

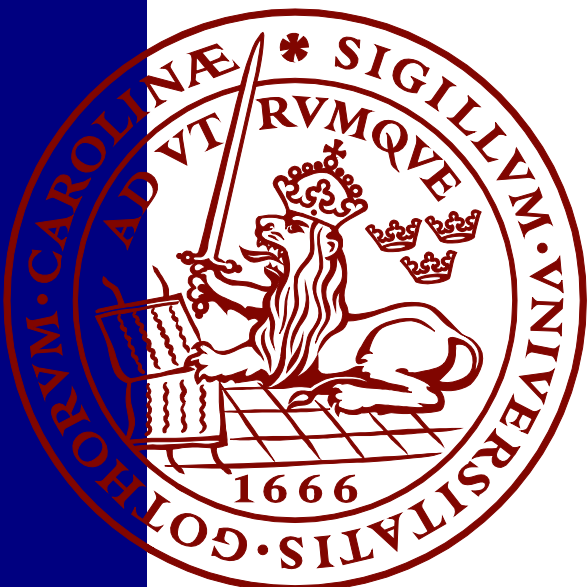
Living Knowledge in a Changing Land

Indigenous Women's narratives of food sovereignty and leadership in Mitú, Colombia.

Natalia Melo Pérez

Master Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science,
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LUCSUS

Lund University Centre for
Sustainability Studies



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Abstract

Indigenous communities in the Amazon are facing rapid socio-ecological changes that threaten traditional land management practices and food sovereignty. Indigenous knowledge and practices, essential for biodiversity conservation, are quickly being lost. I examine how changes in traditional land management affect Indigenous food sovereignty and its impact on the growth of women's leadership in Mitú, Colombia. Through ethnographic fieldwork and using the lens of Feminist Political Ecology, I discuss how structural inequalities, weakened governance, and climate change are significant barriers to Indigenous food sovereignty. There is an increased separation from agricultural spaces, however, women are actively re-signifying these spaces through grassroots leadership. This case study highlights the importance of Indigenous women reclaiming their knowledge and practices as a tool for empowerment and community-centered territorial governance. Recognizing and supporting leadership processes of Indigenous women in food systems is necessary to building resilient, sustainable, and inclusive futures for the Amazon.

Keywords: Indigenous communities, Colombian Amazon, women's leadership, food sovereignty, *chagras*, gender.

Word count: 11,941

Resumen

Las comunidades indígenas de la Amazonía enfrentan cambios socio ecológicos que amenazan las prácticas tradicionales de manejo territorial y su soberanía alimentaria. El conocimiento indígena, esencial para la conservación, se está perdiendo rápidamente. Este estudio analiza cómo estos cambios afectan la soberanía alimentaria y el liderazgo de las mujeres Indígenas en Mitú, Colombia. A través de un trabajo de campo etnográfico y partiendo de la Ecología Política Feminista, discuto como barreras estructurales, la gobernanza débil y el cambio climático afectan la soberanía alimentaria Indígena. A pesar del distanciamiento de los espacios agrícolas, las mujeres están resignificándolos mediante liderazgos comunitarios. Este estudio resalta la importancia de reconocer y fortalecer el rol de las mujeres Indígenas en los sistemas alimentarios como vía de empoderamiento y de gobernanza territorial centrada en la comunidad, esenciales para construir futuros resilientes, sostenibles e inclusivos en la Amazonía.

Palabras clave: comunidades Indígenas, Amazonía Colombiana, liderazgo de mujeres, soberanía alimentaria, *chagras*, género.

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Figure 1. Children playing in *Ceima Cachivera*, Mitú. (Photo by author, 12/02/2025)

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Abbreviations

IC	Indigenous communities
IW	Indigenous Women
TEK	Traditional Ecological Knowledge
SINCHI	The Amazonic Institute of Scientific Research SINCHI
AATIs	Associations of Indigenous Traditional Authorities (<i>Asociaciones de Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas</i>)
FPE	Feminist Political Ecology
PE	Political Ecology
AMITLI	Association of Indigenous working women of La Libertad (<i>Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas Trabajadoras de La Libertad</i>)
ICBF	Colombian childhood welfare institution (<i>Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar</i>)
CFAP	Children's Food Assistance Programs

1. Introduction

Women are central to food systems, taking the roles of producers, processors, traders, caretakers or consumers, they engage constantly with food in multiple ways (Hovorka, 2013). For subsistence agriculture, their role is accentuated even more, since they are often the ones responsible for producing and processing the food that is consumed by their families or sold at local markets (Federici, 2004). Simultaneously, they experience multiple constraints that include lower access to opportunities, resources and systemic gender inequalities, which are replicated in food systems (Njuki et al., 2022; Sibanda, 2025). Despite their central role in the food production–processing–consumption chain, women’s contributions remain largely unpaid, undervalued, and consequently overlooked in food systems research (Njuki et al., 2022).

Building on this, it is widely recognized that Indigenous and local knowledge is key for ecosystem management, biodiversity conservation and the resilience of food systems (Castellanos et al., 2022; Latulippe & Klenk, 2020; O’Brien et al., 2025). Land conservation strategies are strongly tied to Indigenous food systems, which respond to a relational worldview where people and nature are interconnected (Walsh et al., 2021; Yoamara et al., 2020). For Indigenous communities (IC) in the Amazon, women hold essential knowledge to cultivate crops and process them to provide culturally appropriate nutrition for their communities (ACAIP, 2019, pp. 309–322). Thus, the role of Indigenous Women (IW) is vital for both land conservation and Indigenous food sovereignty. However, it has been undermined within IC, especially in South America, diminishing their autonomy and influence in decision-making processes (Rousseau & Hudon, 2015; van der Hammen et al., 2023). Considering their relevance to food systems, IWs need to be recognized to achieve an inclusive and sustainable food systems transformation (Njuki et al., 2022; United Nations, 2023). Drawing upon women’s local leadership and empowerment, food sovereignty and gender-transformative approaches, I will use Mitú in the Colombian Amazon as a case study to address this issue.

1.1 Research aim

Existing literature offers valuable insights into the ecological and agronomic aspects of changing traditional agricultural systems, or *chagras*, in the Colombian Amazon (Andoque & Castro, 2012; Rodríguez, 2010; Uribe Salgado & Uribe Salgado, 2012). Similarly, in recent years, there has been a growing body of work on women’s leadership, particularly in Africa and Asia, focused on their role within food sovereignty and gender equity (Diirro et al., 2018; Hovorka, 2013; Jewitt, 2000; Kuhnlein, 2017; Njuki et al., 2022; Sibanda, 2025). There are also ongoing efforts to strengthen IW’s leadership in the Amazon (Sinergias NGO, n.d.; van der Hammen et al., 2023). However, the intersection between

the sphere of food systems and IW's local leadership has rarely been addressed in academic literature (Njuki et al., 2022), and even less so for urbanizing Indigenous contexts. This thesis helps fill that gap, contributing to the broader discourse on gender roles in food sovereignty and the importance of integrating women's Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into local democracy and conservation strategies. My research is guided by two questions:

RQ1: How do changes in traditional *chagra* systems interact with Indigenous food sovereignty in communities of Mitú?

RQ2: How do these changes impact leadership processes of Indigenous Women in the area?

2. Background

2.1 Vaupés and its people

The Amazon biogeographical region is known for its biodiversity, being one of the largest tropical rainforests and most important river basins in the world (Convention on Biological Diversity, n.d.; Fundación Gaia Amazonas, 2017). A closer look reveals a complex territory where the interactions between the state, Indigenous cultures, and biodiversity, shape the dynamics making each local context uniquely distinct.

The focus of my thesis is the department of Vaupés. Named after the Vaupés river - the main artery of the region (Narvaez Medina et al., 2024), it is located in the southeast of Colombia, bordering Brazil. It's home to 27 out of the 117 Indigenous groups officially recognized in Colombia, highly dispersed within the territory, given its geographical conditions (Gaia Amazonas, n.d.). This is reflected in the fact that there are more than 29 native dialects across the department (ACAIPI, 2019; Narvaez Medina et al., 2024). The Amazonic Institute of Scientific Research SINCHI (SINCHI) describes the region as a dense tropical rainforest that extends throughout the department, creating a warm humid climate, with temperatures between 25 - 30 °C, constant precipitation and high humidity (Jiménez, 2007). Due to the river's strong currents and limited navigability, air travel is the primary means of transportation to and within the department, significantly restricting its accessibility and connections. Simultaneously, it creates a sense of isolation and disconnectedness from the reality of the rest of the country (Jiménez, 2007). Vaupés' regional capital is the municipality of Mitú, which extends through 16.455 km² with only 5 km² of urban area and a total of 37.424 inhabitants, the majority living in rural areas (Narvaez Medina et al., 2024) (Figure 2).

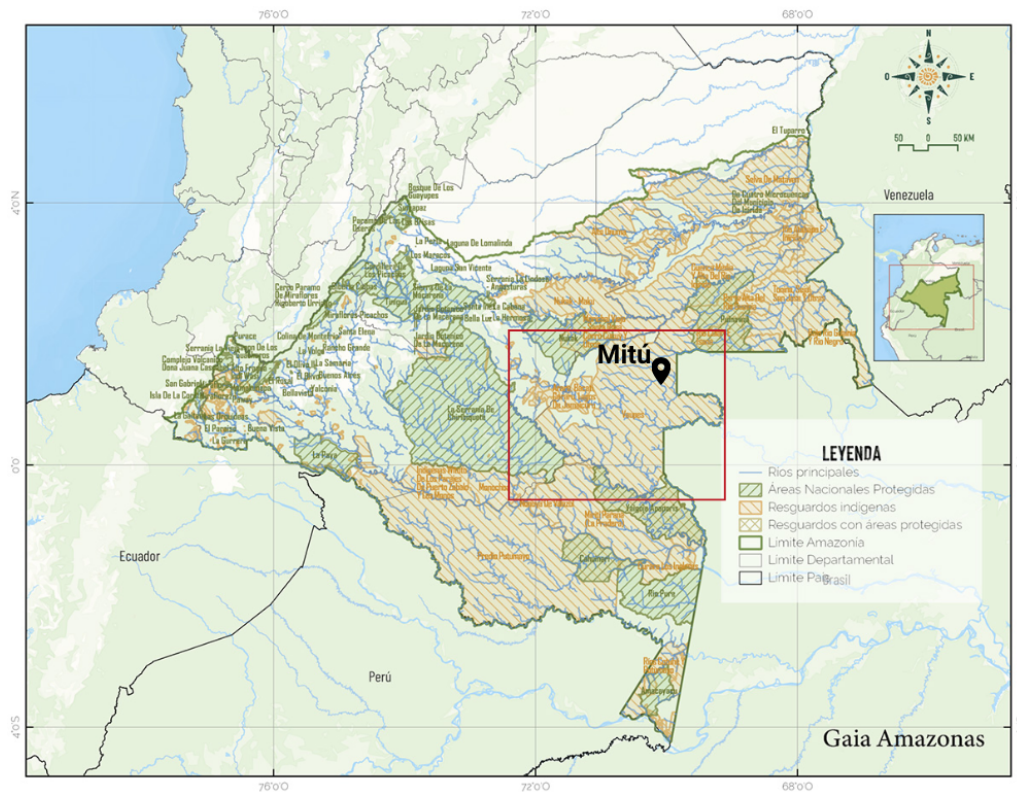


Figure 2. Territorial management of the Eastern Colombian Amazon. Dark green areas represent National Parks and orange areas Indigenous territory (*Resguardos*), the red square locates the department of Vaupés, and the municipality of Mitú is indicated. Map adapted by author (Gaia Amazonas, n.d.).

