women's Develop (CDIMA) in La Paz, Bolivia. CDIMA works to help Aymara communities, especially women and young people, overcome discrimination and poverty by providing training and educational workshops.

CDIMA rose out of the severe social, economic, political and cultural crisis facing Indigenous women, who were suffering discrimination and exploitation by the system for being women, for being poor and for being members of an oppressed people. As Indigenous women they were seeing the price of their products fall, and their work undervalued, underpaid and unrecognized. The fact that there are no laws to protect Indigenous women's work is a grave injustice, which Alicia would like to remedy. CDIMA develops programs to empower and educate Indigenous women and youths, the most marginalized sectors of Bolivian society, so

that they can influence the public sphere and obtain positions of power to better protect their culture and their rights. Alicia told us about the necessity of CDIMA's work when she was in Oakland this summer.

How is neoliberal globalization affecting Indigenous communities in Bolivia, and how are you, as an Indigenous woman and a founder of CDIMA (Aymara Women's Development Center), trying to empower Aymara women and young people to be able to face this new ideology of economic development?

It is true that this situation is affecting all Aymaras and certainly all Indigenous people in Latin America. I will speak about this neoliberalism in respect to how it affects Indigenous women. In Bolivia, the systemic problems are very serious. We suffer exploitation, oppression, the marginalization of women, especially Indigenous women. A woman who doesn't know how to read or write is scorned. In order to attend school, one needs to know the Spanish language. Therefore, when I was ten years old, I learned to speak Spanish because I had to. If I only spoke the Aymara language, I would be severely discriminated against in this society. And my fate was already decided because I was an Indigenous woman who wore a *comisa de pollera y una chompa de obeta* (traditional clothing) and therefore I wasn't worth anything. I automatically didn't matter.

It hasn't changed. It is an experience that I've had all of my life, not only when I was young or when I was in school. When Indigenous women begin to look for work, they are never treated equally with other women and even less so with men. There is a triple discrimination against an Indigenous woman: for being a woman, for being Indigenous and for being poor. I and my Indigenous sisters in Bolivia and across Latin America have suffered this every day of our lives.

For this reason, CDIMA, a group of Aymara women was born. We organized ourselves for the purpose of educating ourselves and empowering ourselves to defend our culture and our language. Our language was used as the means to achieve our goals of defending the thoughts and ideas of our people. We began to work initially on a voluntary basis to fight against marginalization, exploitation, and the different forms of oppression against the Aymara woman. We began to work with the local women's organizations in different rural communities. Women in these small communities have no opportunities to enter the public sphere, and are not encouraged to make any effort to do so. We met many women who had previously received certain kinds of training for women to make them good housewives. They had been taught little manual skills, how to cook, how to take care of their children, all in Western style. When we began our work this was the only type of training available for women.

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We confront this situation by offering another kind of training. We taught them to analyze their situations in their communities: What role do women play at the local level, within their own communities? What role do Aymara women play in the power structure at a national level? All this internal analysis has affected the women in the communities and shown them that they are marginalized. Once women began to question their positions in the community and beyond, they began reacting against this marginalization and discrimination. Aymara women are confident that they as women can do important activities to benefit the entire community.

CDIMA does not work only with the women. We also work to educate the men and raise their consciousness. In the past, everyone only worked with the women, but in order to really change the situation we need to work with the men also. The women began to invite their husbands to our meetings and the men began to come and we began to work together. This has been successful in many communities. Women and men both participating is a positive step, because it is crucial for both Indigenous men and women to work together in the struggle to control our communities.

What type of training did you give the women? Can you give us some examples?

Initially, we had women leaders discuss their experiences: the history of Indigenous villages, the participation of Indigenous women, all of this. This work proved to be very worthwhile. Then, we began to work at organizing from the base level. And during the different courses and activities that we did, the women selected those people who had the potential to be leaders in their communities. Out of the 8 communities, 40 women were chosen. We worked with these 40 women in intensive courses to train them to be leaders.

