



Canada and Mexico, Encounter of Indigenous Cultures. United Nation's Office on Drugs and Crime and Canada's embassy in Mexico.

Liliana Cordero Marines*¹

Dialogues among First Peoples From the Regions Known As Canada and Mexico

Between 2021 and 2023, Canada's embassy in Mexico organized a series of roundtable discussions of leaders, mainly women. The premise was to deepen bilateral, regional, and multilateral cooperation, spread their voices, champion their rights, put an end to human trafficking worldwide, and preserve the dignity of individuals. The objective was to exchange experiences and knowledge about the topics central for first peoples in order to build more just societies.

The crosscutting themes reflect the commitment the Canadian government has taken up in recent years: "The Participation of Indigenous Women in Decision-making Processes"; "Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples"; "Stopping and Preventing Human Trafficking in Indigenous Communities"; "Indigenous Women's Leadership in the Prevention

of Human Trafficking"; "The Role of Indigenous Women in Protecting and Promoting Indigenous Languages and Cultures," among others. The dialogues began with questions. While most of the participants were indigenous women from Canada and Mexico, some of the discussions benefited from the participation of indigenous women from other countries like Ecuador, Panama, Guatemala, and Peru, in addition to academics and government representatives.

The conversations were fruitful. Despite the big differences between the Canadian and Mexican regions, every dialogue made evident a considerable universe of affinities emanating from a common history: colonial plunder and the fight to reverse the damage to their communities. Although nuances and different approaches were clear, the tone was one of agreement and affinity. This article will share only some of the ideas and common points encountered in the light of the questions the Canadian Embassy in Mexico asked the indigenous leaders, both women and men.

* Liliana is a researcher at CISAN, UNAM; you can contact her at lilianacorde@gmail.com.

What are the main challenges that limit indigenous women's and girls' participation in decision making in society and politics?

Guillermina Juárez Leyva and Zenaida Pérez, from Mexican territory, and Francine Joe and Hilda Anderson-Pyrz, from Canadian territory, responded to this question by outlining three grave problems that seem to crisscross the lives of indigenous women and girls from both regions in the same way and equally as intensely.

The First Challenge

All four leaders pointed out that the first challenge was the need to guarantee survival and solve basic needs. They said that having been deprived of their lands, the lack of housing or its bad conditions, scant educational options, the lack of income, food deficiencies, and, of course, insecurity, create uncertainty. This, in turn, translates into dropping out of school, isolation in their homes, or migration that distance women from their communities and from social and political participation.

All of these make it more difficult for women to occupy positions of representation and slows their empowerment. In short, they said that only if basic needs are resolved is it possible to exercise other rights such as social and political participation. This means that it is fundamental that governments generate equitable opportunities for the indigenous population that would allow them to have confidence and acquire and generate skills.

The Second Challenge

When women manage to forge ahead and occupy a position in their community or even in an institution, they are faced with yet another challenge. The four leaders stated that they often do not feel respected or honored. They must overcome racism, classism, power trafficking, and the perception that the indigenous population, above all women, are only destined to serve and not to participate, decide, or exercise rights. From their perspective, this happens because the Western world view wrongly considers them to have less value. As a result, they must overcome patriarchal dynamics that seriously undervalue their actions, or adult-centered contempt if they are young women.

The Third

The leaders considered that unequal power relations lead to political violence. So, the third challenge they pointed to is that they must deal with the damage and stress this provokes. They say that it is very difficult to feel part of something without respect. Based on this, we could add that, for indigenous women and girls to participate in decision-making, it is urgent that governments work to achieve equity for all the women of all the groups and communities in their territory.

What Does Reconciliation Mean for Indigenous Communities?

Canada established its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2007 as one of the agreements derived from the government's recognition of the serious damage done by the state to the First Peoples through its residential schools in the second half of the nineteenth and the entire twentieth centuries. Among the TRC's main objectives was to fully investigate and determine the extent of the damage inflicted, offer solutions to the problems that arose from them, and prevent abuses against these communities. Since that time, both parties have been going through a process of "reconciliation," which has frequently been criticized by the indigenous peoples. That is the context in which the question is posed.

For Ángela Lavalle, from a first nation situated in Manitoba, Canada, and Yinna Dalila Almaraz Muñoz, of Kumiai origin, in what is now known as Baja California, for First Peoples, reconciliation means first and foremost to heal. That is, recover, recuperate, strengthen themselves, and improve after the multiple wounds imposed by colonialization. Every member of the First Peoples needs

Deprivation of their lands, the lack of housing and income, educational and food deficiencies, and insecurity cause dropping out of school or migration that distance women from social and political participation.

Unequal power relations lead to political violence, and it is difficult to feel part of something without respect. For those women to participate in decision-making, it is urgent to achieve equity in their territories.

to recover: their spirits, their families, and their communities. Ideally, the healing should be accompanied by justice. However, it is only seldom that the two go together. Usually, these peoples manage the former without achieving the latter.

In the second place, reconciliation requires the support of both governments and society at large. Indigenous organizations must be backed by governmental institutions and funded to guarantee that their activities can be ongoing so they have a real impact in the communities and their healing can move forward. For Ángela and Yinna, cooperation among First Peoples and the state is fundamental.

