

DEFENSORAS

Ten years ago, at the Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (FMS) we noticed a crossroads that seemed important at the time, and today is essential: the interweaving of socio-environmental justice and gender.

The climate crises in the Chaco region, which includes parts of Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay, was made evident by alternating periods of droughts and flooding. These events particularly affected women and girls who then became promoters of local solutions.



At that time, we were supporting 18 organizations from the Gran Chaco (based in Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay) specifically addressing water-related issues. At one point we stated: women and girls walk up to 30 km a day in the Chaco to get safe drinking water. Therefore, the lack of available water affects multiple rights and puts them at risk. This problem involved many variables: contamination, clearing of and pillaging land, and the ability to make decisions that affected their own lives due to lack of sovereignty.

Advancing extractive industries, real estate speculation, and the worsening climate crises made supporting these environmental defenders, the women who were driving change, ever more important.

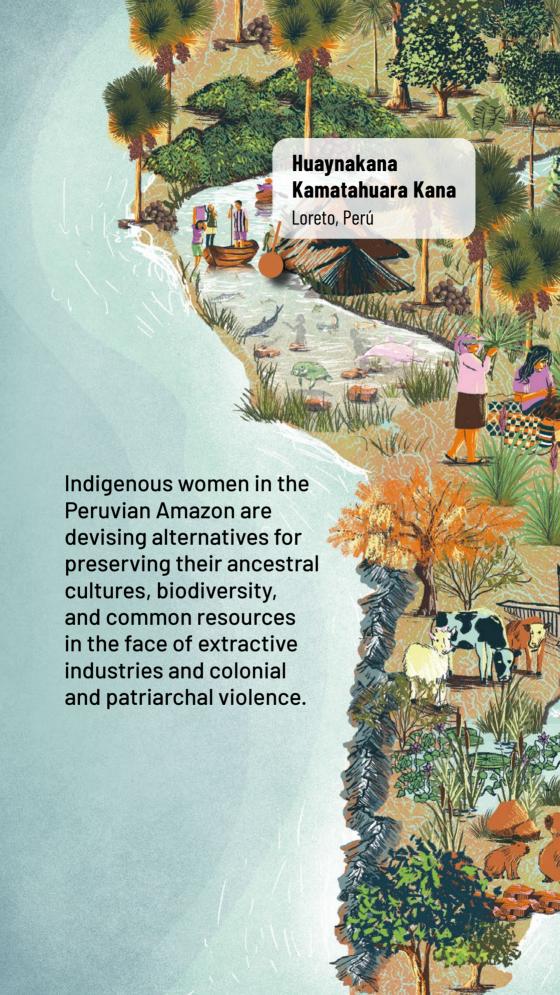


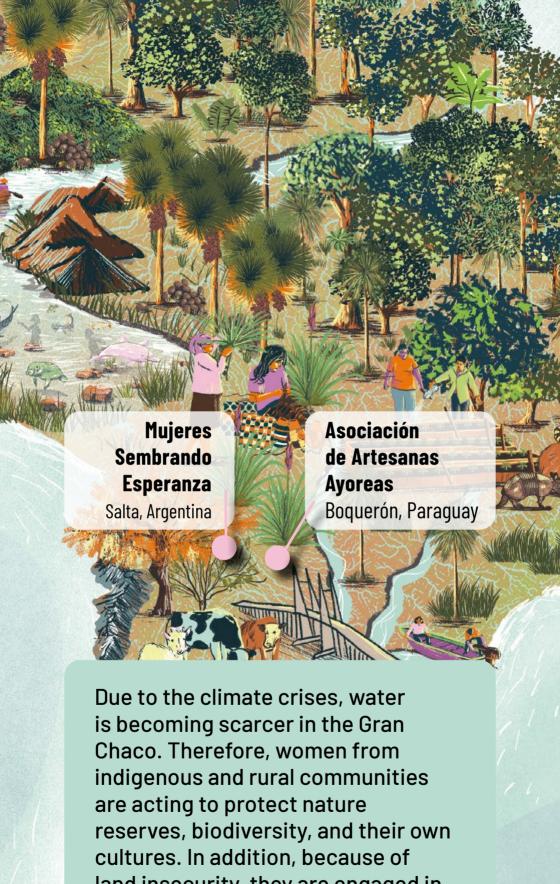
In association with other groups, we continued to get more resources and support more environmental defense groups and organizations, thus addressing more causes in more regions of the continent. In the highlands, wetlands, and Amazon, we supported the preservation of ancestral cultures, the impact of key actors, and alternatives for adapting or mitigating the consequences of climate change.

