

LEADERSHIP AWARD 2021

THE FACES OF RESILIENCE

WOMEN LEADERS FOR CHANGE



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CONTENTS



—————	CREDITS	2
—————	INTRODUCTION	4
—————	BRASIL Rising like a Confluence of Rivers	6
—————	BOLIVIA High-Altitude Resistance	16
—————	DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO Returning to One's Roots to Protect the Forest	26
—————	UGANDA Healing the Wounds of Violence	35

INTRODUCTION

'Many young people try to forget our past, a dark period that we don't want anybody to know about. But with the pandemic, we've realised its importance and tried to recover our own ways of nourishment, healing and care. We should not forget where we came from and the knowledge we carry inside us.'

Petrona Fernández Osco, Aymara Yanari Community

INTRODUCCIÓN

Faced with the scarcity due to the pandemic, a group of Indigenous Women on the Bolivian plateau are rediscovering traditional trueque and minka practices (bartering and community work). These women have also explained to the elders of their community that rubbing alcohol on their hands does not mean losing their connection to Pachamama. In the area surrounding Lake Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indigenous Women are growing community gardens to produce food and medicinal plants to make makeuve, a preparation that helps fight Covid symptoms. In Uganda, Indigenous Women share testimonies of the different forms of violence they are experiencing in the pandemic, to face them together and stop the violence from multiplying. In Amazonas state Brazil, Indigenous Women are recovering ancestral cures whilst promoting the importance of vaccinations in Indigenous languages. These and many other images form part of this collective book, *The Faces of Resilience: Women Leaders for Change*, a work that brings together the life stories from four Indigenous Women's organisations that received the 2021 FIMI Leadership Award.

Since 2013, the International Indigenous Women's Forum (FIMI-IIWF) has awarded the 'Leadership Award' in recognition of women or Indigenous

Women's collectives who through their work, duty and responsibility achieve significant changes in their own or other communities. In 2021, we dedicated the FIMI Leadership Award to the resistance and strength of Indigenous Women's organisations united to fight COVID-19.

The organisations stood out for their perseverance, collective strength and leadership in preventing infections, protecting families and communities, and contributing to create the conditions for individual and collective physical, mental and spiritual survival.

We share their stories here to recognise and make visible the strategies that Indigenous Women have used in fighting the pandemic. All of them were able to cope with extreme situations and convert pain into transformative action. To do this, they used creative approaches based on the ancestral knowledge and practices of their peoples. As Rosimere Maria Vieira Teles from the Arapaço People describes: 'our hearts were in pain, but we stood up and fought for life.'



RISING LIKE A CONFLUENCE OF RIVERS

BRASIL

When coronavirus spread around Amazonas, Indigenous Women took up the fight for survival in light of an absent and negationist state. Together they managed to get hold of essential medicine, food and vaccines to fight the pandemic.

In early 2021, Manaus became the global epicentre of the pandemic. A new, more contagious variant broke through the immunity barrier acquired in the first wave and took hold of the city¹. The virus quickly spread around the state of Amazonas. Nobody was safe: Indigenous, non-indigenous, urban and rural communities alike. At the same time, Jair Bolsonaro's government continued its negationist approach, failing to provide essential services to help fight the health crisis. This led to a massive lack of oxygen at Manaus hospitals, which were already overflowing from the peak in cases. In early February 2021, 105 people a day were dying due to lack of oxygen².



¹'Virus Variant in Brazil Infected Many Who Had Already Recovered From Covid-19', The New York Times, March 1st, 2021, last accessed on January 30th, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/01/health/covid-19-coronavirus-brazil-variant.html>

²'Amazonia: 105 personas mueren asfixiadas cada día en Manaus por falta de oxígeno y voluntad política', Caritas Internationalis, February 9th, 2021, last accessed on January 30th, 2022, <https://www.caritas.org/2021/02/manaos/?lang=es>



The recollection of past epidemics that nearly wiped out Indigenous Peoples resonated in the minds of many.'

Fear took hold amongst the Indigenous Peoples of Amazonas. The recollection of past epidemics that nearly wiped out Indigenous Peoples resonated in the minds of many. Once more, the West had introduced a disease that put their very survival in question. Moreover, the lack of immediate and relevant responses from the government left Indigenous Peoples without any resources to fight the illness.