The first thing that we taught these potential leaders was to lose their fear. The women were scared of speaking in front of people, so we worked with them on public speaking because most Indigenous women are not accustomed

to it. The three steps of the courses are to identify their fear, then work on self-esteem and confidence raising to help them overcome their fears, then to apply this new confidence to their relationships. These three things are fundamental in order for a woman to become empowered as an individual within her community. This is one of the goals of our work. The 40 women who participated in these intensive workshops learned how to overcome their fear of speaking in public, and more importantly they learned to speak their minds freely without fear.

These first 40 women are now liberated, empowered, and organized to defend and fight for the rights of the Aymara woman. Our organization is dedicated to providing training and educational opportunities to all Aymara women. It is fundamental that the women are trained to occupy important positions. If they are not trained, they will never break into the system.

Another objective of CDIMA is to work in conjunction with other Indigenous organizations, not only Aymara organizations, but with all types of organizations at the national level. There is a relationship between Aymaras and Quechuas, and between Indigenous women's organizations. This exchange with other organizations helps our Aymara people think about their actual situation and question it and compare it to the situations in other Latin American countries with relation to globalization. Together we investigate the economic problems being created in these countries and the destruction of the environment. In our villages, many times we don't know in advance what the results will be when big companies bring in equipment to cut down the forest. For example, many forests disappeared without the Indigenous people being aware of what was going on. But through organizing and becoming educated, we can defend our rights and the land.

You also educate and train the Aymara young people so that they will be able to defend their Indigenous heritage. What kind of programs do you have for these youth whom you are helping learn how to defend themselves?

CDIMA has had a lot of experience

working with young people. As I said initially, we work mainly with the two most marginalized sectors of the society, women and youth. We have seen in Bolivian society that these two sectors are completely forgotten by the central government. The youth in our country are managed, governed as a minority, as dependents. And what we want is a space for this minority in the power structure, at the national and international level. In the first place, we believe that Indigenous people should govern themselves, and be represented in the Parliament of Bolivia.

It has been very important to train the adult women, because they act as mentors in the society. Therefore we work with the women who educate the children, and with the youth, because they are the future of the country and the future of the Aymara people. We have taken on this marginalized sector of society, because it is here that the great potential for our people lays.

We did a diagnostic on the young people's situation within the communities. We went to their villages and met with them, because we believe that the youth are people too. In Aymara when a person is of a certain age and is not married, he is not considered a person and we call him "el jaque". We have seen that because of this stigmatization, the young people marry and are required to take on a position without any knowledge or experience and are easily manipulated by the different political parties. This is why it is extremely necessary that we need to train this sector.

Initially, when we went to the communities, the young people (13, 14, or 15 year-olds) would run away from us. This forced us to adapt our methodology of work. We would bring balls and play in the fields and after some games we would have a little break in which we would ask them what role they (the youth) play in the community.

We saw that the youth were being neglected. And so we met with the authorities and the fathers of the families to ask them what are they doing to benefit the young people, so that they are able to be productive women and men in the future. The youth are seen as children, and not as people who have roles in the

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community. We discussed with the communities what happens when our young people grow up without receiving any education or training.

We began organizing traditional music and dance classes for the young people of the communities. We are also teaching them our stories. Right now, we are organizing a competition in the stories of our Aymara ancestors. The young people who know the ancestral traditions and tell the story best will win a prize. We want to educate the youth in what our stories and traditions mean. Through these classes we help them to learn who they are and to identify with the land, because without knowing who they are they will lose their identity. And if before they liked Western music, now they like our own traditional music. For example, one of the young people came to one of the classes and listened to the traditional music. He said "This music is different. I feel something for this music, it attracts me, I don't know, in my body something else happens. And before when I listened, I didn't feel anything. But now, I don't know, it makes me sad, it makes me melancholy." It is experiences like this that prove that we have succeeded in helping the young people feel that our music is their own.