In Mitú, 98 % of the territory is part of a collective Indigenous territory, known as the big common house (Jiménez, 2007; Narvaez Medina et al., 2024). Indigenous communities are organized in territories based on the law of origin, the initial TEK given to each ethnic group. Its compliance guarantees the harmony and equilibrium of life and regulates the relationships between all living beings (ACAIP, 2019). Conserving the territory is therefore essential to maintain the equilibrium in the big common house (van der Hammen et al., 2012) (Figure 3). However, recent social and cultural changes driven by globalization processes, neocolonial pressures, and increasing external influence have begun to disrupt these relationships (Jiménez, 2007). These dynamics threaten the physical environment and the systems of knowledge, values, and practices that sustain Indigenous life and governance. To understand the scope of their impact, it's important to look at history.



Figure 3. The territory and life in Mitú. (Photo by author, 01-02/2025)

2.2 Colonialism and neo-colonialism

Many things have changed in the Amazon since the arrival of European colonizers in the 16th century. However, in Vaupés the ones who shaped and had more influence over the territory were the religious missionaries who started arriving in 1657 (von Hildebrand & Brackelaire, 2012). Various religious groups attempted to control the land and its people; Jesuits, Carmelites, and Franciscan missions, coming from Brazil, led evangelization processes. In the 19th century, these efforts intensified significantly with over 20 religious missions operating and systematically targeting Indigenous cultures (Jiménez, 2007). At the same time, the rubber boom¹ brought widespread exploitation and violent subjugation of Indigenous people, which in Vaupés would last until 1970 (von Hildebrand & Brackelaire, 2012). Colonial history marked and fundamentally altered traditional practices, economies, settlement patterns, and ways of living for Indigenous people. Grey and Patel (2015) argue that “colonialism is both goal and ongoing process—not merely in terms of the neo-colonial economic policies that shape the world, but also in the more traditional sense of the active consolidation and legitimation of Settler control”. I will use neo-colonialism, defined by Loomba (2015), as a descriptive

¹ The 19th and 20th century was a period of intense rubber extraction in the Amazon region that led to widespread exploitation, slavery and violence against IC (von Hildebrand & Brackelaire, 2012).

term for local dynamics that echo colonial past and respond to indirect control of governments, social systems, and institutions over Indigenous ways. Identifying struggles and oppression as neo-colonial can also help trace the erosion of Indigenous identity and self-sufficiency in the department (Grey & Patel, 2015). While I recognize the conceptual depth and debates surrounding neo-colonialism (Loomba, 2015), for the scope of this thesis, I will use the term selectively to illustrate ongoing structural oppression in the specific context of Vaupés.

2.3 Governance structure

The department of Vaupés stands out as a particularly rich example of the complexity of Indigenous territorial governance. With 85% of its population belonging to Indigenous groups, it's the department with the highest percentage of Indigenous people in the country (Jiménez, 2007; Mojica Flórez, 2023) and consequently the highest Indigenous political participation (Cubillos Álzate et al., 2020). Nonetheless, governance continues to be a challenge due to fragile institutional presence and complex power relations between governmental and Indigenous authorities.

Vaupés' governmental structure is made up of the interaction between national frameworks and Indigenous systems of authority. The seat of national government is Mitú, where the departmental governor coordinates local municipalities and acts as an intermediary with the national government (OECD/UCLG, 2022). On the other hand, since its mainly Indigenous territories (Figure 2), governance is based on Indigenous authorities, which often operate independently from the state (von Hildebrand & Brackelaire, 2012). Mitú is then a place of convergence of different types of governance at different levels: department, municipality, *corregimientos*, and Indigenous territories (Figure 4).

With the national constitution of 1991, the government recognized the Association of Indigenous Traditional Authorities (AATIs) as legal representatives of Indigenous groups. AATIs are formed by representatives of the communities that include community captains and members of community committees for different areas (e.g., women and family, tourism, health, education, youth) (von Hildebrand & Brackelaire, 2012). The spiritual and moral authority is the *payé*, a non-hereditary role that can only be practiced by men, who have the function of safeguarding ancestral knowledge and guiding their community (Borrero & Pérez Correa, 2004). However, the maximum authority for decision making is the community assembly, conformed by all the members of the community. Unfortunately, there is a general lack of organization within AATIs in political and administrative terms, creating friction and leading to a fragmented territorial management (Jiménez, 2007; von Hildebrand & Brackelaire, 2012). The SINCHI recognized the need to work and support social networks and strengthen these organizations from the bottom up (Jiménez, 2007).

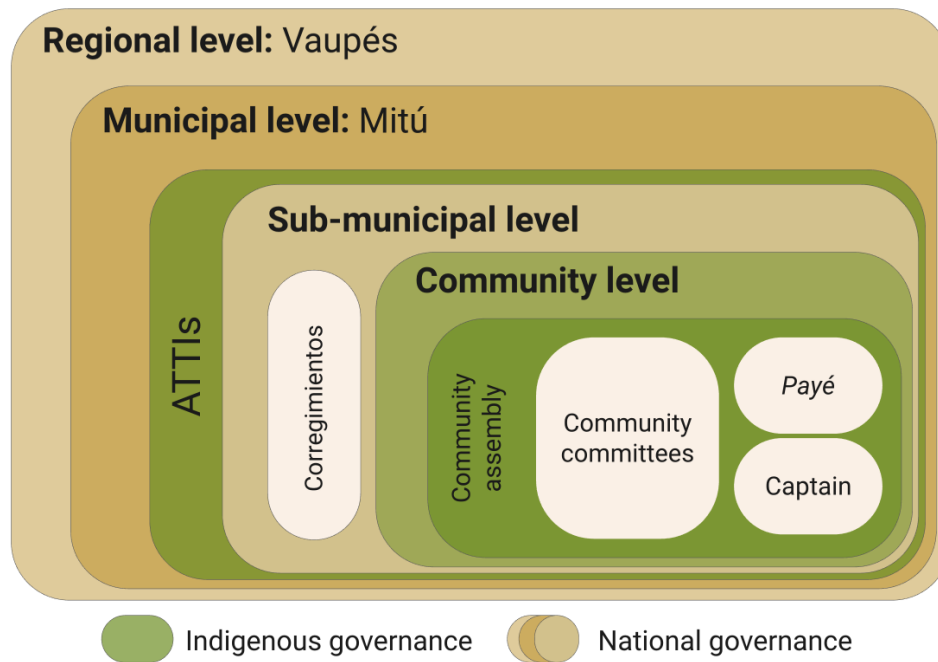


Figure 4. Governance system of Vaupés. Adapted by author from ICLD Colombia Country brief (ICLD, 2024; OECD/UCLG, 2022).

2.4 Between abundance and scarcity

Territorial management for Indigenous people is inevitably tied to agricultural practices, becoming a central part of Indigenous life.

2.4.1 Chagras

Multiethnic Indigenous groups have traditionally managed land according to *chagra* systems, which responds to the conditions of the soil, the climate, and vegetation of the rainforest they live in. *Chagras* are based on a rotational system of parcels of around one hectare which are planted and cultivated for two or three years and then abandoned for the forest to regenerate (Andoque & Castro, 2012). Crops planted include different types of *yuca*², plantain, corn, pineapple, yams, grapes, chili, amongst others (Uribe Salgado & Uribe Salgado, 2012) (Figure 5). This work is done primarily by women, men are only involved in the first stages of preparation of the land, specially cutting down trees, where both man and women take part (ACAIP, 2019, p. 305). Planting and harvesting follow the ecological calendar (Figure 5) —a timekeeping system based on environmental cues— which guides the rhythms

² Spanish for cassava (*Manihot esculenta*). Term used in Spanish due to its cultural significance (Riaño, 2023).

of Indigenous life, including subsistence activities, spiritual rituals and community practices (Andoque & Castro, 2012; Yoamara et al., 2020).

In academic literature, this system is referred to as slash-and-burn agriculture, however, the term generalizes and diminishes the variety and complexity of knowledge needed to cultivate in *chagras* (Rodríguez, 2010). Further, *chagras* are productive systems that not only provide food but also allow the recovery of water sources and provide materials for cultural objects, such as handicrafts or kitchen utensils (van der Hammen et al., 2023). The female line of knowledge within TEK encompasses a wide range of understandings that go from origin stories, appropriate crop and forest management, cultural references and symbolic aspects, which guide the transformation, distribution and consumption of food (ACAIP, 2019, pp. 309–322; van der Hammen et al., 2023).

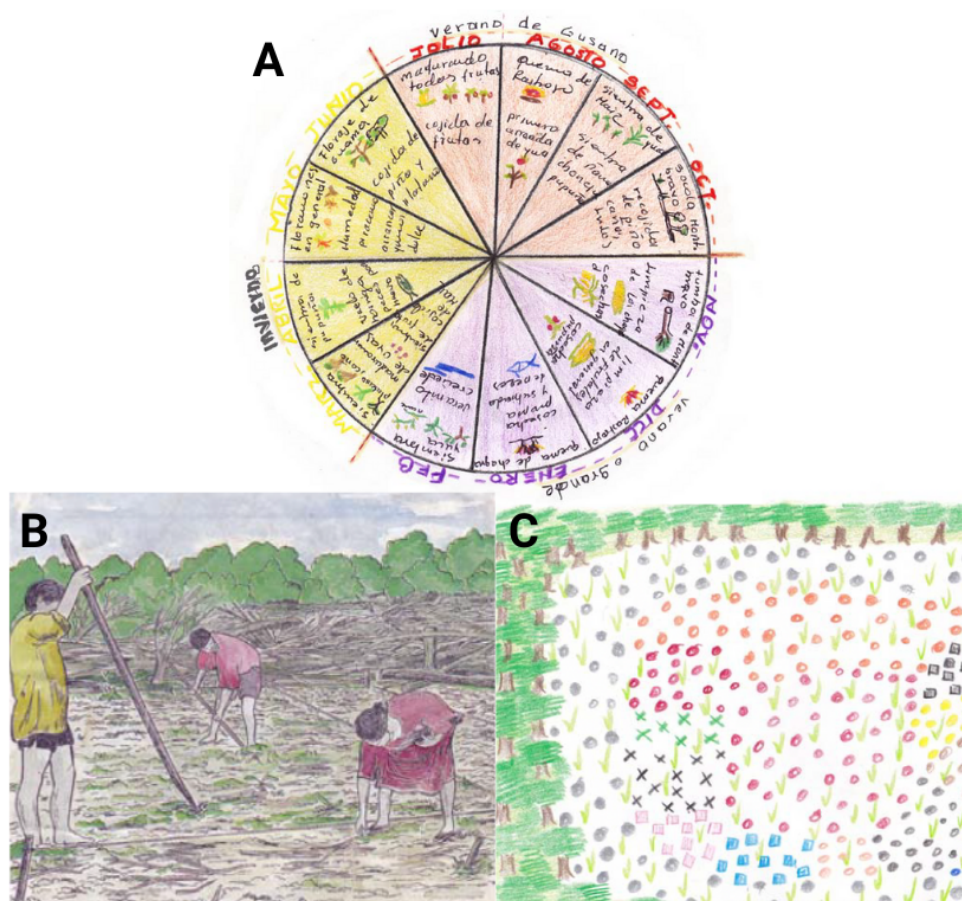


Figure 5. Chagras in Mitú. (A) Ecological calendar sample, (B) drawing of women working in a *chagra* and (C) Current chagra with different *yuca* species from local research in the IC Ceima Cachivera (Each symbol represents one variety of *yuca*) (Uribe Salgado & Uribe Salgado, 2012).