The infection rate reached 4,700 cases per 100,000 in Manaus, and around 7,000 inland³. Indigenous and non-indigenous families all experienced at least one death or had an infected or sick member. The Indigenous urban population was hugely impacted and the hospital had to offer treatment with traditional medicine in a specific room for COVID-19 patients. 'The virus arrived and killed many people, we lost a family member every day. How do we recover from this?' asks, in distress, Perpetua Pereira Cerqueira from the Kokama People in Alto Solimões, one of the Indigenous municipalities with the highest rate of COVID-19 cases.

³ Fundação de Vigilância em Saúde do Amazonas, Boletim diario de casos covid-19, January 20th, 2021, last accessed on January 30th, 2022, http://www.amazonas.am.gov.br/content/uploads/2021/01/20_01_21_BOLETIM_DIARIO_DE_CASOS_COVID-19-12.pdf



Artisan Ingrid
Carvalho Diniz.

“ They organised themselves to collect food and medicine, and distribute them to those families most in need in the city and in the countryside.”

One of the farmers showing the tomatoes she planted during the agroforestry workshops offered by Makira ETA, the Indigenous Women's network of the state of Amazonas.



Artisan Ingrid Carvalho Diniz showing an achiote flower in front of her house. Dyes and seeds are extracted from the flower to make handicrafts.

In addition to coronavirus, the population of Amazonas had to face up to a lack of food. 'If everybody fell ill, who would be able to go to the vegetable garden?' reflects Rosimere Maria Vieira Teles from the Arapaço People and deputy coordinator of Makira E'ta, the Indigenous Women's Network in Amazonas state. 'The pandemic also hit incomes, since most people in our communities have no stable employment. Many families did not even have enough to subsist,' adds Maria do Socorro Elias Gamenha, from the Baniwa People and coordinator of the organisation.

In order to deal with these situations, as well as an incompetent government, the Indigenous Women of Makira E'ta decided to take the lead. They organised themselves to collect food and medicine, and distribute them to those families most in need in the city and in the countryside. 'Our hearts were in pain, but we stood up and fought for life,' recalls Rosimere. Makira E'ta joined forces with a group of Indigenous and non-indigenous organisations to fundraise. Afterwards, they delivered basic parcels to 62 Indigenous Peoples through the women's network set up throughout the vast Amazonian territory. The logistics were complex (some communities are located four or five hours from Manaus by boat) but the food and medicine got there.



The Indigenous Women's Network also promoted the use and cultivation of medicinal plants to help treat COVID-19 symptoms. In this way, ancestral knowledge was rediscovered, such as Sateré-Mawé therapies and cures. Workshops were also run for elders and young adults from different communities to exchange know-how.'

'It was really significant that with such few resources we were able to help fight hunger,' states Socorro. 'Women in mourning led the efforts and fight throughout the pandemic, in light of the noticeable absence of public authorities. It highlighted how important Indigenous Women are in leading their communities, and their ability to create peaceful and caring links in difficult times,' she adds.

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| Ingrid Naiane and Raiara da Silva bathing in Cuieras River in the community of Três Unidos, Amazonas.



Doña Babá cares for the plants she grows around her house to make natural medicine.

Nevertheless, the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil did not just have to fight the pandemic. The fight for survival became a war against the government, negligent public authorities and false information campaigns. Jair Bolsonaro denied the virus even existed, opposed mobilising resources to strengthen the health system, and discredited the use of masks, health and safety measures, and social distancing. In turn, he recommended taking medication with no proven scientific efficacy, such as hydroxy-chloroquine. He also publicly opposed vaccinations. 'People were dying and he was saying it was a little flu,' Perpetua Pereira Cerqueira angrily recalls.

The Indigenous Peoples of Brazil were used to fighting against Bolsonaro's government. Since he took office on January 1st, 2019, his cultural 'assimilation' policies and encroachment of protected Indigenous lands have deliberately violated the rights of Indigenous Peoples, in order to exploit the Amazon rainforest without any opposition. 'As women, we had to come up with ways to fight this war, as it was a battle against the public authorities,' states, with determination, Jaqueline Guimaraes Aparicio from the Kokama People and head of communication at Makira E'ta.



Ingrid Naiane playing with dandelion flowers, one of the medicinal plants used by the Amazonian Peoples.