One of our greatest achievements is that our young people identify as children of Aymaras and as Aymaras. We are proud that they take Aymara as their own identity. One of our objectives is that the young people who enter into high schools and universities and other jobs remain Aymara. We also want the youth to learn about their rights as Indigenous people and to form concrete ideas about their future as Indigenous people. In the communities where we work, we actually have around 30 young people that are creating their own proposal, calling for popular participation as a base for local power. This proposal will truly defend our rights and help us to defend against the outside influence of globalization. If we don't educate our children, they will be manipulated by other people.

In our communities, it is necessary to defend against all of the types of exploitation that exist. We need to defend ourselves with knowledge, through information and training. If this does not happen, Indigenous people are going to continue

to be manipulated, to be exploited, and to suffer as a result of this neoliberal system. The youth, women, and men are now creating their own ideas about development from their own communities without losing their identity, without losing their traditions, without losing their language.

One of the biggest obstacles in the present system is that Aymara youth have no opportunities to become professionals. They remain in their communities or they go to the big cities to be day laborers, to be white peoples' assistants, to be porters or simply to be drunkards. This is the life of Indigenous young people in the cities. And what we want to do is train the youth so that they will grow up to be great men and women and play an important role in the cities and in their communities.

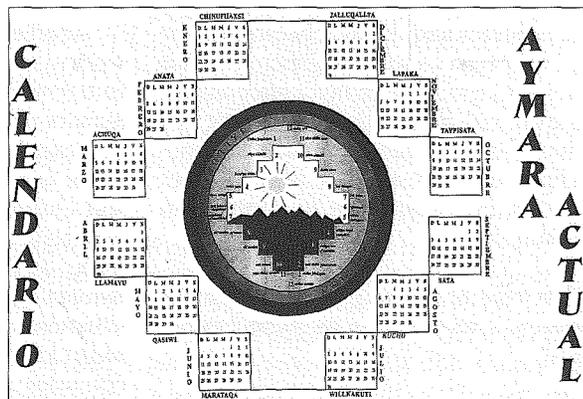
Because of our work, the young people think differently now. They want to be professionals. They are eager to be trained. They have a better education and greater self-esteem and can therefore enter into positions of power. Of course, in relation to the population, this is a small group of young people; between those trained and those in training, there are around 369 young people. We want at least 50% of these young people to become professionals. And if they aren't professionals, then we hope that the majority hold important positions within different spheres, as directors, as leaders. We also hope that when they obtain an important position within the public sphere, they won't be used and manipulated by political parties, but will be true to their own personality which is Indigenous.

Our major goal is that in 10 years we want to see our Aymara young people trained as professionals and to see them in Parliament. There are possibilities through new laws that have been implemented in Bolivia. If they achieve this, their goals are realized at the public level and they are in the power structure and can work for their people and for their nation. One of our biggest objectives is that at least 10 young people, after 10

years will have entered the governing body. For us, for CDIMA, this would be a great success. And if there are more, that would be even better. They can set an example for the other youth in the community. And I believe that this is a realistic goal because the 30 young people with whom we are working now, are beginning to work with confidence.

What advice would you like to give to the Indigenous movement and to Indigenous young people in particular?

I would like to tell the youth that in the first place we need to think about what is happening with our people. What is our place within the society and what is happening in our countries with the young people? What do our governments say about the youth? And by responding to these questions, maybe we can escape the situation in which Indigenous young people are currently. The young people will allow us to move forward with our



initiatives and the initiatives of our ancestors. Therefore what I want to say is that we have to continue the struggle. We can't leave our culture. As Indigenous people we have to face the situation and move forward, making sure that our people are respected, that our rights are respected, and that the youth are educated and trained. Because, with training, it is possible for them to achieve everything that they desire. If we don't have training, if we don't have better information and education we won't be able to move forward. This is the most important thing that I have observed. When the youth are informed and understand what is happening around them, then they can reflect on it and propose their ideas about overcoming the problems of their people.