

# The Right to Love and Politics: An Indigenous Activist's Perspective

*Eulalia Yagarí González, a Chami woman activist in Colombia, was elected as a member of the regional parliament of Antioquia on March 8, 1992 (International Women's Day). In this interview, she speaks to us of her life and hardships as an Indian woman activist. Eulalia is convinced that the struggle of Indians in Colombia for land, culture, and autonomy must be conducted on many different fronts simultaneously. Her struggle is not only relevant to Indigenous communities but to all oppressed people in Colombia, particularly women.*

## Interview with **Eulalia Yagarí González**

**Why did you agree to be an Indian candidate for the senate elections?**

**B**efore I answer your question, let me just say that the political participation of Indian women is nothing new. We have always been involved in politics in the sense that we've always defended our interests, our tradition, our culture, our fellow men as well as our whole people and our land. We fought for 500 years until our voices were finally heard. Now Colombia has a new constitution. A certain sector of the Indian population, Blacks, and other ethnic groups have united in a political alliance, which will not only defend Indian interests and rights, but also those of Black people, the lower classes—in fact all marginalized groups.

When they were looking for candidates and they noticed that I'd been politically active for twelve years and was committed to the rights of women, children and our entire people, they chose me. Actually I only agreed to the candidature after they approached me for the third time. But as an Indian

woman I don't just want to fight for the interests of Indian women, I also want to fight for the rights of all women in this society, the workers, the *campesinas*, the Black women who have always been discriminated against until now, the women of other ethnic groups like the Gypsies—basically all women who are politically and socially active in this country. But when I demand their rights I don't just want to make superficial political speeches. No, if I get elected to the Senate, I'll fight for quite specific proposals and projects promoting the social development of women: the right to prenatal care, for recognition of women's participation, and power for women to achieve their right to work and decent jobs, not just jobs that are almost beyond physical endurance.

**What could Indigenous women achieve in the senate if they were elected?**

We could start by implementing everything the new constitution has assured us of. We must form alliances with other progressive forces, with spe-

cific groups on the left, but also on the right. We'll see what the politicians will actually do. Of course, in the election campaign, they promised all sorts of things. Personally I don't have any illusions about what I can do for the Colombian people, firstly because I'm aware of my limitations and secondly because we don't have the financial means. We have far too little power in the state to really change society. All I can do is simply devote all my strength and intelligence to the task in hand. I'll also use my feminine cunning, because in all honesty, we women are very cunning. Women are capable of a great deal. It's just that we've always been undermined. Our rights were taken away from us and we were undervalued. Women were there for sex, child-rearing and maybe the odd bit of politics. We never had any more space than that. So we're well-placed to flirt with our bodies, but also with our intelligence, our discerning nature and with our cunning. We have many abilities we can use to change this society. As an Indian woman, I can't speak such high



Eugenia, San Juan Quichá

class Spanish as a big politician, but that doesn't mean I have no right to be heard. Despite all my limitations, I intend to fight in the senate—albeit cautiously, because the senate is a completely new ball game for us.

**You just said you only let yourself be nominated as a candidate after the third invitation. Why were you so hesitant initially and why did you accept in the end?**

Basically I never wanted to get into big politics. I've been pushed into it. The work in the senate seemed to me like the struggle of a little fish faced with a shark. And besides, this work means giving both my daughters to someone else to look after. I've also got a partner who's politically active as well.

I have a difficult relationship with him. We love each other but our political struggle in this quagmire of violence and war makes it impossible for couples to live in peace with one another. We're not the only ones in this position in Colombia. Hundreds of us women, Indian women, *campesinas*, women from the popular movements, workers and trade unionists aren't able to have happy relationships with their partners. Commitment to the cause takes away the ability and time for love. Relationships often break up, because there's a lack of opportunity for the joys and pleasures of love, affection and togetherness. Sometimes we're only at home for one or two days and often only for one night. There's no time to sleep with each other or even just stroll

along the street together. And there's no time to keep the family together or bring up the children properly.