The last battle was to extend the vaccination campaign planned by the government, which only included vaccinating Indigenous Peoples who live in rural villages, excluding around 500,000 Indigenous People in urban areas⁴. The Makira E'ta women once again led the resistance alongside other Indigenous Organisations. Together they took the government to the Supreme Court. They also partnered with the Coordination of the Indigenous Organisations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB) to run a campaign in Indigenous languages about the importance of vaccination with young communicators, community leaders and health professionals. This was in opposition to the information distributed by evangelical churches, which opposed vaccination stating that the vaccines were contaminated. 'The evangelical church pastors managed to convince Indigenous People to not get vaccinated,' Perpetua explains distraughtly.

The Makira E'ta women are exhausted, but they have no plans to quit. 'There was a moment when we wanted to throw in the towel,' acknowledges Rosimere, 'but we supported one another through little messages, jokes or calls. We came together to win the fight, and it's not over yet. That's why I stood up; we couldn't give in,' continues Rosimere in a whisper.

As the Amazonian saying goes, Indigenous Women are like rivers, they rise when they come together. Makira E'ta is the flow of pure, crystalline water that expands in stormy weather. Its strength spreads throughout the forest valleys, lagoons and mountains, nourishing, healing and caring for its inhabitants and the environment.

⁴ 'Indígenas brasileiros alertam que son excluidos de vacinação', Telesur tv.net, January 7th, 2021, last accessed on January 30th, 2022, <https://www.telesur tv.net/news/indigenas-brasilenos-alertan-excluidos-vacunacion-20210107-0026.html>.

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Graduation togas drying on the clothes lines of the community of Três Unidos, Amazonas.



HIGH-ALTITUDE RESISTANCE

BOLIVIA

Thanks to the Chimpu Warmi Network,
the Indigenous Peoples on the Bolivian
plateau survived the pandemic by
returning to traditional forms of
nourishment, healing and care.

When Coronavirus hit the 4,000-metre plateau—the highest point on the Bolivian mountains—Indigenous Peoples understood that the virus had no regard for anything or anyone: be it tributes, prayers, medicinal plants or the elderly. In the early days, the virus was far away in the cities and many distant communities thought that it did not even exist or was a government issue. However, when the strict lockdown was lifted, young people and adults started to travel from the city to the countryside again, bringing the illness to the most distant communities. The virus then became a very real and painful illness that took away family members, leaders and loved ones. ‘We are doing something wrong. We are not living in harmony with nature like our ancestors used to. The achachilas (the spirits of our ancestors who protect Indigenous Peoples) are very angry and there is no way to appease them,’ explained Petrona Fernández Osco from the Aymara Yanari People on the banks of Lake Titicaca.

Indigenous territory of Jach’a Marka Tapacarí Cóndor Apacheta (JMTCA), located in the dry high plains of Oruro, Bolivia.





Field horsetail, muña, chamomile, k'ichita and suico are all plants that grow in the heights of the Potosí and Oruro Departments and that are used to fight covid-19.

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In the Jach'a Marka Tapacarí Cóndor Apacheta Indigenous territory (JMTCA), located on the arid Oruro plateau, Indigenous Peoples have been fighting against mining that hollows out the mountains and scorches the earth. They called the coronavirus 'Qhapaj Niño' (strong or powerful child) out of respect, as we should respect viruses in order for them to go away without causing too much harm. A convoy of children, young adults, elders, and adult women and men trekked to the highest part of the mountain, where the wind gusts and the sun burns your cheeks, sporting the typical multicoloured Aguayo blankets and ponchos from the plateau, to ask the gods for the virus to pass through unnoticed. 'Each community organised tributes with a small table, incense, local plants and sugar. During the three days of prayer, the entire community had to remain peaceful without any fighting or bickering. If not, Pachamama and the gods will not hear us,' states Vitalia Martínez from the community in Torre Jake.

Nevertheless, coronavirus hit the mountain hard, ignoring the prayers and limitations put in place by Indigenous Authorities. People began to fall ill with symptoms ranging from coughs, sore throats, fevers, loss of taste and smell, muscular aches, to breathing difficulties. The communities decided to completely isolate themselves, a situation that exacerbated the lack of food due to the economic shutdown and the strict lockdown that the country had implemented in March 2020. 'There was no sugar, oil, rice or toilet paper,' recalls Betty Villca Mitmi, an activist for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and coordinator of the Chimpu Warmi Network. In the JMTCA indigenous territory, large quantities of cheese, from which many families make a living, were spoiled and products only came in from the city every two weeks to avoid infections.