Therefore, over the past 10 years, we have supported more than 300 initiatives with 93 organizations across Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, México, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Perú, Venezuela and Uruguay. The following pages narrate only five of the many stories we could tell. They describe struggles for land, equality and dignity, conservation, and the women who bring about change. Yet, they are also stories about choosing vital and communal options for navigating the current climate crisis and for believing that other ways of living are possible.

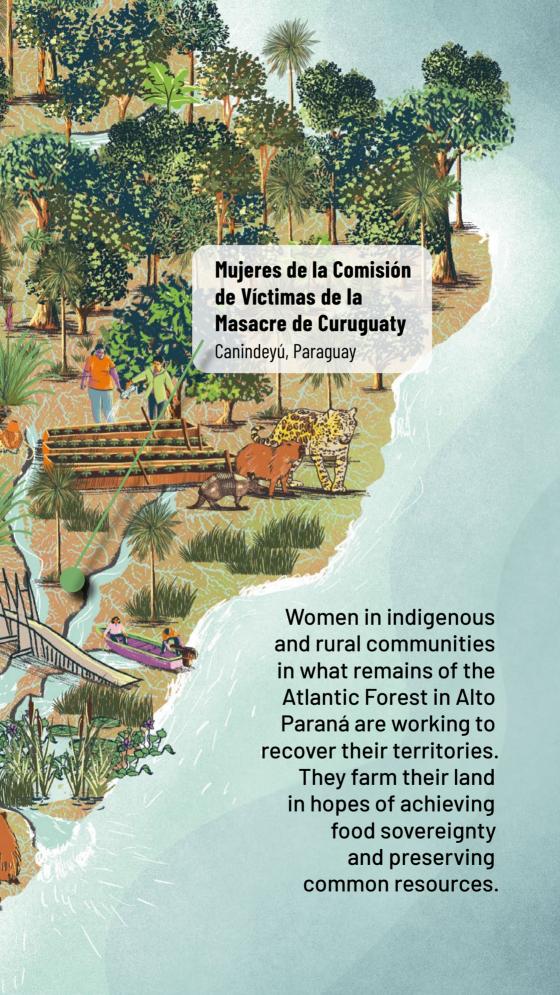
They can also be read as a prism through which to observe a future being constructed from this point on. In different parts of Latin America, in response to impending catastrophe, the women mentioned in these pages propose different relationships to culture, language, land, animals, plants, water and all that is united in this vast world in which we humans, as a species, live. With political imagination, a feminist commitment and willingness to listen, they try out new ways of existing in the present that restore lost bonds and reinvent ways of being.