Building and maintaining a *chagra* requires community work, planning and organization. It is hard work that demands daily commitment and the ability to navigate tensions between the human and non-

human world (Mosquera Borges, 2023). *Chagras* are essential for IC, since they provide a space for knowledge sharing, union and collective support, while providing food that ensures local food security (Uribe Salgado & Uribe Salgado, 2012). Therefore, *chagra* systems are more than subsistence agriculture, they are a living system of social and territorial organization through which meaningful relationships are built with the territory and its living beings (Mosquera Borges, 2023). In the context of my research, I understand *chagras* and food systems under this broader definition.

2.4.2 Challenges to Indigenous food sovereignty

Nowadays, cultivating goes beyond self-consumption, it also has an economic purpose. Crops and processed food items (e.g. *farina* – Processed *yuca*) are used as the main source of merchandise in the market. These are used to obtain other types of food sold in supermarkets or meet family needs, such as household cleaning products or school materials for kids (Sinergias NGO, 2022b) (Figure 6). However, multiple conditions make this way of living fragile to environmental and social changes. To start, the soils in Mitú are sandy with low concentrations of nutrients and a high degree of acidity and erosion, which significantly reduces soil fertility and hinders crop growth (Jiménez, 2007).



Figure 6. IW in the local market *San Victorino* selling their produce. (Photo by author, 5/02/2025)

On the other hand, ongoing social changes give way to new dietary preferences. Store-bought products are favored over traditional foods, resulting in a westernization of diets³ (Sinergias NGO, 2022b), a nutritional transition that is happening as well in other Indigenous context worldwide (Damman et al.,

³ Reduced consumption of local foods (like fish, fruits, tubers) and increased reliance on a purchased diet (like rice, pasta, tomatoes, pre-processed foods and drinks) (Damman et al., 2008).

2008; Grey & Patel, 2015; Gyawali et al., 2024; Warne & Wescott, 2019). A volatile economic income increases the risk for poverty, which, combined with a preference for store-bought foods, increases undernutrition and chronic diseases simultaneously (Damman et al., 2008). Although recent nutritional assessments are lacking, the National Nutritional Status Survey of 2010 reported that Vaupés had one of the highest rates of chronic malnutrition in children under two years old in the country (ICBF & FAO, 2015), a strong indicator of maternal malnutrition as well. From an Indigenous perspective nutrition, as well as other aspects of health, are embedded in a relational worldview which emphasizes the interconnection between people, territory, spiritual balance, and community wellbeing.

2.4.3 *Dujpjturāna* - Wellbeing and health

Dujpjturāna is a term from the Tucano linguistic family that refers to a general mental and physical well-being (Sinergias NGO, 2022b). Nutrition is an essential part of *dujpjturāna*, however, in Indigenous worldview nutrition entails not only the consumption of food, but it relates to the access and availability of spaces (forest, *chagras*, rivers, etc.) over time. Access and availability of food changes according to the ecological calendar, prayers, rituals and beliefs related to the law of origin (ACAIP, 2019; Uribe Salgado & Uribe Salgado, 2012). The last one dictates specific social norms and beliefs, which directly impact the quality and type of food each ethnic group can grow and consume (Sinergias NGO, 2022b). Additionally, spiritual rituals guide how food should be consumed and ensure that food is nutritious for the body and no sickness comes from it (ACAIP, 2019, p. 243). For women, these concepts are especially important due to their lifecycle that includes, in most but not all cases, menstruation, gestation, breastfeeding and the responsibility for children's nutrition. Each of these stages of life is accompanied by certain prayers and diets that must be followed (ACAIP, 2019, p. 243; Sinergias NGO, 2022a). These social and spiritual determinants of health shape the meanings of food and are essential to understand Indigenous food systems.

2.5 Women's political participation and food systems

Women's political participation in Colombia remains limited, and the department of Vaupés is no exception. In the latest electoral report, there is a clear underrepresentation of women and especially of ethnic women (belonging to ethnic or racial groups) (MOE, 2023). By looking solely at the report, this disparity could stem from the fact that women often do not run for office in the first place, with almost double the men registering as candidates in 2023. This underrepresentation reflects deeper structural inequalities that hinder the inclusion of women's voices in decision-making processes (Rousseau & Hudon, 2015; Wakefield, 2017).

In a context such as the Amazon, where environmental governance is vital and cooperation is often fragmented, the lack of women's participation not only limits representativity but also weakens the potential for effective, inclusive and sustainable environmental and territorial management. Agarwal (2000) argues that women's social networks and cooperation are essential for environmental action. Similarly, the World Resource Institute and the Rio Declaration agree that women's participation is vital to achieve both equity and sustainable development (Jewitt, 2000). Women's role within food systems makes up a great part of this contribution. Diiro et al. (2018) found that increasing women's empowerment and community leadership is associated with higher agricultural productivity in Kenya. Similarly, Niewoehner-Green et al. (2019) describe a correlation between leadership positions in agricultural groups and women's influence on community decisions in rural Honduras. Strengthening local leadership specifically related to agricultural practices can empower women, build confidence and create opportunities for political engagement that support food sovereignty from the community level upward (Federici, 2004; Wakefield, 2017). Therefore, I hypothesize that through the re-signification of *chagra* systems and traditional roles, local leadership is being fostered in Mitú and could lead to strengthening IW's local governance and support Indigenous food sovereignty.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis draws upon Feminist Political Ecology (FPE), and I will operationalize it through three dimensions: Knowledge, power and practice.

3.1 Feminist Political Ecology

As a critical research field, Political Ecology (PE) provides a starting point to understand human-nature relations as embedded in a set of narratives and political forces that create a landscape for environmental access, management and transformation (Robbins, 2019). Challenging apolitical approaches to ecological issues, PE explores power dynamics, social justice and governance within environmental conflict (Sultana, 2021). It recognizes that different social groups have unequal access and control over resources and examines how they navigate and resist power relations. Building on PE, feminist scholars started questioning the gender dimension of these issues. How does gender interact with struggles over knowledge, power and practice? And how do these in turn interact with feminist objectives? (Elmhirst, 2011). Influenced by ecofeminism, feminist environmentalism, and postcolonial feminist critiques, amongst other feminist theories (Sibanda, 2025), FPE emerged to address how gender, power, and environmental issues intersect.

Centering the attention on feminist perspectives, FPE has evolved together with feminist theories where the 'de-centered subject' has gained relevance. As such, gender becomes secondary in the

debate and emphasis is given to the exploration of fragmented identities, where gender is only one of the multiple social differences that create intersecting inequalities (Elmhirst, 2011). Ethnicity, religion, class, age, geographical location, post-coloniality and others interact, constructing the way in which people cope, transform or resist development (Elmhirst, 2011; Wakefield, 2017). By adopting intersectionality, FPE provides a broader understanding of resource access and control, making this framework particularly relevant when exploring IW's roles in food systems and leadership spaces.

PE helps to contextualize agricultural dynamics within a broader context of power structures, where geographical location, urbanization, state policies and economic pressures reshape local land use and food systems. Adding a feminist perspective, the analysis focuses on understanding the social and cultural complexities of IW in Mitú, which shape how women's participation and governance take place. FPE then becomes the lens through which I observe and analyze the social and environmental interactions happening in the field. I will draw particularly on three key aspects relevant to this study.

3.2 Knowledge - Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as a term started to be used in the late 1900s, as defined by Berkes et al. (2000) it is a way of knowing related to the relationship of living beings with one another and the environment. It is defined as a three-fold complex that includes knowledge, practice and beliefs, which evolve through adaptive processes and are orally transmitted through generations (Berkes et al., 2000). TEK is holistic in outlook and adaptive by nature. As Indigenous people adopt new ways of living the cumulative body of TEK changes, it is not an static system of knowledge (Latulippe & Klenk, 2020). Neither is its ultimate goal to be ecologically wise, meaning its evolution can also lead to maladaptive ecological practices (Berkes et al., 2000).

Knowledge is not neutral, it is deeply shaped by social contexts and categories (Agarwal, 2000; Elmhirst, 2011). For women within rural agricultural contexts, knowledge acquisition is intersectional and often guided by uneven knowledge spaces (Jewitt, 2000). Within TEK these factors play a critical role, given the gendered divisions of labor and cultural expectations which determine who knows what, knowledge sharing and learning (ACAIP, 2019; Gricius & Martel, 2024). Therefore, situated knowledge and lived experiences have to be considered to understand systemic injustices in socio ecological systems (Ekowati et al., 2023).

3.3 Power - Food systems

Power shapes the access and control over immaterial resources, such as knowledge, but also material resources such as land (Latulippe & Klenk, 2020). Power relations interact at different scales and spaces, some more visible than others, to determine natural resources management (Elmhirst, 2011). For instance, the household, kitchen or *chagra*, are spaces where power struggles happen at different

scales. Thus, food systems are not exempt from power dynamics (Figure 7). Hovoka (2013) uses *feminist foodscapes* as a framework to illustrate these issues, parting from the ubiquity and political nature of gender. Food lies at the core of social relations and the interaction between humans and nature. It also reflects cultural beliefs, shapes social behavior, economic and political relations (Hovorka, 2013). Production, distribution and consumption of food, as well as whose knowledge and labor are valued within food systems reflects symbolic and structural inequalities that intersect with other social categories (Jewitt, 2000; Njuki et al., 2022; Sibanda, 2025). Thus, food is a form of power.