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Women of the JMTCA Indigenous territory serving the food to share with the community, an ancestral tradition called *Apthapi*.



Maze is and always has been the staple food of this territory.

In light of this helplessness and hardship, the women took on the role of family caretakers, doctors and defenders. The Chimpu Warmi Network (a national network of Indigenous Women) organised support for communities, guaranteeing food, providing COVID-19 protection kits (sanitizer, masks and soap) and running workshops to raise awareness of symptoms and health measures amongst the people. 'Women played a very important standout role. It was really hard for them to lose their husbands and children, and although they were unwell, they continued to care for families and seek ways to survive the pandemic. They also ensured prevention and were highly involved in the workshops,' states Petrona Fernández Osco, treasurer and network member.

Thanks to earlier work done by the Chimpu Warmi Network on defending land from mining and strengthening political organisation amongst the Indigenous Peoples of Northern Potosí and Oruro, they had direct contact with Indigenous Authorities in distant communities, supporting them during the lockdown. They first set up communication channels over the internet that young people could teach to their elders. An awareness campaign was also organised to explain COVID-19 health measures through workshops, videos and pamphlets translated into Quechua and Aymara. 'It was really hard to get people from the community to understand that they needed to follow the health measures. As they are permanently in step with the land, rubbing alcohol on their hands represented losing their connection to Pachamama. Older people found it hard to breathe through masks. Only those who had lost family members or elders understood,' recounts Betty. One of the strategies that really worked was to get the message across through videos with children, where they explained how to wash your hands and wear a mask.

Through the Chimpu Warmi network, a national network of Indigenous Women, the communities were able to secure the food they needed and obtain prevention kits against covid-19.



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K'ichita is a medicinal plant used in the Andean region of Bolivia.



Nonetheless, what really saved Indigenous Peoples was re-discovering ancestral knowledge, values and practices. When the coronavirus entered the homes of plateau communities, the elderly were the most affected and many families lost grandparents. The communities realised that in addition to taking away their loved ones, the virus was also taking away part of their history and ancestral knowledge. Young people who were used to western culture—going to pharmacies and buying medicine, going shopping and buying processed foods—had not learnt or internalised the practices that enable Indigenous Peoples to fight crises together, without depending on the outside world.

When the community was under lockdown with no access to the hospitals or pharmacies, the women used plants and medicines at-hand which their ancestors had used to survive pandemics, viruses and illnesses over many centuries. In this sense, they went back to using plants such as ch'iquita, yellow wira wira, white amor seco, small-leaf chachacoma or eucalyptus. They also came up with remedies to combat the cold and flu symptoms, using cool Mentisan (a mentholated ointment made in the Bolivian Andes), sweet honey, sharp onion and garlic, and bitter chuño potato water. 'All these plants are readily available in the community. There are many medicinal plants but, at times, we are unaware of their properties,' acknowledges Lidia Sequeiros from the Llatja Wasa People in Oruro. Many women also made eucalyptus inhalations, moistening the th'ola in rooms to ease the breathing of elderly patients. The Chimpu Warmi Ne-

“Indigenous Peoples also strengthened their Ayni principles of solidarity and reciprocity during the pandemic—approaches that have been part of the Andean Inca culture for over 4,000 years.”

work is currently preparing a catalogue of all these plants and traditional remedies so that they are documented for posterity.

There were rumours in Northern Potosí about an all-powerful elixir for COVID-19: milk from black mules. Although largely forgotten due to the generalised use of cow's milk, this milk is most similar to breastmilk and contains two essential enzymes that strengthen the immune system, in addition to vitamins, proteins and minerals. 'My friend got some milk from the white-nosed black mule, known as the mojina. From that moment on, my husband started to get better,' states Leonarda Guarayo Copa from the Ayllu Chayantaka Indigenous People.

'Even when I was ill, I went to the fields to graze my sheep, as this needs to be done on a daily basis,' explains Andrea Nina Macani, a member from the same community. On one of those trips, Andrea came across a young girl who told her that eucalyptus Mentisan and black mule milk were really good for fighting coronavirus. The next day, the young girl brought her some Mentisan that her mother had made, as well as a little black mule milk, and Andrea soon recovered from her illness.