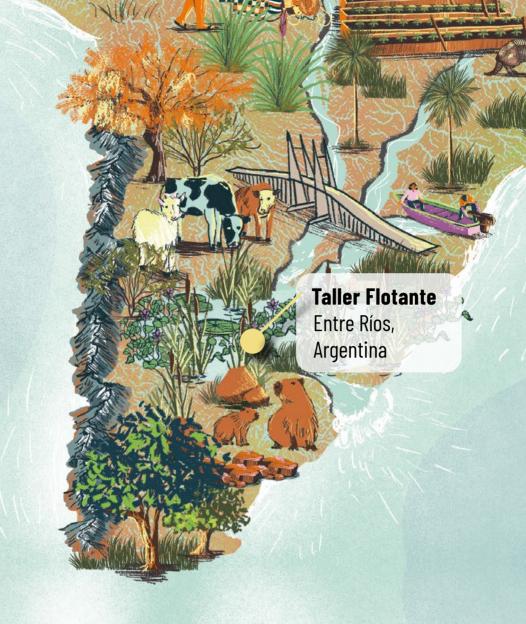




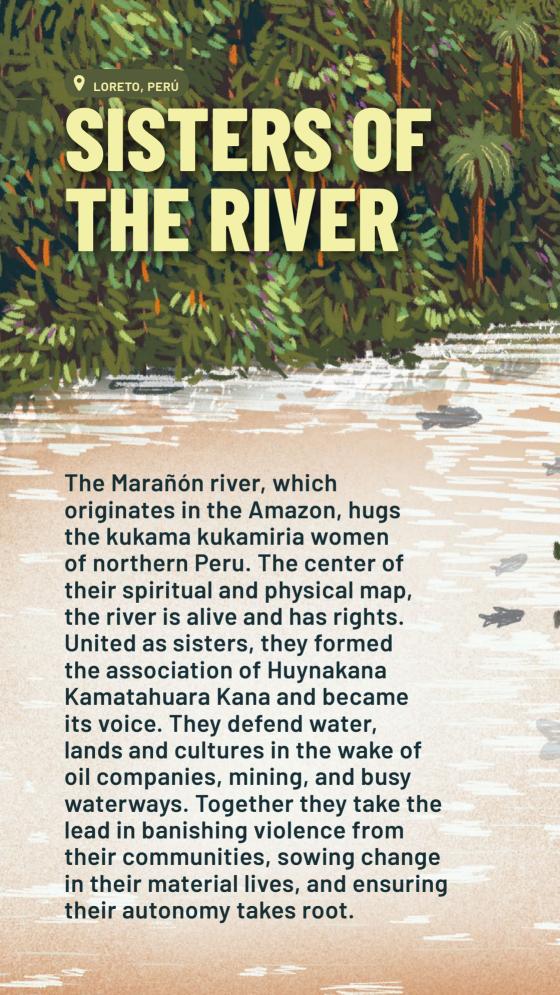


land insecurity, they are engaged in struggles to hold onto their lands.





Wetlands are the main supply of fresh water on the planet. They are disappearing, and along with them the coastal identities of those living on the riverbanks. Women in wetland areas are creating networks to preserve the terrain as well as their communities' livelihoods, cultures, and existence.





The Marañón river, with its Spanish name and indigenous soul, emanates in the Andes and flows into the Ucayali to form the Amazon. It is fed from many sources. As it descends from an altitude of almost 1800 km, the river irrigates mountain peaks, painted rock canyons, marshes, hillsides, and tropical gardens. With a basin the size of Ecuador, it is home to 1025 species of vertebrates, such as manatee, red and gray dolphins, and jaguars, and 448 species of birds. It feeds nets with fish, riverbeds with silt, and people drink, bathe, and travel in its currents. The Marañón's streaming milky waters lull the karuara, ancestral spirits that whisper their curative knowledge to those who inhabit the riverbanks.



This powerful and vital connection to the Marañón leaves its impression on the kukama kukamiria women's day-to-day lives. While they look to cast out violence from their homes, bring sustenance to their families, and train to be leaders, they fight for this living being that provides everything they need so that it can continue its course, free of dams, mercury, illegal gold exploitation, and hydrocarbon spills; the ills that also make their communities and themselves sick.



The daughters, mothers, and grandmothers of Loreto's Parinari district in northern Peru, members of Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana—which means hardworking women in the Kukama language—initiated a legal battle against the State and other key actors in order to protect the Marañón river. In March 2024, almost three years after filing the case, a decision was handed down.

The Marañón river was recognized as an entity with rights. The favorable verdict stipulated that as a tributary vital to the ecosystem, it had the right to exist, run its course, be restored and stay free of pollution. The river also had the right to a voice, and the Kukama women were named its "defenders and representatives" by the justice system. The judges who signed the decision urged authorities to protect both the river and the women's rights.



One way Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana protects the Marañón is by carrying out activities that support the reforestation began in 2023. To prevent trees from being cut down, they want to register 20,000 native species saplings as their children.

The aguaje or moriche palm can be used for human consumption or sold in other forms. Fruit is gathered from the açai, genipa and vinohuaiyo. Oils are extracted from mahogany and rosewood. Huayruro is used for making crafts, while copaiba and sangre de grado are medicinal.



Nothing needs to be cleared. Everything in the forest can be gathered for use. They can reap the benefits of the forest while leaving it standing. The forest species provide raw materials for the products the women sell, which increases their income and quality of life. By conserving these resources, this project focuses on self-management and economic autonomy.

These skills can also be used as tools for eradicating violence against women. As Miluz Canaquire, president of Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana, says "We want to be the ones who manage our projects, continue the work we are doing, and the trust we have in ourselves."

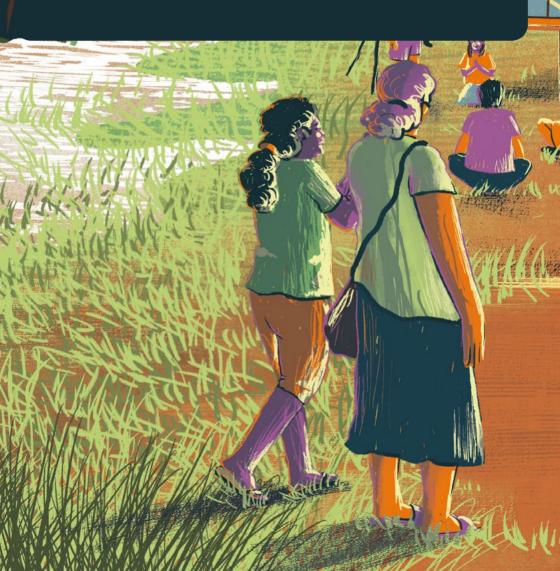
Going house to house, community by community, Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana—with the support of FMS—educate their community about collective rights for stoping violence against women's bodies and their communities' land.