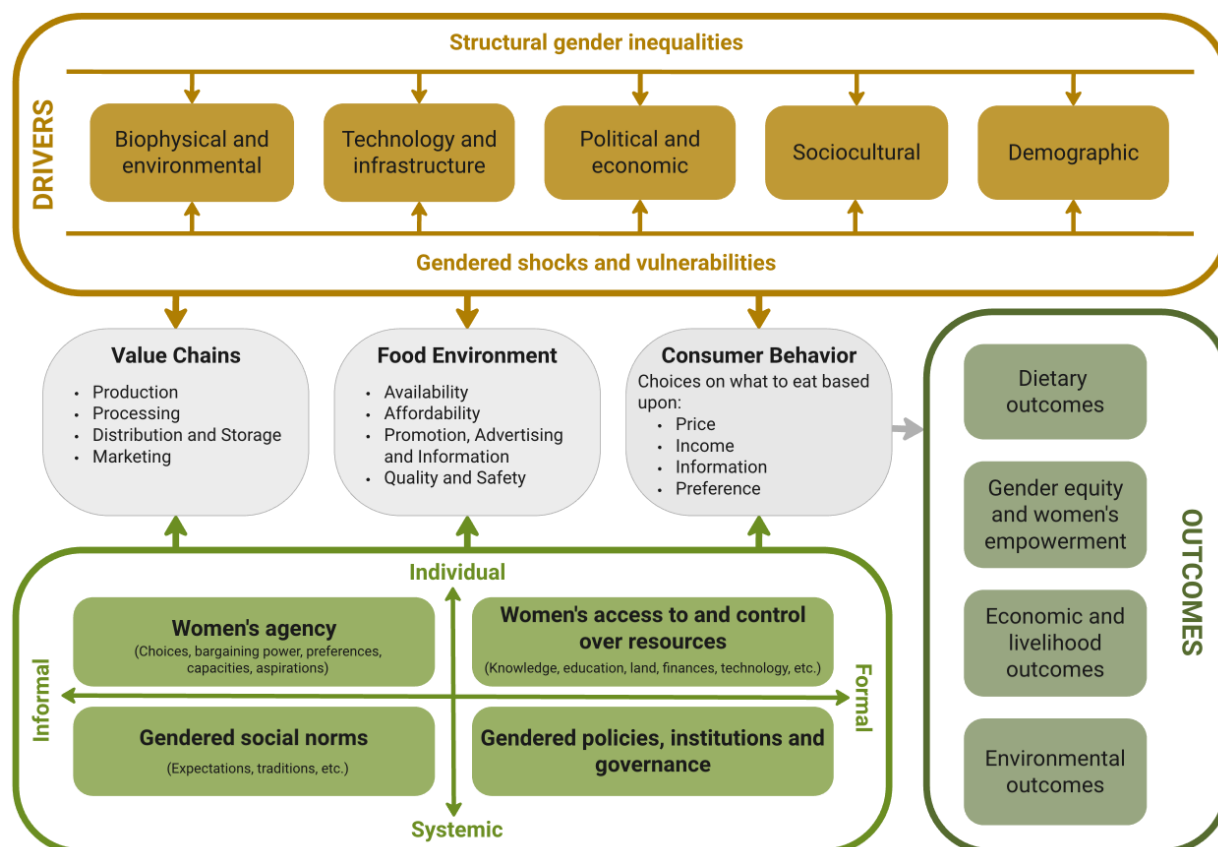


Figure 7. Gendered food systems (Njuki et al., 2022)

Food security discourses reflect this power dynamics in terms of access, use and control over food (Hovorka, 2013). The term emerged within food policy and development discourse, ensuring access to food by focusing on international price stabilization and market-based solutions (Jarosz, 2014). This approach, however, does not necessarily challenge structural issues that create food insecurity in the first place and leaves small farmers and local communities' voices out of the debate. As a response, La Via Campesina, an international peasant organization based in Brazil, published its *Declaration on Food Sovereignty*. Food sovereignty as defined by La Via Campesina is "the right of peoples to define their own food and agricultural policies as well as the right to produce their basic foods in a manner respecting cultural and productive diversity" (La Via Campesina, 2001). This concept then emphasizes

social justice and the right of communities to control their own food systems to ensure access to food. Nonetheless, Hopma & Woods (2014) and Jarosz (2014) agree that food security and sovereignty are not oppositional or exclusive, instead there are a lot of blurry points between them. In sum, I will use the lens of *feminist foodscapes* and food sovereignty as described above as a framework to understand food systems dynamics.

3.4 Practice- Leadership and empowerment

When advocating for fair distribution of rights and responsibilities FPE scholars explore how gendered power dynamics affect decision-making within food contexts (Agarwal, 2000; Jewitt, 2000; Sibanda, 2025). Leadership comes in as a way to mobilize communities and generate social transformation (Batliwala, 2010). Even though leadership theory has been traditionally gender-blind, Alexandre recognized that leadership is directly affected by gender dynamics - “in our distribution of power and resources, in our self- and collective perceptions of effective leadership, in our identities as leaders and as followers, and in our expectations of who can lead, of where leadership takes place and for what purposes” (Wakefield, 2017). This opened the discussion for feminist scholars to explore the intersectionality within leadership theories. Transformational leadership theory is defined by Batliwala (2010) as an interaction between leaders and followers who share a common purpose and raise each other to higher levels of ethical and moral aspirations, transforming them both. Feminist theory recognizes the importance of leadership as a way to dignity, freedom of choice and decision making. It is a relational changing process through which women assert their rights, question dominant roles, challenge power structures and catalyze social change (Batliwala, 2010).

There is an interaction between institutional and local domains of leadership (Wakefield, 2017). Local leadership is a way “to change the distribution of power, both in interpersonal relations and in institutions” (Stromquist, 1995). Especially in agricultural contexts, it serves as a foundation for women’s empowerment, which over time is transferred in institutional decision-making (Federici, 2004; Wakefield, 2017). In empowerment processes agency and action, as highlighted by León (1997), are central, therefore the focus and scope of the analysis will be on IW’s action at the local level.

4. Methods

My work is based on a descriptive single case study (Yin, 2014), using food systems as a vehicle to delve into their struggles and motivations of IW to transform their realities in the municipality of Mitú. I combined ethnographic methods with a revision of academic and grey literature. A mixed methods qualitative design allowed me to go into both breadth and depth in my research (Knott et al., 2022).

4.1 Fieldwork and analysis

The research was conducted in the urban center of Mitú and three IC close by: *Ceima Cachivera*, *Puerto López*, and *La Libertad* (Figure 8). I carried out fieldwork in two phases. The initial 2 weeks were focused on exploration and familiarization with the context, understanding the needs and the current projects developing in the field, establishing initial contacts, and engaging in dialogues with key actors and community members. The second phase, also lasting two weeks, involved conducting semi-structured interviews and spending more time in the research areas selected. In both phases ethnographic observations were conducted and recorded in my field journal notes.



Figure 8. Map indicating the locations where fieldwork took place. (Adapted from Google maps)

Overall, I talked to 44 women, who embodied several roles within their communities: researchers, community leaders, *chagreras*, mothers, nutritionists, NGO members, entrepreneurs, governmental officials. For research purposes I divided them into three broad categories, not mutually exclusive: community members, leaders and expert representatives of institutions (Annex 1). Women interviewed ranged from 20 to 80 years old and self-identified within one or more of the following ethnicities: Desana, Wanana, Tucana, Cubea, Bará, Tatuya, Siriana and Piratapuya. I conducted 4 expert interviews, 4 interviews with community leaders and 5 interviews with community members involved in relevant associations or institutions. I also facilitated focus groups, 3 with members of women's associations and 1 in an IC setting (Figure 9). The aim here was to gain a broader understanding of their perspectives through intergenerational and interethnic dialogue (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018). I used purposive and snowball sampling, given my main goal was to gain insights and depth from specific groups within the population instead of high representativeness (Knott et al., 2022).



Figure 9. Focus groups. (Photos by author, 02/2025)

Ethnography, as described by Madison (2020), is more than just a data collection method and the encounter with the other becomes the departure point of the research. The qualitative and ethnographic research approach in my thesis responds to the need of having people's experience at the core of the study, clarify discourses and understand the complexity within intersectionality (Escobar, 2000; Madison, 2020). Through dialogue and observation, I collected data related to the participants' relationship to agriculture, memories, experiences as leaders and members of a community undergoing rapid change. To do so, I used a topic guide with sample questions that were adjusted according to the population group I was addressing: Community members, leaders or members of institutions (Annex 2). Focus groups instead were based on dialogue, with 4 topics as a base: first contact and changes in *chagras*, agricultural practices nowadays, leadership processes and personal and emotional relationships. I went to the communities and extended an invitation to participate in the discussion, people entered and left the space and not everyone present participated. Groups were mainly composed of women and in some cases few men joined the conversations, however, they did not actively participate. People recorded as part of the focus group were those who stayed at least half of the dialogue even if they participated actively or not. I shared with the participants before and after the main discussion was closed.

Data gathered from interviews was analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for thematic analysis. This type of analysis allows for flexibility within the research framework, making it an ideal method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns that are relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis tool NVivo was used for the coding process, which followed an inductive thematic approach (Knott et al., 2022). Themes were identified, reviewed and redefined for a final analysis stage. Field notes were included as part of the analysis and to provide context for the results obtained. I reviewed and read my notes during fieldwork and during the coding process to ensure inclusion of relevant information. I triangulated the fieldwork data with grey and academic literature and the theoretical framework described above, focusing especially on the concept of food sovereignty and the definition of empowerment by Stromquist (1995) and León (1997).

4.2 Storytellers

Indigenous women navigate complex realities where they cope, transform or resist development processes, making their perspectives dynamic and deeply contextual (Elmhirst, 2011). They become storytellers of their realities (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). During my fieldwork I encountered and interacted with multiple people, each one with a different story to share. The ethnographic approach of my research also led me to conversations and interactions with other community members, which I recorded in my field notes as part of the results. All these interactions, some planned and some more spontaneous, were crossed by power hierarchies, symbols, preconceptions, prejudices, values and meanings from all involved. This underscores the inherently subjective and relational nature of ethnographic research, recognizing the influence of agency and idiosyncrasy of research subjects rather than positioning them as passive informants. With this I aim to acknowledge the intersubjectivity in ethnographic research (Madison, 2020) and of human interactions in fieldwork. Funder (2005) describes this issue from the researcher's perspective, understanding the idea of an "open mind" in fieldwork research as limited by larger structures which highlight the ethnocentric conditions of fieldwork, contributing to the definition of researcher's positionality.

4.3 Positionality

Positionality as defined by Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) is "the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group". They categorize this positioning into two, insider and outsider, acknowledging the continuum spectrum of this relationship and its changing capacity throughout the study (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

I see myself as an outsider in my research context for multiple reasons. Even though I am Colombian, I was born and raised in a town close to the capital, Bogotá, and have had very close contact with the

city. I had the opportunity to travel within my country, however, I had never been to Vaupés, or to the Amazon region and had no contact or relationship to it before starting my research. Meaning that my construction of the place was influenced by media, news and external preconceptions. In addition, I was raised in a westernized⁴ catholic context with interactions to some Indigenous groups, but never in close contact with them. Creating a preconceived notion of what being 'Indigenous' meant. During my time in Vaupés, I constantly acknowledged and questioned those ideas, however, this clearly positions me as an outsider. In fact, this was actively acknowledged by the communities that continuously referred to me as "white" (meaning non - Indigenous) and questioned my right and capacity to access certain information, ask questions, or empathize with them. Finally, I want to highlight language as a factor. Spanish is my mother tongue but for most people I spoke to, if not all, it's their second language. This creates a translation barrier, since the perspective of participants in using Spanish as a communication language is not neutral and a hierarchical stance is created between us, with Spanish being perceived as an external and imposed language. Moreover, during the analysis I took on the dual role of research/translator which is a political issue on its own and entails ethical dilemmas about representation and interpretation (Temple & Young, 2004).

Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014) also recognize the multiple dimensions of positionality that create tension and conflict during the research process. In my experience this comes with gender, as a woman I closely identify with my research participants, and I could see myself as an insider. However, as previously mentioned, I have had a different life experience and worldview than IW in Mitú, which positions me from an outsider privileged perspective. The fact that I spent only 4 weeks in the field and then moved away further accentuated these differences. Even though I was aware of this, acknowledged it and empathized with them, the time constraints made it difficult for me to build enough trust to create a collaborative relationship with the participants.

4.4 Ethical considerations and limitations

Ethical guidelines from Lund University regarding research with human participants were considered and followed throughout the research. The research was conducted so that it respects ethical considerations, including clear communication of the purpose of my visit to Mitú to everyone I interacted with and voluntary and consented participation through an informed oral consent before each interview (Annex 3).

⁴ In reference to the western bias described by Funder (2005). I refer social, cultural, and epistemological influences of European and North American traditions.

Addressing gender issues in a patriarchal context can be a sensitive topic. Reason why I tried to minimize any harm to participants as much as possible, talking and clarifying the purpose of my research to participants' husbands if needed and emphasizing the right of participants to not answer questions and leave the conversation without any consequence. Anonymity and confidentiality were also part of this process. I use fake names for participants who did not consent for their names to be used, I also place them on an age range and create ambiguity by ensuring findings cannot be directly linked to the individuals. However, given the nature of my sampling methods and the fact that Mitú has a relatively small population, it is important to recognize that most participants knew each other, and they rapidly got to know who I was interviewing. Finally, my attempt to keep my interpretation to a minimum is also an important ethical implication given my positionality. I revisited my field notes, interview memos and recordings multiple times during the fieldwork and the data analysis to increase transparency. And constantly reflected on my own beliefs and assumptions of the context and the participants.

Considering the geographical dispersion of IC, limited access to remote areas and uneven presence of external actors which shape social dynamics differently across the territory, it is important to highlight that the findings of this research do not represent the general situation of IW in the department of Vaupés, let alone in the Amazon region. I interviewed and interacted with people close to the urban center of Mitú, therefore as a single case study generalization of the findings is a limitation (Yin, 2014). However, the research design and the conceptualization of the theoretical framework can be replicated to understand other IC within the Amazon. Additionally, my sampling method focused on IW and local initiatives, therefore, the perspectives of other actors outside this scope were not considered, such as men or international organizations. This narrows the perspective of the dynamics in the territory but opens the door for future research to study food systems and governance from a broader approach.

5. Findings and analysis

In Mitú the rhythm of daily life is deeply intertwined with food systems. Women begin their day early. Before the sun rises, they get ready and leave their homes, often together with their children, to walk about 1 hour towards their *chagras*, where they will spend most of their day. They will cultivate, cut, clean and plant different crops, while their children observe, learn, eat fruits, play, help, or go to the stream close by. Coming back, they have their basket full of food, hanging from their head towards their back, their kids hold smaller baskets, also full, as they return—without many pauses—to their

community (Figure 10). These are the memories women in Mitú have of their childhood, but it is not the case for most of them nowadays.



Figure 10. Dora and her daughter Marta working their *chagra*. (Photos by author, 8/02/2025)

Chagra's work is deeply relational, anchored in a worldview that sees humans and non-human creatures as co-inhabitants of a shared ecological system (Walsh et al., 2021).

"It is the connection between nature, animals and people Everything is connected in these places.

Once I went to pull out yuca with my grandmother and it was guama⁵ season. Some macaws and monkeys arrived, and they were all in the same tree fighting for food, as we were pulling yuca out"

(Lina, 2025).

Chagras are not only a source of food and income, but they are living spaces that act as archives of ancestral knowledge and indicators of community relationships, cultural identity and ecological changes. As society transforms, so do these spaces, both in practice and meaning. Building on this, I will explore my two research questions, starting by studying the separation from land and *chagras*.

⁵ *Inga edulis*, also known as *guama* is a fruit native to South America.

Followed by an analysis of how shifts in food systems affect Indigenous food sovereignty, to finalize with its impact on the roles and leadership of IW.

5.1 Separation from land

Chagras are spaces where women find their identity, freedom, safety, health and sharing. Women describe them as “the base and a system of life”, “a place of wealth”, “the heart of the family”. They are also a space of fertility and birth, literally and figuratively. Growing crops and having land to do so is a sign of safety for IW and their families. “Without the land we are nothing [referring to the *chagra*]” (Ceima Cachivera, personal communication, 2025). Even though *chagras* are still considered essential spaces for life, there is an increased abandonment of these practices in Mitú.

5.1.1 Erosion of *chagras*

Indigenous ways of living are protected and supported by political agendas in Colombia, including the national constitution, legally binding national laws and international agreements (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2010). However, the reality of the interwoven relations between the state and Indigenous people reveals the imposition of practices where monocultural ways of living are rewarded, especially in urban and suburban areas where the presence of the state is stronger (Barragán & Laudice, 2015; Jiménez, 2007). In line with Barragán & Laudice’s conclusions, interviewed women evidence in their children a lack of interest in Indigenous ways, especially when it comes to their participation in *chagra* practices. This is a result of the internalization of neocolonial narratives and contradicting worldview that portray Indigenous ways as inferior or unwanted (Grey & Patel, 2015). This perception is reinforced by increased exposure to digital media and formal education (Narvaez Medina et al., 2024). In particular, formal education creates a dilemma for IC. Vaupés reports one of the lowest rates of educational coverage in Colombia, with secondary education access 36% below the national average (Fundación Empresarios por la Educación, 2023). There are increasing efforts to improve the coverage of formal education in the department (Narvaez Medina et al., 2024), benefiting mostly people living closer to urban centers (Jiménez, 2007). However, as more children attend schools or boarding schools and must fulfill educational duties, their time and interest in participation in *chagras* is lower and the transmission of TEK is disrupted (Grey & Patel, 2015). This, combined with the fact that institutional efforts to implement ethno-educational models are slow and ineffective (Gracia Vélez, 2017; Jiménez, 2007), undermines and creates a barrier to the subsistence of traditional practices.

On the other hand, more IW are looking to have paid jobs or higher education. One community leader reflected on this.

“Having a chagra is a full-time job. I abandoned it so that I could dedicate myself to the association and my work and since my husband says that he doesn't go to the chagra alone, we don't have one anymore” (Carolina, personal communication, 2025).

Chagras are productive systems, yet economic practices are becoming increasingly extractivistic, undermining their spiritual and relational context, which plays a critical role in coexistence and social relations (Martina, personal communication, 2025). For example, Riaño (2023) studied the symbolism of the sweet yuca in the *Menarca* ritual⁶, which represents women's strength and ability to create harmony and community cohesion. Food systems are cultural and social forces that bind communities together (Grey & Patel, 2015). Communication and sharing between family members used to happen during the long working hours in *chagras*, with less engagement in them, alternative spaces for this exchange are harder to generate (Lina, personal communication, 2025).

As these spaces diminish, so do the networks of care and reciprocity that sustain both ecosystems and communities, but how these changes enter family units and impact dynamics and values differs. Some women recognize it as a personal choice where family values are a decision women make depending on their own values and priorities. While others acknowledge the challenges of living in a context of shifting social expectations, where traditional practices are increasingly difficult to sustain. There is, however, a shared sense of emotional loss, where distance from the land brings frustration and a deep feeling of disconnection.

5.1.2 Internal migration

Population growth, influx of external cultures, expansion of the agricultural frontier, armed conflict and increased pressures on natural resources set a scene where voluntary and forced internal migrations prevail (Jiménez, 2007). Van de Hammen et al. (2023) explore this phenomenon and state that children and adults moving into urban centers has two main consequences for food systems. First, it promotes multiethnic settlements where people from different ethnic groups and with different dialects live together. This combination tends to weaken community life, as families follow their own traditions and increasingly adopt a more nuclear family structure. Specific ethnic group TEK loses its

⁶ Traditionally practiced by *yukuna-matapí* communities the *Menarca* ritual marks the transition into adulthood for women, transforming them into economically productive and fertile (Riaño, 2023).

perceived value by new generations, given that people have less access to it within their communities and increased access to external cultures (Uribe Salgado & Uribe Salgado, 2012). Secondly, as more families settle closer to urban centers, territorial management changes. Within an increase in population there is less productive land for everyone to cultivate, access to land is more difficult, and transportation is expensive (Jiménez, 2007). This has resulted in many women not owning a *chagra* or abandoning subsistence-based food gathering practices due to practical reasons (Ceima Cachivera, personal communication, 2025). In response to these limitations, some women are increasingly using their backyards for small-scale cultivation (Figure 11), adapting to spatial constraints of urban contexts while losing the holistic nature of *chagras*.



Figure 11. Backyard cultivation from Juana with chilli and onion. (Photo by author, 13/02/2025)

5.2 Indigenous food sovereignty in a changing context

To understand how traditional *chagra* systems interact with Indigenous food sovereignty in IC of Mitú, this section explores health impacts, institutional approach and climate change consequences on food systems.

5.2.1 Nutritional risk

Distancing from *chagras* and the cultural shifts that come with it increases the nutritional risk in Mitú. First, there is evidence that nutritional transition of IC worldwide directly impacts eating behaviors, with negative health consequences (Damman et al., 2008; Gyawali et al., 2024; Warne & Wescott, 2019). The association of women of *San Victorino* in Mitú is a clear example of this shift. They are a group of 13 women who sell traditional food in the local market of the city. They rely on market-bought

products to prepare the food they sell and rarely have their own *chagras*. Their income becomes an economic activity to support their family needs and get store-bought products, defined by them as “white people’s food” or “normal food”, for their family’s subsistence. This exemplifies how sociocultural transformations not only reduce access to traditional food systems but also reshape perceptions of food itself, creating negative stigmas for traditional food (Gyawali et al., 2024). As studied by Gyawali et al. (2024), stigmatization of food in an Indigenous context can lead to negative health outcomes. In Mitù these manifest as malnutrition, anemia, obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular and other chronic diseases (Sinergias NGO, 2022b).

Secondly, given the complexity of *dujpturāna*, loss of TEK contributes to nutritional vulnerability within IC (Sinergias NGO, 2022b). The weakening of cultural and spiritual frameworks that sustain *dujpturāna* particularly impact IW’s health given their lifecycle and role of caregivers (Grey & Patel, 2015), this can even include TEK held and transmitted through the male line. The absence and decreasing assigned importance of *payés*, or spiritual authorities, is not just symbolic—it disrupts vital rituals that ensure the safety and nourishment of food, especially during key life stages like menstruation or childbirth (Sinergias NGO, 2022a).

“For example, the day my daughter had her first period. I looked for my relative and I couldn't find him.... he is one of the few people who can do the healing of food and water⁷ [One of the few payés left in the community]. I looked for him and he was not there, I started to cry and I told my daughter: You can't eat yet, you can't go to swim in the river. All day my daughter did not drink or eat because I was looking for someone to pray the water, the fariña, the chili”.