Indigenous Peoples also strengthened their Ayni principles of solidarity and reciprocity during the pandemic—approaches that have been part of the Andean Inca culture for over 4,000 years. As a way of community life and understanding the world, Anyi is based on a ‘culture of mutual care’ (Khuyapayaq Aylluchakuy in Quechua) between community members (Ayllu). The concept of Andean reciprocity believes that one gives and receives at all times, as the actions of an individual have an impact on those of others. Therefore, one should give without expecting anything in return, thus living in harmony and synch with the entire cosmos.

At this time, Indigenous Peoples resumed practices such as trueque or bartering for Indigenous seeds, and minka or community work. When a woman would have to go to the city, she would ask her friend or neighbour to watch over the sheep. In the JMTCA Indigenous territory in Northern Potosí, two people were selected to go to the city to sell cheese on behalf of all the producer families. Profits were shared amongst the entire community based on the needs of each family. In turn, given the dearth of nourishment, the community resumed storing products. Moreover, thanks to food production on community farms, Indigenous Peoples were even able to supply cities, where basic provisions were scarce. ‘Indigenous Women and Peoples provide food sustainability to large cities as we care for the land and sow seeds. However, we also want recognition and acknowledgement. If our ancestors had not learnt to care for seeds and interpret Pachamama to ensure a good harvest, many people would have disappeared,’ states Petrona in her delicate yet forceful voice.

The Native Authorities set up a table of offerings before any activity.





Female Native Authority of
the JMTCA Indigenous territory.

Before the pandemic, passing knowledge and practices down to future generations of Indigenous Peoples in Bolivia had broken down. Parents took young people away from communities into the city, in search of new opportunities. These young people, like Betty or Petrona, grew up far from the countryside and their roots, attempting to hide a past that is still stigmatised in Bolivian society. 'Many young people try to forget our past, a dark period that we don't want anybody to know about. But with the pandemic, we've realised its importance and tried to recover our own ways of nourishment, healing and care. We should not forget where we came from and the knowledge we carry inside us,' Petrona concludes.

Nowadays, both women lead the Chimpu Warmi Network and work to support and strengthen the communities that their parents left behind. They are taking up the mantle of their sisters who began the struggle for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Women. Today, the original leaders, such as member of parliament Toribia Lero Quispe, continue this struggle in national politics. Meanwhile, on the ground, the Chimpu Warmi Network continues to build alliances with Indigenous Women and support their leadership roles in communities. At times of crisis, it is the true guardians of ancestral practices and knowledge who enable Indigenous Peoples to survive adversity.



RETURNING TO OUR ROOTS TO PROTECT THE FOREST

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Amidst the volcanic mountains of Nyiragongo, the lush vegetation of the Congolese rainforest and crystal-clear waters of Lake Kivu, Indigenous Women from the Maharifa Ya Wamama Vijijini organisation joined forces to care for the environment, stand up to discrimination and fight the pandemic.



| Buganga Village, Goma.

The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is home to the second largest primary rainforest on the planet—an essential habitat for many species, global carbon balance and climate change mitigation. Nevertheless, illegal logging is tearing up the Congolese rainforest to extract raw materials such as wood and minerals. In 2020, the DRC lost 500,000 hectares of primary rainforest, equivalent to approximately the entire territory of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Indigenous Women of Goba, on the eastern border of the DRC, founded the Maharifa Ya Wamama Vijijini organisation in 2016 to promote the talent of Rural and Indigenous Women as guardians of the forest. Through organic farming and the sustainable use of resources, the women established harmonious ties to nature and mitigated the impacts from climate change. Years later, the pandemic showed them that this way of life would make them self-sufficient and resilient in order to overcome any crisis.



‘If they were unable to find a way to sustain their loved ones, they would face violence and anger from their husbands.’

Rebeca Awilo learned how to make straw rugs and bags since she joined Maharifa Ya Wamama Vijijini. Kalungu Village, Goma.

The DRC government imposed a strict lockdown in 2020. People were not allowed to leave their homes and ran the risk of arbitrary arrest if they were caught in the street. Indigenous families in the communities around Goma were locked in their wood and clay homes across the hillsides, far from one another.