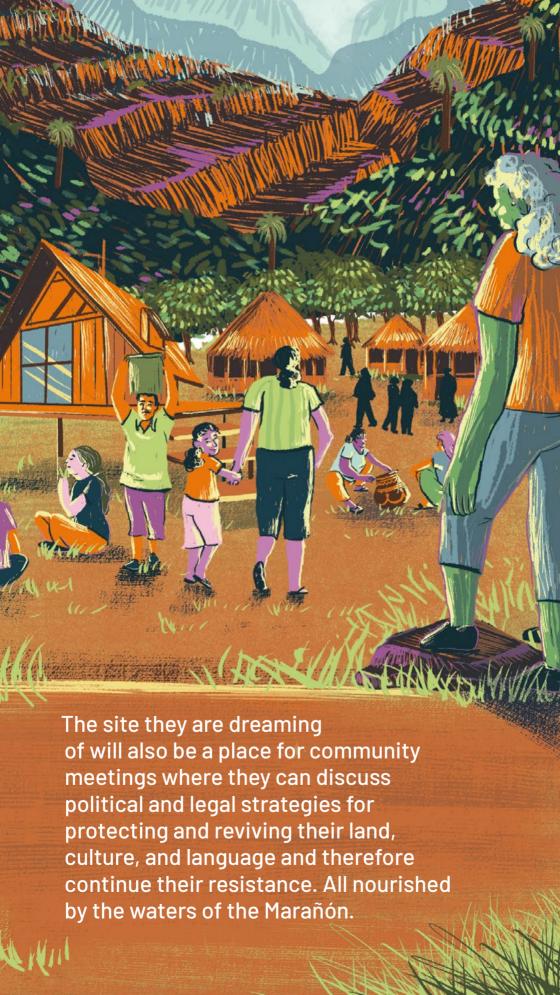
This work, done from an intercultural perspective, includes the revitalization of the Kukama Kukamiria language. Belonging to the Tupi-guarani language family, it is spoken by 2.8 percent of the population, although elder women continue to speak the language. The organization hopes that these women can transmit Kukama Kukamiria to the younger generation of women and that those who pass down the language will be paid and have their own income as well.



Technical guidance and support for small craft initiatives and subsistence family gardens help to guarantee food security. This allows the association to continue transforming their reality.

The communities are laying the foundation for building a future center for holistic healing and ancestral medicine. Here, men and women healers will have a permanent garden where they can hold traditional ayahuasca rituals.







PROTECT THE PACHAMA

In the Chaco, near the triple border between Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay, south of Coronel Juan Solá, Estación Morillo, Salta, the organization of Mujeres Sembrando Esperanza (Women Sowing Hope), is building a way of life rooted in the care and revitalization of their rural identity. Therefore, they are sowing a path to autonomy for the entire community. Every generation is defending their land from being dispossessed by the state and the consequences of the climate crisis, establishing a reciprocal relationship of bold tenderness with the Pachamama.

In 2015, a group of men and women campesinos created a human chain in front of the machines that came to level their land. It was not the first time —nor will it be the last— that their homes were knocked down to dispossess them from their land. The group's power lies in the embodied collective they formed to defend the earth both legally and physically.

Mujeres Sembrando Esperanza is part of the Asociación Unión y Progreso (Union and Progress Association), an organization of men and women farmers from the Chaco in Salta, a northern Argentine province. The organization brings together more than 1000 rural families. They are united by claims to the land and water and the fight for better living conditions in this area.



In 2021, their leader, Lucia Ruiz, suffered legal persecution. Her case was acquitted, setting an important precedent and a milestone that measured the women's strength as organizers.

Today they feel proud of the autonomy they have conquered. Being heads of their households and owners of their lives comes from learning and working together. It also means getting funding for their projects, informing families and helping them to access the law that regulates dominion for caring for the land. In addition, they run their own community radio and gathering spaces.

If the Chaco in Salta had a face, it would be that of a woman because for the organized women, it is like another companion. They are the ones who lead the work of caring and managing the family economy; they are the food suppliers and tenders of small scale livestock and community gardens.





In terms of their relationship to the land, they not only benefit from it but also cherish and care for it. This helps to buffer them from the ill effects of a climate crisis that they did not cause. "We inherited a land without trees," they declare. They see the urgency of preserving the little vegetation that is left and transforming their way of life to adapt themselves to it.