For this support to yield the best results, the parties involved must come to understand each other. Yinna is categorical when she says reconciliation cannot happen without mutual comprehension. To meet this challenge, it must be assumed that the First Peoples' perspectives are very different from the Western viewpoint. She says that a similar effort must be made to that of learning another language to be able to communicate with a different way of thinking, with different rules and ways of understanding the world. This must surely imply putting oneself in the shoes of those who do not matter, of the survivors of the different attacks, the attempted extermination, and assimilationist projects.

Given such persistent destruction, reconciliation means taking on the task of rebuilding the First Peoples, their governments, and their laws. It also means empowerment. Neither Ángela Lavalle nor Yinna Dalila Almaraz Muñoz talk in terms of simulated or subtle empowerment. They do not want to be included in a preexisting system in which they neither participate nor have room for action; much less do they ask to become part of a hierarchical, patriarchal system. That is why the empowerment they imagine can only be born from a transformation.

For this reason, reconciliation means restructuring. That is, their rights would be a normative part of the

structures, included in a horizontal relationship, seen as something beyond their traditions; so, they would need room for action, and they would be seen as important, conceived as equals.

What kind of support could the international community give to the indigenous communities' goals?

Rubí Celia Huerta Norberto, a Purépecha and professor at the San Nicolás de Hidalgo Michoacán University's Purépecha Language Academy, and Laura Bournouf, of Métis-Cree origin and the minister of language of the Saskatchewan Métis Nation, consider support from institutions fundamental. From their point of view, that support must happen in two necessarily inseparable moments: the recognition of First Peoples and their rights, and that this recognition be transformed into actions that contribute to reducing the inequality gap between these communities and non-indigenous inhabitants.

Despite their coming from different places, both views agree that a shortcut to the solution of the challenges they face today, for people to be able to enjoy the best living conditions, it is fundamental that indigenous languages be reconstituted. It must be remembered that in forging both the Canadian and the Mexican states, the indigenous peoples were subjected to aggressive and genocidal assimilationist policies.

In this process of plunder and destruction, the intergenerational transmission of knowledge and reproduction of native modes of being were savagely disturbed and the use of their languages severely restricted. Rubí Celia Huerta Norberto points out that, since every linguistic system reflects a way of seeing the world, as Laura Bournouf says, we must understand that when a language is lost, a universe disappears. Therefore, they call urgently for the reconstruction of their languages, their world, their living conditions.

To achieve this task of reconstruction, the international community must systematically lend support through funding or resources for the different projects the communities take on to revitalize themselves. As the Purépecha leader points out, actions or plans must be identified and pinpointed depending on the conditions of each

language. It would be useless to apply generalizations, ignoring the particularities of each linguistic system's diverse spatial-temporal coordinates. However, in the dialogue, both women thought a series of strategies have been very useful for dealing with this challenge. Digital tools for linguistic revitalization have been particularly effective. Disseminating indigenous literature, both nationally and internationally, as well as producing printed materials, have borne fruit. Lastly, they saw familiarization with what other peoples in different regions of the world are doing for evaluating their viability as productive. At this point, we must take note of how they take an active role in constructing their own future, weaving alliances and designing practices to achieve their goals.

What programs and initiatives are governments implementing to promote and strengthen indigenous languages and cultures in their respective countries?

In 2019, the Canadian government passed the Indigenous Languages Act (ILA) to support the efforts of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis, focusing on strengthening mother tongues. Also, CAN\$900 million, a historic investment, are slated to support these efforts between 2019 and 2026. These resources have been used to hold workshops and classes; create archives, bookstores, and make videos; publish pamphlets, write digital materials and texts in indigenous languages; and carrying out different empowerment and awareness-raising activities such as discussion circles to emphasize the importance of preserving linguistic diversity and of being participants in decision-making. The roundtable discussions themselves that gave rise to this dialogue are the result of these efforts.

For its part, the Mexican government underlined the importance of understanding the diversity of the First Peoples and of not moving ahead as though they are a homogeneous group with the same needs and conditions. It also underlined the need for training interpreters and translators, developing glossaries, and ensuring the presence of indigenous women in public administration, teaching, research, legislation, and the art world, including literature and design. These professionals have the most important role in revitalizing language.

Cooperation and comprehension among First Peoples and the state are fundamental for reconciliation, and this must imply putting oneself in the shoes of the survivors of the attempted extermination, and assimilationist projects.

Despite the differences between both governments' approach to the problem, the sessions underlined women's essential role in both regions in preserving the languages and transmitting culture. As Amanda Shannon, of Algonquin and Anishnaabe origins, the Director of Indigenous Languages Policy at Canadian Heritage, said, mother tongues keep families, generations, and communities together because they are essential for reproducing cultural identity, exercising spirituality and self-determination, and for relating to the world.

While the biggest discrepancies were shown to be how the two governments act, based solely on these four exchanges, we can observe the affinity among the positions held by the indigenous women who inhabit Canadian and Mexican territory, the strong commonalities among their communities as they identify problems, challenges, and solutions. From these leaders' point of view, structural changes are needed to be able to achieve a true transformation that allows them to be more involved in decision-making, advance in reconciliation, resolve different problems, and successfully revitalize their languages. This means beating back inequality, guaranteeing basic needs, eradicating racism and perceptions and practices that make these communities seem inferior, getting governments to commit to systematically funding the appropriate efforts, and ensuring that institutions and society at large become aware of reconstruction efforts. And, of course, all this must be done with respect and equity for the "othernesses" that make up our world. ■■

Notes

1 The research this article is based on was possible thanks to the valuable contributions of student Daniel Islas Chávez, majoring in modern English literature and language, doing his community service at the CISAN.