Gender inequalities and discrimination against Indigenous Peoples exacerbated the impact of the pandemic on Indigenous Women. The burden of nourishing their families fell on their shoulders. If they were unable to find a way to sustain their loved ones, they would face violence and anger from their husbands. With no access to owning land and the inability to undertake any economic activity outside the home, Indigenous Women had very limited resources.

The double discrimination against Indigenous Women in the DRC deprives them of one of the most valued resources for survival: land. According to a study from the Coalition of Women Leaders for the Environment and Sustainable Development (CLFEDD by its French acronym), 70% do not have access to owning property. Landowners have evicted Indigenous Peoples from the green and fertile lands around the lake, cornering them in the foothills of Mount Nyiragongo, where the land is poor for growing plants and crops.



Kavira Odette holds a plant called Vinga. Its roots and leaves are used to treat hypertension and diabetes.



Furaha Clementine represents Maharifa Ya Wamama Vijijini in Bweremana region. She has learned how to make a clay brazier and now trains women in the region so they can make a living and take care of their families.

Nonetheless, several Indigenous Women have managed to lease small plots of land alongside Lake Kivu thanks to support from the Maharifa Ya Wamama Vijijini organisation. They have created community gardens, growing vegetables, pulses, fruit trees and medicinal plants. For Narcisse Balingene Chipere, chair of the organisation, organic farming is the group's main activity as it fulfils many everyday needs. 'Agriculture enables us to feed ourselves and create a company that brings in revenue from our home gardens, without having to leave the home. Moreover, it bolsters solidarity and cohesion amongst us all,' she explains.

Thanks to the community gardens, the Indigenous Women have also ensured access to medicinal plants. In light of the rise COVID-19 cases, they made mavuke, a medicinal plant remedy used to treat illnesses such as malaria, flu and colds, breathing problems, hypertension and diabetes. In order to make mavuke, they cook different plants such as mango, papaya or avocado, white eucalyptus and lemongrass in a pot, depending on the illness they aim to treat. The steam from the remedy is inhaled under a white cloth. Such is its efficacy that women from rural communities grow the plants, and those that live nearer the city make medicinal bouquets to be sold at the regional market. Thanks to the organisation, the women have established a production and marketing circuit.

A group of women from the Indigenous Community near Lac Vert—a spot famous for its green waters and surrounding vegetation—began producing charcoal balls to avoid overusing wood and the destruction of the forest. Using debris from the forest, ash and plantain tree husks, the women make greyish balls that they leave to dry in the sun for several days. ‘The charcoal balls are really easy to sell, even in our own families, as people have no money to buy wood,’ recounts Angelani Mukallemba, a member of the Integrated Programme for the Development of the Pygmy Peoples in Kivu (PIDPP by its French acronym).

The income from these activities has enabled the Indigenous Women to organise other activities such as sewing workshops. During the pandemic, they made cloth masks to substitute for surgical masks, which were scarce and distrusted by local people. ‘People thought that masks carried the disease. Making them locally made them feel safer,’ explains Kavira Odette, a rural woman who supports the Indigenous Women of Maharifa Ya Wamama Vijijini. In addition to masks, they make clothing such as uniforms, trousers or blouses with African patterns. Nowadays, more women want to take part in the workshops, but the organisation does not have sufficient funding to buy sewing machines for everyone. In turn, another group makes hats and bags by weaving palm leaves in the traditional style, some of which they paint in colours and sell at markets. All these activities have enabled Indigenous Women to remain mentally and physically healthy during lockdown.

‘**Agriculture enables us to feed ourselves and create a company that brings in revenue from our home gardens, without having to leave the home.**’



Members of the organization in Kondero Village participate in agricultural activities growing green peas and medicinal plants.

‘

We have gained autonomy, food sovereignty, solidarity and social cohesion between us all.’

Ombeni Shamavu makes clay pots
in Kalungu Village.



The Indigenous Women at the Maharifa Ya Wamama Vijijini organisation found the necessary food, medicine and resources in nature to be collectively autonomous and survive, as their ancestors did, by respecting the forests, mountains and rivers. 'We have gained autonomy, food sovereignty, solidarity and social cohesion between us all,' states Odette. 'We trust and believe in ourselves,' adds Noela Kabeshero, an Indigenous Woman at the organisation. In a world that limits and discriminates against them, mutual trust enables them to undertake collective projects to improve their living conditions and fight together for their rights. Meanwhile, the Nyiragongo volcano—meaning 'the one that burns' in the local language—continues to lie dormant.