Continually alternating periods of flood and droughts over the past years have degraded the land in which they live, making it especially difficult to raise livestock, their main productive activity.



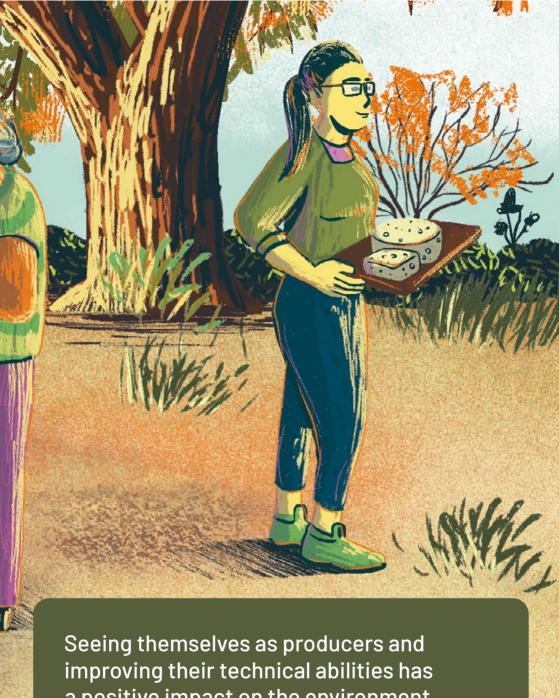


With the help of Fondo de Mujeres del Sur (FMS) they have developed a management system for the peladares. "Peladares" is the name they give to the area of depleted soil, "pelado" ("cleared") by the impact of livestock farming and extensive agriculture, deforestation and drought.

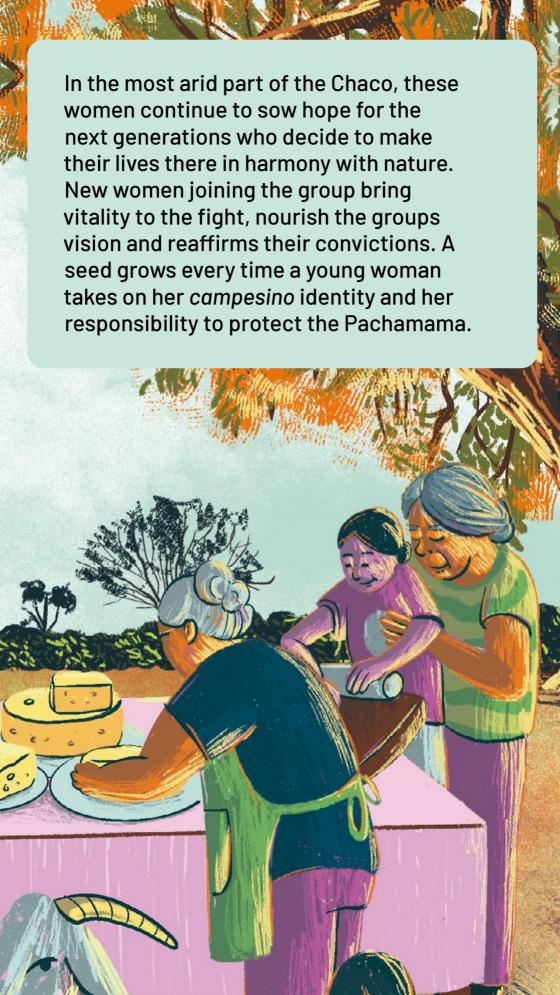
With their own tools and hands, the women build water storage systems by their corrals. The animals in the pens then move the soil and prepare it for reforestation. It is a circular process by which the women restore the soil and preserve the vegetation that is left while taking care of the animals.