**Who are your children growing up with?**

With relatives. But of course an aunt or granny can't replace a mother. You can't just switch emotional ties. Traditionally, we Indian women always have our children with us. Indian children grow up differently from other children. From birth we carry children around with us. In many communities they're only weaned when they're five or six. I suckled Marcela for four years. Because of my work I had to wean Patricia after two years. I think this long and close relationship early on helps Indian communities to develop a strong sense of solidarity. We may well have political differences, but we still feel ourselves to be Indigenous people.

Today our children, the children of the popular leaders, are growing up with traumas and psychological problems as a result of the permanent state of war. They have no home, no parents who love each other, they don't feel protected and they don't have a good education. Lots of children are constantly in day-nurseries. We leaders and women at the head of the popular movements sometimes find ourselves on our own in the end, not because of the political work in itself, but because it's being conducted in a war situation.

**You're a member of the Antioquia Organization of Indigenous Peoples (OIA). What type of women's program do you have in the OIA?**

We don't have a specific women's program which reflects the fact that very few women are in leadership positions. Cristiania is an Indian community where many politicians like to have a finger in the pie. Women have achieved a lot of political space but many are not in a position to take on political functions. In my opinion we need a new policy for liberating women, but I don't mean a policy like the ones introduced here from Europe and North America.



Photo: SAIC Archives

"Women are capable of a great deal. It's just that we've always been undermined." -EYG

The cultures and societies are totally different there.

My positive image of women is not just limited to Indian women. I feel that women in general are amazing, lovely creatures. Women—Indian and black women, French, Cubans, Soviet citizens, Chinese women—all women are the most beautiful people in the world.

On the other hand, some women who used to suffer and were repressed and put up with being beaten, have managed to liberate themselves. But what happened? They now act like they're on another planet and behave just like men. I know it's great to feel free at last. But do we really want this type of freedom? I don't think so. I want liberated women to strive for something different. Women must change the course of this universe. But to do this we're going to need all our willpower.

#### How do you defend yourself against machismo?

Well, I've had to put up with all kinds of stuff. There are foolish, uncouth types who shout at you and don't let you finish speaking. So you have to grit your teeth and say to them:

"listen, you may be physically stronger, but I've got more inside my head. And if we're seriously fighting for the same cause, then no one just gives orders and no one just obeys." On the political circuit I've put up with some difficult situations. If they're traveling with a woman as a member of a delegation, the men are right in there trying to go to bed with her. And afterwards they've got nothing better to do than talk about it and then it becomes the latest gossip. "Oh, so you went to bed with her, as well? And what was she like?" After that the woman is finished politically. A friend of mine was done for because 15 men claimed to have slept with her. And they laughed themselves stupid over it. That's machismo in its purest form. As a woman involved in politics, you still have to deal with stuff like that.

But we can't wage this struggle the same way everywhere. You have to go about it differently when you're dealing with women who think of themselves as the slave at home and nothing else. In this country there are still a lot of women who believe they can't experience any sexual pleasure because that's simply a man's prerogative. Many allow themselves to be repressed by their

husbands all their lives without even realizing it.

#### Don't you think that's gradually changing?

Certainly there are women who think the same way I do and are working towards a different educational policy. But it's not just a question of discussing things with men because men as individuals and the system which represses are not one and the same thing. Men are also our lovers, our friends and our brothers. The problem is that in Colombia and in the whole of Latin America there are still far too few men who acknowledge our true worth.

#### What will you do if you don't get into the senate?

I'll work in the communities again. I have a piece of land I'll cultivate. I enjoy tilling the soil, sowing, harvesting. I'm actually a campesina. I used to grow coffee. I worked hard at it and carried heavy loads. But with the money I earned, I used to buy myself nice clothes. I'd happily do that again. 🐾

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