This testimony was part of the discussion with women from the Association of Indigenous working women of La Libertad (AMITLI), where the topic of loss of TEK and its nutritional consequences for younger generations was a pressing concern.

Aside from spiritual factors, social determinants of health play an important role when referring to utilization and stability of food to meet dietary needs (FAO, 2008). The nutritionist from the family advocate’s office of the Colombian childhood welfare institution (*Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar* - ICBF), highlighted the importance of social factors for nutritional risks in Vaupes. Variety of crops and cultivation dynamics in the household, domestic violence, broken family unit and alcohol

⁷ Following TEK - food must be preyed or healed to keep the order of the world, for human to maintain their right place in the food chain and spiritual realm. These are preventing rituals, which have special relevance during birth, first feeding, first and second menstruation (Sinergias NGO, 2022a).

consumption are amongst the main risk factors for child malnutrition (Tatiana, personal communication, 2025). In the U.S similar social factors have shown to increase adverse childhood experiences, including abuse, neglect, household dysfunction and food insecurity of IC (Warne & Wescott, 2019). Together, these cultural, spiritual and social factors disrupt food systems and impact the nutritional risk of IC, underscoring the urgent need to support culturally grounded health strategies.

5.2.2 Institutional approach

In Colombia, intercultural implementation strategies that address the vulnerabilities of Indigenous nutrition are lacking. The national policy on nutritional and food security has the main objective “to guarantee that the entire Colombian population has access to and consumes food in a permanent and timely manner, in sufficient quantity, variety, quality and safety.” (CONPES, 2007). The ICBF is the main institution addressing nutritional issues in the country, they lead a variety of programs tackling children under 5 years old, pregnant and breastfeeding women (ICBF, 2021). These efforts aim to address malnutrition in terms of availability, access, utilization and stability of food, following a food security framework (FAO, 2008), however, they often lack an intercultural approach.

Even though the national policy recognizes and promotes an ethic and territorial approach (ICBF, 2009), and the ICBF acknowledges the importance of creating integrative frameworks (ICBF & FAO, 2015), there are a lot of concerns from the population on its implementation and efficiency. There is an evident lack of preventative programs in place and several implementation challenges of ongoing programs in an Indigenous context (Sinergias NGO, 2022a; Velasco et al., 2021). Governmental guidelines are designed at the national level and aim to meet international frameworks, as a result, while they may recognize contextual diversity in theory, in practice, they often fail to reflect the specific needs and cultural realities of local communities (Tatiana, personal communication, 2025). Children's Food Assistance Programs (CFAP) (ICBF, 2020), for example, have deficiencies in coverage as identified by Velasco et al (2021). Particularly in geographically isolated areas, procedures do not align with the specific needs and characteristics of certain population groups, IC being among the most affected (Velasco et al., 2021). In areas where there is access, however, the census used to evaluate who receives the benefit is inaccurate and when delivering the supplements—which are also composed of non-traditional foods—there is no follow-up on their consumption. Leading to children not consuming supplementation or those most in need not even receiving it (Tatiana, personal communication, 2025).

Mothers in Mitú had divided opinions and perspectives on CFAP, some referred to it as a great help for their families' livelihoods, while others were more critical of them. They highlighted the

dependency these programs can create and how they alienate families from Indigenous practices, an experience also studied by Warne and Wescott (2019). In general, when IW refer to external projects, they point out the lack of continuity, monitoring and long-term impact, “projects end and they leave people with more needs than when they started” (Carolina, personal communication, 2025). Others expressed frustration with the lack of proper consultation, noting that projects are frequently imposed rather than developed collaboratively. There is, however, a consensus, evident in the focus groups, on the lack of integration of TEK within these programs. This, combined with the inconsistency of governance in the area (Valderrama González, 2019; von Hildebrand & Brackelaire, 2012), creates a fragmented approach to food sovereignty, which as stated by La Via Campesina (2001), limits the process of giving communities the authority to define their own food systems, reducing agency, autonomy and participation.

5.2.3 Climate change

On top of social factors, climate change acts as a broader external force that constrain Indigenous food sovereignty in Mitú. The IPCC recognizes that the Amazon is disproportionately impacted by climatic changes and variability, which exacerbates persistent poverty and precarious health conditions, such as malnutrition (Castellanos et al., 2022). In the Amazon, this is manifested as a reduction in the diversity and quality of crops, seeds, and soil (Rodríguez, 2010; Torquebiau, 2024). Climate variability also disrupts the ecological calendar, making it harder to coordinate planting and harvesting cycles due to seasonal unpredictability (Andoque & Castro, 2012). “Doris for example, cut down her *chagra* expecting summer to come, but she has not planted anything yet because.....look at this weather [referring to the rainy weather in February, a dry season]” (AMITLI, personal communication, 2025). An increase in temperature has also led to shorter working hours, limiting food production. Women remembered their working hours when they were children.

“If we left early morning [usually before sunrise] we were back around 2 or 3 in the afternoon, now we have to be back by 9 or 10 in the morning because there is too much sun and it’s impossible to work” (AMITLI, personal communication, 2025).

Environmental changes disrupt traditional agricultural rhythms, undermine the sustainability of TEK, and threaten food access, availability and stability.

5.2.4 Chagras and food sovereignty

As *chagra* systems undergo profound changes due to cultural shifts, external market pressures, the erosion of TEK, migration, and climate change, so do the foundations of Indigenous food sovereignty.

At the heart of these shifts lies the separation from the *chagras*, which results and causes - at the same time - loss of *dujpturāna* in IC. As shown by the previous analysis these transformations are part of a complex interplay (Figure 12).

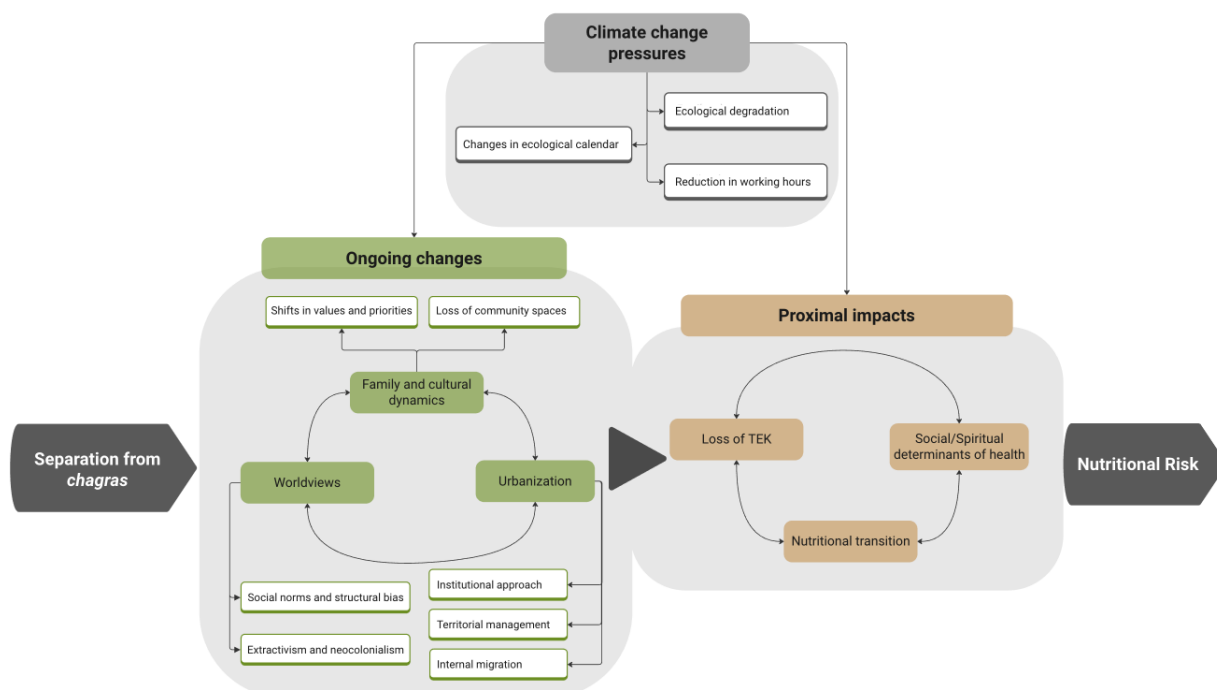


Figure 12. Impact of the separation from *chagras* on nutritional risk of IC in Mitú and interacting factors (Graph by author).

Bringing back the power and knowledge dimensions within FPE, food systems in Mitú are guided by gendered knowledge, which evidences power dynamics happening at different scales (Figure 7). Moving beyond the right for food and the agricultural practice itself, in an Indigenous context, it has social, ecological, emotional, spiritual, and physical implications, therefore food sovereignty must be locally defined (Grey & Patel, 2015; Hopma & Woods, 2014). Indigenous food sovereignty is more about land and identity than production and consumption processes. Predominant relational worldviews in Indigenous cosmovision connect land management practices with daily life elements such as rituals, beliefs and care practices, forming an interconnected system of meaning and practice (Walsh et al., 2021). Therefore, changes in *chagra* systems disrupt food production and nutrition, but also social and spiritual systems that support IC. Indigenous people fight neocolonial processes while struggling to maintain the cultural and relational responsibilities of their traditional worldviews, therefore food sovereignty comes inevitably with a decolonizing discourse (Coté, 2016). In cases where IW bear an uneven weight of responsibilities when it comes to food management due to traditional mandates, gender, together with decoloniality, are windows into societal dynamics (Grey & Patel,

2015; Warne & Wescott, 2019). This is the *feminist foodscape* of Mitú, which recognizes what is valued in society, how it relates to food and how women carry the burden and consequences of these dynamics. It's then worth exploring the impact this *foodscape* has on leadership and empowerment of IW.

5.3 Leadership processes

There is a strong cultural association between women and land that reinforces gendered social norms, which links women to family and ties the idea of having a family to *chagras*. These roles create the expectation and responsibility in women to maintain their cultivation spaces, which easily turns into a social obligation rather than a personal choice.

"I come from a very traditional context, but later I understood that working in the chagra is not only the women's duty, it's something collaborative.....I had to fight a lot with my family and my mother-in-law about this, so that my husband would help" (Denis, personal communication, 2025).

Patriarchal discourses are still very present within IC, and historical colonialism exacerbates them (Gricius & Martel, 2024). This is very clear when looking at the gendered dimension of TEK. Women are often constrained to work and talk about certain topics, like cooking, cultivating, family and in some cases traditional medicine (ACAIP, 2019, pp. 301–352). Talking about life and death, for example, is believed to affect women's womb and gestation period, which directly affects and limits women working in the health sector (Lucia, personal communication, 2025). Challenging hegemonic structures is a key aspect for women's empowerment processes (León, 1997) and therefore the resignification of traditionally female spaces and their role is a transversal aspect for leadership processes in Mitú.