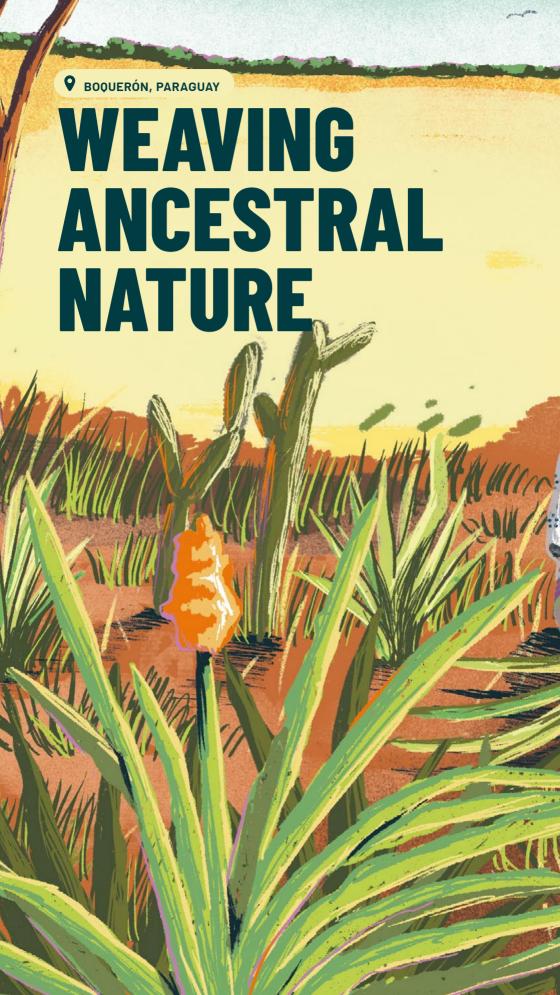
The women leaders are now aware of the value the work they do promoting economic development has in their rural communities. Their role raising livestock, especially goats, is fundamental. Supported by FMS, they receive fair treatment as they work to better their production while also keeping in mind actions for lessening the climate crisis.

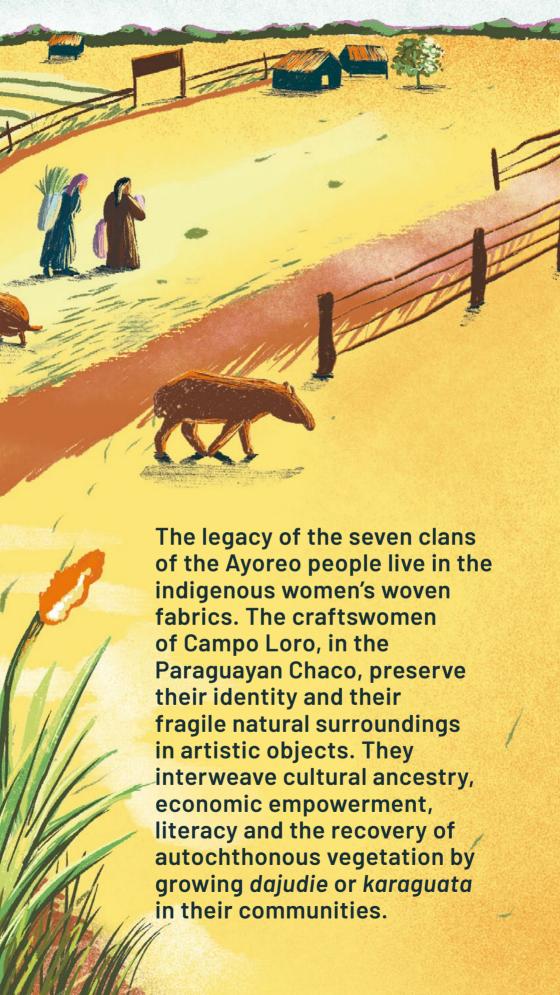




Seeing themselves as producers and improving their technical abilities has a positive impact on the environment, reduces migration by their young people from rural to urban areas, and empowers intergenerational economics. One of the dreams they are pursuing is to go beyond the territory and enter the Argentine market with their own brand of goat meat and cheese. This will give them greater economic independence.









Long "talcales" and ravines run like veins along the gently rolling terrain in the northern region of Western Paraguay. Only saltwater lakes form on the Dry Chaco's semiarid surface and drinking water is always scarce. Animals like the tagua, tatú bolita, ynambu'i, taguato'i, and ypekũ hũ inhabit this vast and complex ecoregion. Flights of birds from other latitudes turn the sky into a migratory route throughout the year. This diversity is in stark contrast to plundering due to the expansion of extensive cattle ranching over many decades.



Campo Loro sits in the middle of the plains in the department of Boqueron, some 480 km to the north of Asuncion. Surrounded by ranches, this Ayoreo community, once part of an evangelical mission, now has a deed to the land. Most of the 1800 people, members of the 280 families that live in Campo Loro are day workers for the agribusinesses that ravage their land.



The natural cycles that indigenous peoples always observed have been altered by excessive exploitation. Loss of biodiversity and increasing droughts put both access to safe drinking water and food sources in danger. This makes ancestral ways of living on the land difficult to sustain. But the Ayoreo women of Campo Loro, by adapting to change, have managed to preserve their culture by remembering through their weaving and fighting for their rights.