Once the lockdown ended, Mami Mwajuma and a group of women from Sasha territory decided to gather and work together as members of Maharifa Ya Wamama Vijijini.

A photograph of a man riding a bicycle on a wide, reddish-brown dirt road. The man is wearing a red and white checkered shirt and dark pants. He is looking towards the camera. The background features a line of green trees under a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The right side of the image is overlaid with a solid orange-brown color containing white text.

HEALING THE WOUNDS OF VIOLENCE

UGANDA

During the pandemic, a group of Indigenous Women from northern Uganda gathered to speak in public about the different forms of violence they face on a daily basis and overcome them through joint projects. Indigenous Young Adults in their community did this through music and drama.



Fountain of Life Uganda in partnership with Northern Uganda Conservation Initiative have developed trial plots so girls and women can grow specific plant species that boost body immunity. Otuke District, Uganda.

In Africa, so the saying goes, a hungry person is an angry person. On an empty stomach, people even fight for a neighbourly greeting. The harsh restrictions implemented due to the pandemic meant people in Uganda stayed locked in their homes for 18 months. Many of them had problems finding food. Some men even committed suicide as they were unable to feed their families. Households became pressure cookers with children off school, a lack of work and no available food. This pressure exploded onto the bodies of women and young girls. This violence, however, did not occur overnight, but returned like a ghost from the past that nobody wishes to remember.

People's lives in northern Uganda have been marked by violence. The low-intensity civil war between the Ugandan army and the National Resistance Army (NRA) left around two million displaced individuals. These people had to live in refugee camps for over 20 years, facing all kinds of abuse: from sexual violence to people trafficking. In 2012, UNHCR decided that the Ugandan conflict had ended and ceased helping the displaced, since many of them had returned home⁵. Nonetheless, the trauma remained in the minds and bodies of those individuals. 'People were completely affected and returned home with their trauma,' explains Molly Achello, director and founder of the Fountain Life of Uganda organisation, which fights violence towards Indigenous Women and Girls.

⁵W. Spindler, 'UNHCR closes chapter on Uganda's internally displaced people', UNHCR ACNUR, January 6th 2012, last accessed on January 29th, 2022, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing/2012/1/4f06e2a79/unhcr-closes-chapter-ugandas-internally-displaced-people.html>



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Molly Akello has spent her entire life fighting violence. Firstly the physical, emotional and sexual violence she experienced throughout her childhood and adolescence as an orphan. Later, the violence faced by women and girls in her community. This is why Molly founded Fountain Life of Uganda, so that no more Indigenous Women or Girls would have to live through the same thing as her. Breaking cycles of violence in the social fabric of a community represents a collective healing effort. ‘We therefore work on putting our problems on the table to talk about them and collectively move on from them,’ Molly states.

When coronavirus hit Uganda, the cycle of violence reared its ugly head. A 24% increase in reported rapes and 17% higher adolescent pregnancies were recorded across the country, according to data from the Ugandan Ministries of Health and Gender⁶. Domestic violence, adolescent pregnancy and early marriage rose by 45% in the northeast of the country in 2020. Four girls were murdered in Lagon after being raped, and six women died in fights with their partners.

⁶ R. Apondi, A.C. Awor, L.J. Nelson, J. Cheptoris, F. Gabirano, C.D. Egbulem, S. Alamo, L.A. Mills, J. Hegle, ‘Gender-based violence shadows COVID-19: Increased sexual violence, HIV exposure and teen pregnancy among girls and women in Uganda’, IAS 2021, July 18th-21st, 2021, last accessed on January 29th, 2022, <https://theprogramme.ias2021.org/Abstract/Abstract/2172>



Molly Bella Akello exhibiting plant based products grown and processed by the girls and women trained by Fountain of Life Uganda.

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The first initiative of FLU members was to create a forum so that women could share the problems and types of violence they faced on a daily basis.’

Teen mothers grow vegetables as an alternative income source in Otuke District, Uganda.



