

# Empowering Native Women: New Initiatives to Reclaim Indigenous Women's Status in Central America

Paying attention to women's roles as managers of territories and transmitters of cultural identity, we focus on two regions of Central America where small-scale Indigenous women's initiatives are encountering success at re-inserting women as dynamic members of their societies.

By *Laura Hobson Herlihy*

Indigenous women's involvement with conservation, development, and human rights organizations has given them new political and economic power in the Honduran Mosquitia and in Panama. Conservation efforts have almost always focused on men's role in economic activities and their use of natural resources. However, focusing attention on the important role of women as managers of community territories and transmitters of language and cultural identity provides glimpses of the emerging empowerment process that many Indigenous women are presently experiencing in Central America. In this article I present the case of the Miskito and Tawahka of Mosquitia and the Kuna, Emberá, and Ngobe-Bugle Guaymí in Panama.

## **Majao: A Women's Market in Moskitia**

The Tawahka Sumu (population 700) live along the upper reaches of the Río Patuca in the Honduran Mosquitia. High atop cleared river banks, houses cluster to form the villages of Krausirpe, Krautara, Yapuwás,

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Photo: Laura Hobson Herlihy

A resurgence and re-valorization of Indigenous women's status is possible through their own organization and involvement with conservation, development, conservation, development, and human rights organizations.

Kamakasma, and Wasparasni. Krausirpe, the biggest village, has a population of about 400. Because few Indigenous women in Mosquitia still weave bags made from rainforest plants, I was surprised to find Tawahka women weaving bags made from the *majao* (*Heliocarpus Donell-Smithii*) tree.

The women explained that FITH (Federación Indígena Tawahka de Honduras)—a legally recognized Indigenous federation that represents the Tawahka people—initiated a local market in the late 1980s to purchase their woven *majao* bags. In order to be marketed in Tegucigalpa as “book bags” or “purses,” FITH representatives requested that women weave smaller,

multi-colored, bags with a long shoulder strap. A few years later, MOPAWI (Mosquitia Pawisa), a non-profit development agency in Honduras, took over FITH's bag-making project and incorporated it into their “Formación de la Mujer” program, which has helped improve women's socioeconomic status in Mosquitia by providing them with local cash-earning opportunities. Marketing woven *majao* bags is a positive element in Tawahka Sumu society. Bag manufacturing is not harmful to the rainforest environment and it provides a mechanism through which women pass down traditional knowledge to their daughters while, at the same time, providing income for their households. In the process, the

women's *majao* bags have become one of the recognizable symbols of their broader struggle for their own identity and cultural survival.

### Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve

Just north and contiguous to the Tawahka zone is the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve. It was established under the United Nations' Man and the Biosphere Program in 1980 to protect the natural and cultural heritage of this special part of Honduras. The Miskito, the largest Indigenous group in the reserve, lived in 19 villages with a population of 4,500.

In Kuri, a small Miskito village (population 122) on the Caribbean coast, Indigenous-held territories within the biosphere are passed down through the female line. Sisters built their homes around their mother's patio and reared their children together as one greater family. Women inherited both coastal village and rainforest territories from their mother, known as *Mama Almuk* or *Kuka*, the powerful grandmother figure, village elder, and head of the matrilineal group.

Miskito men lived away from the coastal villages for long periods of time, earning cash off-shore while diving for lobsters and doing subsistence agricultural work up-river while living on their wives' rainforest territories. With the men gone, women passed down Miskito language and culture to their children in matrilineal residential groups, teaching them traditional kinship terms and women's activities.

### Indigenous Women's Congress in Panama

Farther down the isthmus, in a broader and unprecedented way, Indigenous women in Panama recently organized an annual, national-level congress called "Mujer Indígena de Panamá" with the help of non-governmental development organizations (NGOs), including UNICEF-Panama, the United Nations, and the Centro de

Estudios y Acción Social Panameño (CEASPA). I attended the first Indigenous women's congress in 1993. Nearly 100 Kuna, Emberá, and Ngobe-Bugle Guaymí women met over a weekend to discuss their common problems and goals in this Central American country. First, the participants analyzed the political, legal, social, economic, and cultural involvement of Indigenous women in Panama. Next, they analyzed the history and status of women in each culture group. The objectives of the meeting were to promote the participation of *werara* (Emberá woman), *merv* (Guaymí woman), and *ome* (Kuna woman) as one force, and to formulate propositions to be included in the "Plan Nacional de la Mujer." At the end of the three day meeting, the Kuna, Guaymí, and Emberá leaders proposed that the "Plan" should include, among other programs, education, health care, land titling, and work opportunities (including the marketing of arts and crafts) for all Indigenous people in Panamá.

Beyond this, some Indigenous women in Panamá also hold local and regional political offices. Celia Mezua, President of the Emberá "Congreso General," holds one of the most powerful Indigenous political positions in the country. As President of the Congreso, Mezua presides over a council of leaders who make important cultural, political, and economic decisions concerning the Emberá. The daughter of a former *cacique* (chief), Mezua graduated from the national university, became a local leader, and was then elected to regional leadership positions.

During the first Indigenous women's meeting in Panamá, Mezua called out for justice and decried the government's taking of a Ngobe Guaymí man's life, and for their use of tear gas against pregnant Indigenous women who had recently demonstrated in Panamá City. She also called for the national legislature to approve the law recognizing the Guaymí Comarca homeland. Likewise, she demanded



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A *Mama Almuk* or *Kuka*, the powerful grandmother figure and village elder.

that legislators enforce the demarcation of the already existing Kuna and Emberá Comarca boundaries and for the removal of newly settled colonists within their limits. Newspaper reporters recorded the event and these demands in the national press. That the government did not respond to all of them did not diminish the significance of this event. For the first time in Panamá's history, Indigenous women, coming from different cultural identities, acted together in unified opposition to the national government. Mezua and the other Indigenous women leaders continue to pressure the government concerning their territorial and human rights. The Indigenous women's congress meets annually to discuss these and related issues.

Indigenous women in Panamá and Honduras are aware of the impacts colonialism, including "Modernization" and "Westernization" which have historically subordinated them. Their organized resurgence and self-valorization, as well as their involvement with territorial conservation, their own definition of "development," and collective human rights, are hopeful signs that they will ensure a future for their larger societies for years to come. ♡