The land in the Chaco—despite erosion and fragmentation—continues to be strongly tied to the Ayoreo people through the women. Groups of women walk many hours digging up the *Bromelia hieromyni*, dajudie in Ayoreo, more commonly known by the Guarani word karaguata. With these plants, which they transport on their head, they create fibers for the textiles that materialize their deepest memories.

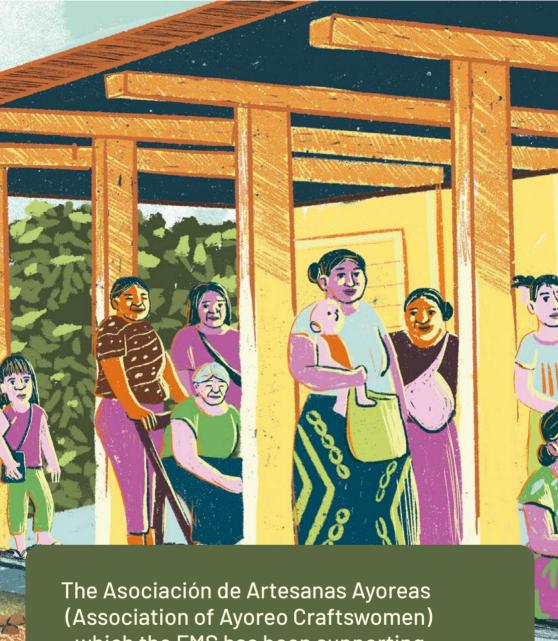




The specific and unique signs of the Etacóre (fem.: Etacóro), Picanerái (Picaneré), Chiquenói (Chiquenore), Dosapéi (Dosapé), Cutamurajái (Cuchaméjnoró), Jnurumini (Jnuruminé) and Posorajái (Posijnoró), as the seven Ayoreo clans are called, are imprinted in the threads made into bags, tapestries, and other objects. Identity and nature are woven into forms and colors that represent scaly zigzagging snakes, anthills creating circles as they break through the earth, tracks of wandering deer, and lines left by passing clouds.

The women's footsteps are imprinted in their weaving. With the rectangular heelless and toeless shoes of their Ayoreo ancestors, the craftswomen make a path into the future with the strength of their past. They adapt to the climate crises by transplanting *karaguata* closer to their community. This gives them access to the raw materials while also restoring biodiversity and transforming their lives.