In this scenario of gender-based violence, where many victims have been Indigenous Women and Girls, the Fountain Life of Uganda organisation decided to take a stance. The first initiative of FLU members was to create a forum so that women could share the problems and types of violence they faced on a daily basis. Initially, they designed a mixed space but soon noticed that young women felt unable to speak. 'So we decided on a single women's forum and the results were excellent,' states Molly Akello. They found a space where they could share their challenges, which particularly enabled them to feel empowered and seek joint solutions to their problems.

The women agreed to include male leaders from the community to educate their fellow countrymen on respect for women. This led to the creation of a support and mediation network that responded to all cases of violence. In this sense, regional authorities, social service and the police were invited to the forum. 'Those in leadership roles need to know what we are experiencing,' Molly contends.

Thanks to the forum, they convinced the authorities to include cases of violence against women and girls in statistics for the district report, alongside recommendations from Indigenous Women. Moreover, they managed to get a law passed that ensured women's access to social services. Today, each town holds weekly meetings to talk about gender-based violence. There are also legal sessions where aggressors are handed over to the police. 'We still have cases of violence,' Molly acknowledges, 'but at least the perpetrators are now punished and locked up.'

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Akello Florence (left), chairperson of the Canomiyadiro women's group at the shea butter factory in Ogoro Sub County, Otuke District, Uganda.



A teen mother working at a vegetable garden.

With schools closed, and boys and girls at home without anything to do for over a year and half, sexual violence increased amongst adolescents, and many young girls fell pregnant. FLU organised music and drama clubs which, in addition to offering a break from lockdown at home, fostered discussions about sexual violence and early marriages through performance. 'If the children themselves create the messages, singing and acting them out, they create connections with their peers and can dissuade them,' explains Elizabeth Achiro, programme coordinator at Fountain Life of Uganda. According to Elizabeth, the message has taken root amongst young people, and cases of sexual violence have dropped in the district in recent months. Before the pandemic, the organisation circulated poems in the media to talk about respect for individual rights. For example, a community radio programme would raise awareness about the right to land of Indigenous Women, widows and single mothers.



‘In addition to guaranteeing the rights of Indigenous Women and Girls, the forum was also a place where together women could fight against the poverty and hunger caused by the coronavirus outbreak.’

The community dance group performing during the training session at Otuke District Headquarters. Fountain of Life Uganda also offers psycho-social support and counseling through entertainment to help young mothers cope with early parenthood.



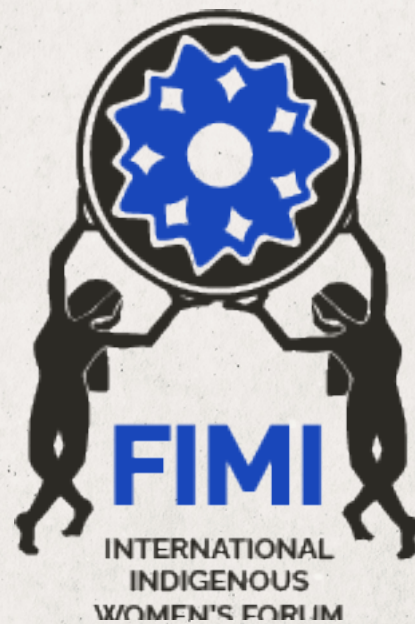
| Adong Mary, a member of the Chanomiyadiro women's group setting up the shea butter processing machine at the factory in Ogoro Sub County.

Molly Bella Akello, founder of Fountain of Life Uganda, training a group of teen mothers at the greenhouse in Otuke District, Uganda.



In addition to guaranteeing the rights of Indigenous Women and Girls, the forum was also a place where together women could fight against the poverty and hunger caused by the coronavirus outbreak. In this sense, they found new ways to generate income and used the lockdown to grow vegetables in their kitchen gardens. They rediscovered the use of local trees to treat COVID-19 symptoms and produced shea butter oil that is excellent for the skin. The next aim is to obtain a government licence to export personal care products and reach other Indigenous Women around the world. In turn, the forum members would like to invite elder men and women who conserve ancestral knowledge about autochthonous plants to share their wisdom with Indigenous Young Adults.

The pandemic has led to many broken families, violated women and deaths. 'At the start, people simply waited for the virus to kill them, they thought there was no solution. But now they have learnt and adapted their routines,' Elizabeth states. The forum has represented a ray of hope for many women. It is a place to learn from one another to jointly overcome the wounds from far too many years of violence.



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