Women from the *San Victorino* association concluded that the role of IW has always been important in their society, but now they are being recognized. To understand this change I will use Stromquist (1995) as guidance. She states the need and cohesion of three groups of actors to overcome barriers and engage women from less privileged contexts in empowerment practices: Women in institutions, women in academic circles and grassroots groups. Understanding empowerment as a way to leadership and the first inevitably attached to the context and political processes within (León, 1997), I identified and adapted these actors and their roles to the context of my research. This will guide the analysis of how changes in *chagra* systems, described in the previous section, impact IW's leadership processes in Mitú.

5.3.1 Women in institutions

Leadership processes for women in Mitú are very recent and localized (Figure 13). During the formation of the Regional Indigenous Council of Vaupés for the defense of the territory, ancestral rights and local governance, women's participation and leadership were key (Comisión de la verdad, 2022). Nonetheless, resource and organizational management led to a quick decay in women's involvement (Jiménez, 2007; von Hildebrand & Brackelaire, 2012), from these movements however women started to have more voice in community matters (Adelia, personal communication, 2025). Adelia - intercultural social development expert and coordinator of *Sinergias* NGO in Vaupés - highlights a shift in how women assumed leadership roles, which became noticeable for her in 2020. The establishment of the *Women and gender committee* (Alcaldía de Mitú, 2019), that later turned into the *Office of women and gender equity*, has been an important asset for centralizing funds and projects for women's leadership and recognition (Lina Paola, personal communication, 2025). In 2021, the first “Women of the Amazon Summit” took place (Comunicaciones COICA, 2021), followed by a gathering in Vaupés to initiate processes of engaging with local economies (OPIAC, 2022). Nowadays, IW’s participation within Indigenous governance is centered on two roles. The *Women and family committee* within AATIS and the government's advisory board for women, composed of 17 women representatives of different population groups and minorities (Gobernación de Vaupés, 2024). However, significant gender gaps persist, for instance, out of the 20 current AATIS representatives, only one is a woman (Lina Paola, personal communication, 2025).

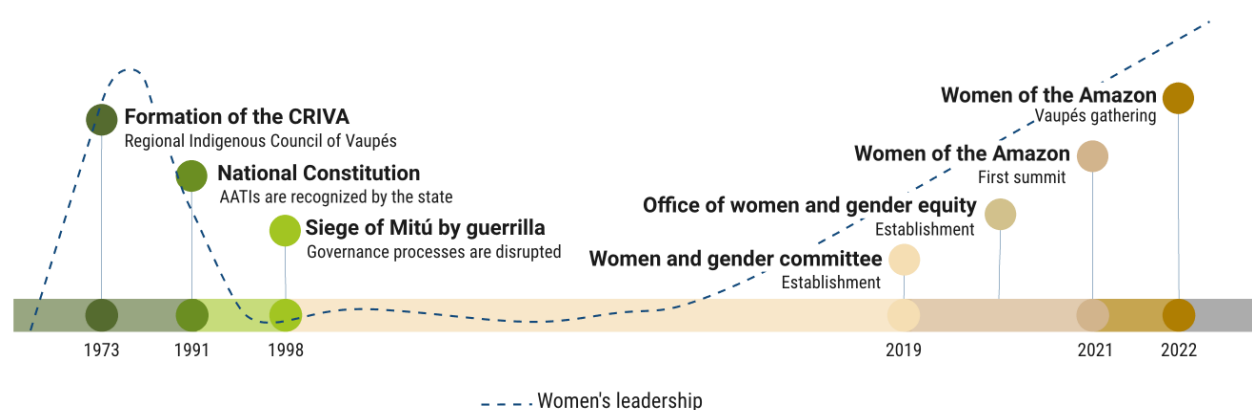


Figure 13. Timeline of important events on women’s leadership processes in Mitú. CRIVA stands for *Regional Indigenous Council of Vaupés* (Graph by author).

The increased presence of women in governmental institutions aids in the collection and distribution of funds as well as the creation of projects focused on women and their needs (Stromquist, 1995).

Previously and given the colonial history of Vaupes, research and decision-making spaces were mostly occupied by men, shaping both external support and research agendas around male-dominated narratives and priorities. Today, with more women working in academic contexts and increasingly involved in institutions, there has been a gradual shift in focus toward IW's realities, concerns, and forms of leadership, both from the outside and inside perspectives in Mitú (María Clara, personal communication, 2025). This has led to the development of programs such as *Promotoras de vida* (Gobernación de Vaupés, 2023) or *Fondo mujer* (Vicepresidencia, n.d.), that aim to support local women's processes through economic funds, educational programs and facilitation of spaces to create community and share experiences.

5.3.2 Academic and traditional circles

Stromquist defines this group of actors as “women in academic circles, who will contribute theoretical analysis of how gender is created and how it can be modified in society” (Stromquist, 1995). Given the context of Mitú, higher education, guidance and training are more practical examples of how this change of narrative is happening. One way in which education affects the territory is through internal migration. IW who migrated to get higher education and come back to their communities have had a great influence on transforming discourses (María Clara, personal communication, 2025). Four of the women I interviewed have gone through this process and spoke of the tensions involved in reconciling new forms of knowledge and leadership with traditional worldviews for themselves and their communities.

“The goal is to find a balance between how western and traditional knowledge can go hand in hand. If I want my people to understand, then I have to speak in my language [Tucano], but if I want to have a political impact, I need other types of knowledge and language” (Denis, personal communication, 2025).

In finding this balance, transformation of TEK takes place and the cosmovision of *chagras* is redefined. *Chagras* are spaces where women find their strength and value, and by recognizing this it gives IW a better understanding of their world, clarity in their abilities to change it, and resources to develop and have influence on it (van der Hammen et al., 2023).

A leadership based on strengthening cultural identity in Indigenous contexts requires training processes and guidance that consider local worldview and beliefs, while at the same time providing education and support on organizational and institutional matters (León, 1997; Vonimary Søvik, 2018). *Sinergias* NGO is an organization working towards strengthening local practices and TEK through

projects and programs that influence local policies, especially focusing on intercultural health and social development (Adelia, personal communication, 2025). They have had great impact creating resources and developing projects that highlight important issues for women such as nutrition, childcare and local women governance. A clear example of this is the radio show *El canto del tucán - Nomé phephiri* (Sinergias NGO, n.d.), where through a series of 5 episodes transmitted on the local radio station, they shared experiences and learnings of three months of encounters and meetings with IW leaders of Vaupés. To achieve empowerment that has a broad reach, connecting it with the context and local collective actions is essential (León, 1997). Institutions such as *Sinergias NGO*, act as departure points for intercultural projects with a differential approach that can significantly impact the empowerment of IW.

On the other hand, the needs of women seem to be the main reason why they participate in leadership or community roles. In Mitú women's needs are often economic and social, such as worrying about their community and gender violence. Vonimary Søvik (2018) found similar motives for IW in the Central American context. Lina Paola, head of the *Office of Women and gender equity*, states that women ask for support and guidance in three main areas: Leadership, gender based violences and financial independence. In terms of financial independence, strengthening entrepreneurship processes is the main focus, with most of the small businesses relating to *chagras'* produce or handcrafts (Lina Paola, personal communication, 2025). The economic dimension of *chagras* has allowed many women to sell their own produce or form cooperatives and associations around it. Like the case of the AMITLI association, women who work together to sell *yuca* starch in the local market or to bigger buyers, such as schools within the department (Figure 14). This supports IW's family economy, however, it's worth mentioning that this is not an easy task since most of the time IW have to sell their products at a very low price to compete with market prices and can only cover the cost of transportation to the urban center, having no actual income (Mosquera Borges, 2023). Nonetheless, the economic role of *chagras* gives IW a platform for both agency and action, allowing them to reclaim their power to decide and, as argued by León (1997), opening pathways for empowerment.



Figure 14. Working space and production of women from the AMITLI association. (Photos by author, 5/02/2025)

5.3.3 Grassroots groups - Associations

In her definition of feminist leadership, Batliwala highlights the importance of relationship-building. “Feminist leadership is not a one-way or top-down process, but leads through consultation, participation and consensus building” (Batliwala, 2010, p. 35). Community movements and collective leadership models mobilize individuals and create collective power to change hegemonic structures and achieve transformative change (Agarwal, 2000; Wakefield, 2017). In Mitù, through the creation of associations, groups of women, and spaces of dialogue, women are redefining their role in society. I talked to three different women’s associations, *AMITLI*, *Puerto López* and *San Victorino* and they all recognized that working together has not been easy, but it has given them access to external projects, funding, education and a sense of community. Despite gendered expectations, interpersonal tensions and structural inequalities, the motivation of IW to work together stems from a deep sense of collective responsibility and care for their communities. When talking to community leaders, their main motivation was to support others and walk together with their communities to motivate and open spaces for opportunity and growth.

One frequent aspect creating oppressive burdens for women’s participation is confidence (Batliwala, 2010; Wakefield, 2017). Most of the women I talked to said they often avoided participating or taking on leadership roles because they felt unqualified or lacked sufficient knowledge. The women of the *San Victorino* association agreed that language was also a barrier for confidence when trying to find governmental support, but going together to offices helped them overcome this fear. The sense of community, mutual accountability and collaboration that the associations promote makes IW feel supported and accompanied. León (1997) recognizes the importance of community, cooperation and solidarity as a way to achieve self-esteem and confidence. Community leadership in Mitù involves

everyone, women work from their role as mothers, wives and caretakers, involving their husbands and children in the process of rediscovering their role and making it visible (Maria Clara, personal communication, 2025).

Working in community, however, comes with a lot of challenges especially regarding interpersonal and social dynamics. Increased and uncontrolled consumption of alcohol is a big concern for most associates since it leads to gossip, violence and increases interpersonal tensions (Sinergias NGO, 2022b). Selfishness in knowledge sharing, rooted in traditional Indigenous origin laws (ACAIPi, 2019), and envy of others' success were also concerns in some of the conversations. IW have a lot of responsibilities, they are busy responding to family needs, expectations and often face different forms of violence (Stromquist, 1995; Vonimary Søvik, 2018). Wakefield (2017) studied how when women become active members of their communities, they must sacrifice time to fulfill day-to-day duties or time with their families. They also often face criticism, putting them at higher risk of spiritual and domestic violence, which has been observed and addressed by local programs (Sinergias NGO, 2024). Some IW manifest a sense of frustration and hopelessness acknowledging the emotional toll of leadership. Yet, they recognize how collective spaces and associations have allowed them to pursue personal and collective goals.

In the dialogue at *Ceima Cachivera*, women concluded that even though they get together they do not share the struggles of their personal lives very often. At a community level, social interactions between women are being strengthened through spaces of dialogue based on common life experiences. Programs like *Promotoras de vida: Tejedora de Vida*, facilitate encounters of association leaders of different AATIS in the department where workshops on Indigenous governance, sharing circles and knowledge sharing take place (Gobernación de Vaupés, 2023). Similarly, the United Nations Development Program project *Cuidadoras de la Amazonia*, found that women in the Amazon seek community spaces. These spaces allow them to recognize shared challenges, exchange experiences and get inspiration to make local changes in their own communities (van der Hammen et al., 2023). *Chagras* are central here since they constitute a big part of life for IW, for example seed exchanges are a great excuse to get women together. Even though the space itself is gradually being lost, the role of *chagras* as a communication space is being transformed. While conversation may not happen directly in the *chagra* as frequently as before, it remains a symbolic and practical excuse to come together, strengthen community ties and women's voices in their communities.

5.3.2 From local leadership to governance

IW voices are vital to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly contributing to reach zero hunger, gender equality and protecting and resorting ecosystems, but transversal to other goals (Jewitt, 2000; O'Brien et al., 2025; United Nations, 2023). There is a growing body of literature that studies the correlation between women's role in food systems and their ability to contribute to their communities from this position (Diirro et al., 2018; Niewoehner-Green et al., 2019; Sibanda, 2025), however, women's voices in food systems are systematically being undermined (Njuki et al., 2022). We are 5 years away from 2030 and far from reaching the goals set by the United Nations (Castellanos et al., 2022). So, how to solve it? There is no straightforward answer but understanding different types of *feminist foodscapes* and how women are interacting with them can be a start. Mitú is a good example of how IW local leadership can be enhanced through grassroot groups, strengthening women's roles in institutions, education and training. This has led to collective action and transformative changes in the system which over time can have a direct impact on the local governance (Federici, 2012; Wakefield, 2017). *Chagras* become the path through which IW are coming together - by re-signifying their roles within food systems, they are not only reclaiming food sovereignty but also fostering gender equity, community resilience and environmental stewardship.

6. Conclusion

Mitú is a complex territory, representative of the Amazon region, where historical, social, political and ecological factors construct and continuously shape the realities for Indigenous peoples, local communities and women. In response to the multiple and intersecting pressures these conditions create, IW have begun to develop community-based strategies to cope with and transform their surroundings. *Chagras* have been a central aspect in this process, because even though their abandonment is evident, they are still part of the building blocks for Indigenous life. Changes in how IW relate to and place themselves physically and spiritually in the *chagras* are directly impacting nutritional risk in Mitú, and jeopardizing food sovereignty. A central part of food sovereignty is the right of people to control their own food systems, to do so, there is a need for local governance that is supported through policies and programs but not determined nor prescribed by these. Here is where *chagras* regain their relevance. Through the re-signification of these spaces and the role of IW, community leadership and collective empowerment can be reached. IW in Mitú are a clear example of how this is possible in practice. Even though it's still an ongoing process and there are many

challenges for them, this case study shows possible pathways to achieve real food sovereignty and gender equity in Indigenous contexts.

Sustainability science addresses transdisciplinary, complex, systemic and above all urgent issues. With the wish to contribute to the field, I provided an in-depth case study that bridges situated knowledge with academic circles and provides a solution-oriented approach to equitable food systems. I show that there is a need for academic research to acknowledge the plural realities of IW and center their voices in the co-production of knowledge. Building on my thesis work, future research could study similar processes of transformation of traditional agricultural systems in other parts of the Amazon region, allowing comparative insights across contexts. Similarly, expanding the scope to include perspectives of other actors such as youth, men or international institutions can offer an integral view of the systems at play. Finally, it is relevant to examine the interaction and long-term impacts of IW leadership on environmental sustainability.

What is happening in Mitú and its implications for IW offers valuable insights into how localized, gendered and culturally grounded strategies can inform broader sustainability efforts. It highlights the relevance of collaborative work at a community level, but also its relevance when it comes to addressing systematic problems that require multiple actors involved in their solutions. Recognizing and supporting leadership processes of IW in food systems is a matter of equity, social justice and a necessary step toward building resilient, sustainable and inclusive futures for the Amazon.

7. References

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8. Annex

Annex 1. List of interviews and focus groups

Interviews. The field of *Institution/Community* for *Community member* is not included for anonymity purposes. Fake names are used for some participants.

Interviewee	Institution / Community	Date of interview
Expert representative of institutions		
Lina Paola Pereira	Office of women and gender equity	22/01/2025
Adelia Maria Prada	Sinergias NGO	13/02/2025
Tatiana	ICBF	14/02/2025
María Clara van de Hammen	Tropenbos NGO	20/03/2025
Community leader		
Carolina	AMITLI association	5/02/2025
Lina	Youth leader	11/02/2025
Paula	Women and family AATIS representative	12/02/2025
Juana	Puerto Lopez women association	13/02/2025
Community member		
Sulma		12/02/2025
Sandra		13/02/2025
Martina		14/02/2025
Denis		17/02/2025
Lucia		17/02/2025

Focus groups

Community / association	Participats	Age range	Ethnicities	Date
Ceima Cachivera	10 women	20-70	Cubea, Siriana, Desana, Tucana, Piratapuya	12/02/2025
AMITLI association	3 women and 1 men	30-60	Desana, tucana, tatuya	5/02/2025
Puerto López association	10 women and 2 men	30-80	Cubea, tucana, tatuya	13/02/2025
San Victorino association	6 women	20-70	Tatuya, cubea, desana, piratapuya	17/02/2025

Annex 2. Semi-structured interviews topic guide and sample questions translated to English

Women from the communities

First Contact and How the Chagra Has Changed

- What was your first contact with the *chagra*?
 - When you were little, did you go to the *chagras*? Did your mother have a *chagra*? Did she **take** you? When did you start cultivating? How did you learn what you know now about agriculture?
 - Do you do the same with your daughters now?
- What do you currently grow in your *chagra*? How is it different from what your mother or close relatives used to grow?
 - Has your family lost any seeds or varieties of food? Where do you get the seeds you use to plant?
 - How has the way you and your family eat changed?
 - How do you think knowledge about agriculture and cultivation has changed and how it is passed on? How has the use of language and the terms used changed?
 - How have these changes affected you?

Current Agricultural Practices

- How long have you been cultivating your *chagra*, and what is your daily routine like while working there?
 - How often do you go? How long do you stay? How has climate change affected the way you work in the *chagra*?
 - Is the land communal, or who does it belong to? Do you have a community *chagra*? How is the land divided or differentiated if it's communal?
 - Do you still perform traditional prayers and rituals before planting and cultivating? Has there been any change in the ecological calendar?
 - Have you had any experience with a carbon project? How have carbon offset projects affected the *chagras*? Who makes land decisions when these projects are in place?
- How have traditional practices changed nowadays? Do you still perform traditional rituals and preventions before planting and harvesting?

Leadership Processes

- How is the work you do in the *chagra* recognized or valued?
 - Do you sell what you grow, use it at home, or trade with other families? If you sell it, how do you use the money?

- Who is recognized as a leader in your community, and what role do they play?
 - Have you noticed any changes in women's leadership in your community? Why do you think these changes have happened?
- What is the decision-making and consultation process like? How much are women consulted, and is there a difference if they have a *chagra* or not?

Personal Perception and Emotional Relationship

- How do you feel about your work and your cultivation practices?
- How do you feel, and what reflections do you have about the changes in these practices and land management?

Community Leaders

First Contact and How the Chagra Has Changed

- What was your first contact with the *chagra*?
 - When you were little, did you go to the *chagras*? Did your mother have one? Did she take you? When did you start cultivating? How did you learn what you know now?
 - Do you do the same with your daughters now?
- Do you have a *chagra* now?
 - If yes: What do you grow, and how is it different from what your mother or relatives grew?
 - If not: What is your current relationship with land and cultivation?

Leadership Processes

- Who is recognized as a leader in your community and what role do they play?
 - Have you seen changes in women's leadership in your community? Why do you think those changes have occurred?
- What is the decision-making and consultation process like? How much are women consulted, and is there a difference if they have a *chagra* or not?
- What is your role as a leader in your community? Do you work at the community, municipal or regional level?
- What motivated you to become a leader? Has that motivation changed? What challenges have you encountered along the way?
- What values are important for you and your community in your role as a leader? How has your relationship with the land shaped these values?

Personal Perception and Emotional Relationship

- What challenges do you see in your community regarding food and nutrition?
- How do you feel about your role as a leader?
- How do you feel, and what reflections do you have, about the changes in agricultural practices and land management for you and your community?

NGO Workers or Institutions

Institutional Work

- How does your institution engage with Indigenous women in communities around Mitú?
 - What kinds of interventions or projects are being implemented?
 - What is your role in these interventions?
- What work does your institution do related to food security for Indigenous communities?
 - What ecological and social challenges have you observed? What institutional challenges are present?
 - In your view, what is the biggest challenge for women and communities in this regard?
- From your perspective, how have traditional *chagra* practices changed and how has this affected food security in the communities?

- Have you seen changes in women's leadership? Why do you think those changes have occurred?
 - Do you think new forms of autonomy are emerging for women? If so, where do you think they come from and why?
- What is your perception of women's participation and leadership processes within their communities and at the government level?

Personal Perspective

- What is your opinion on governmental interventions in these matters?

Annex 3. Consent form translated to English

Before we begin and I ask whether you agree to participate in this research project, I will give you some information about the study and your rights as a participant. It is very important that you clearly understand this information, so if you have any questions now or at any point after this interview, please do not hesitate to contact me.

This study is led and conducted by me, Natalia Melo Pérez, as part of my master's thesis in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science at Lund University in Sweden. It is supervised by Torsten Krause and Carlos Hernández, researchers at the Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies (LUCSUS).

Description: This study seeks to understand traditional agricultural management and practices, and how these have changed. Additionally, it aims to explore the relationship between these practices and leadership processes among women, with a focus on both ecological and social sustainability.

Procedure: You are invited to participate in an interview lasting approximately one hour. The interview will be a conversation between you and me, in which I will ask questions related to your daily practices involving agriculture and food, and your knowledge and perceptions of these. During the interview I will take notes and record the conversation using my phone. The audio files will be transcribed and used exclusively for analysis purposes.

Risks and Benefits: The risks of participating in this study are minimal. The questions do not include sensitive personal information, and if you prefer not to answer a particular question, you may simply skip it without any problem. The benefits of participating in this study include the opportunity to reflect on your cultivation practices, your personal history related to these, and your leadership roles within the community.

Confidentiality: For the purpose of this thesis, it is necessary to collect personal data in order to better understand the profiles of the interview participants. All the information you provide will be treated with strict confidentiality. The data will be anonymized and used exclusively for academic purposes. Personal data will be stored only for the duration of the research project and deleted once the project has been reviewed. Access to personal data will be strictly limited to the researcher and her supervisors and your privacy will be protected in all published and written materials resulting from the study. The results will be made available on the university website and may be published in other contexts, but your identity will never be disclosed.

Your Rights: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to:

- Withdraw your consent, decline to participate, skip specific questions, request that the recording be stopped or leave the interview at any time without any negative consequences.

- Receive information about the personal data being collected and request corrections to any incorrect information.
- Contact me at any time to modify or delete a response, as well as to request transcripts of your interview.

If you have any questions about the study, your rights as a participant or are at any point dissatisfied with any aspect of this research, you may contact me at: na6258me-s@student.lu.se

By providing your consent, you indicate that you have understood the information and agree to participate in this study. Verbal consent will be requested and recorded at the beginning of the interview.

Do you understand the project and the implications of your participation?

Do you agree to participate in this study?

Do you agree to have this interview recorded?

Thank you very much for your trust and for taking the time to participate in this study.