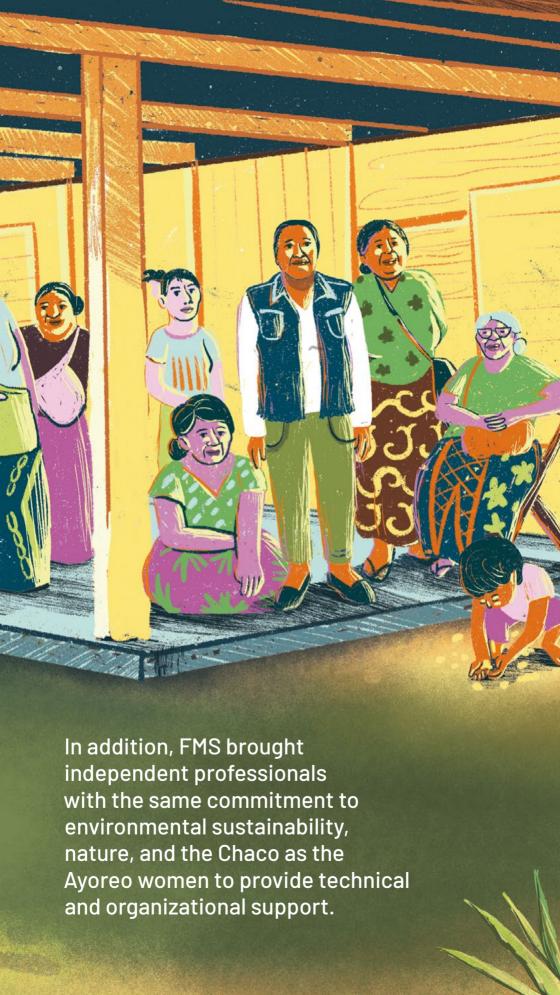


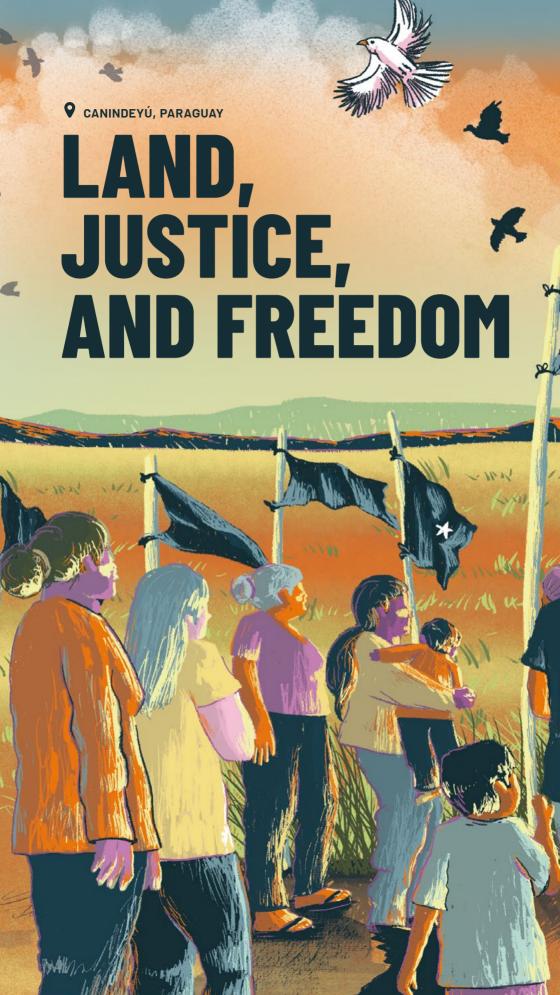
The Asociación de Artesanas Ayoreas (Association of Ayoreo Craftswomen) —which the FMS has been supporting since 2017—seeks to preserve their habitat and cultural ancestry, and increase their craft production as a means of subsistence.

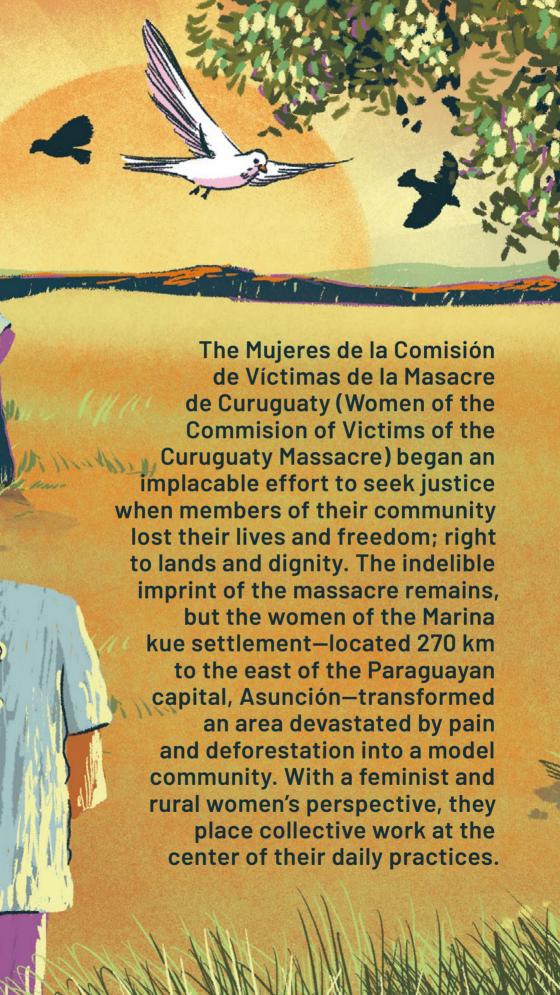
The Asociación de Artesanas's Campo Loro cultural center is a place where the women can meet, work, display their artistic production, and weave strategies for community development. As the Ayoreo women accomplished their goals, they wanted to have greater influence, both in their communities and on behalf of themselves. To this end, they participated in the Ruta de Aprendizaje "Mujeres y Acceso a Recursos Naturales – Agua y Tierra" (Learning Route "Woman and Access to Natural Resources—Water and Earth"), an international gathering of women with similar struggles. They realized that to continue on this path, they needed to make their demands visible and create opportunities for exchange. They, therefore, decided that it was essential for them to learn how to read and write.

Ayoreo women were involved in designing the literacy program—which also receives FMS support— in their own language. Initially, the goal was for them to recognize their names in documents and paperwork. But, it had the added benefit of helping them improve commercialization of their products as well as their ability

to demand their rights, not only with community leaders, but also with state actors.







Rewriting history is not easy, especially over ashes. On June 15, 2012, something changed forever for the rural families in the settled areas of Marina kue when eleven *campesinos* lost their lives in a violent confrontation with police who sought to expel them from their land. Six police officers also died.

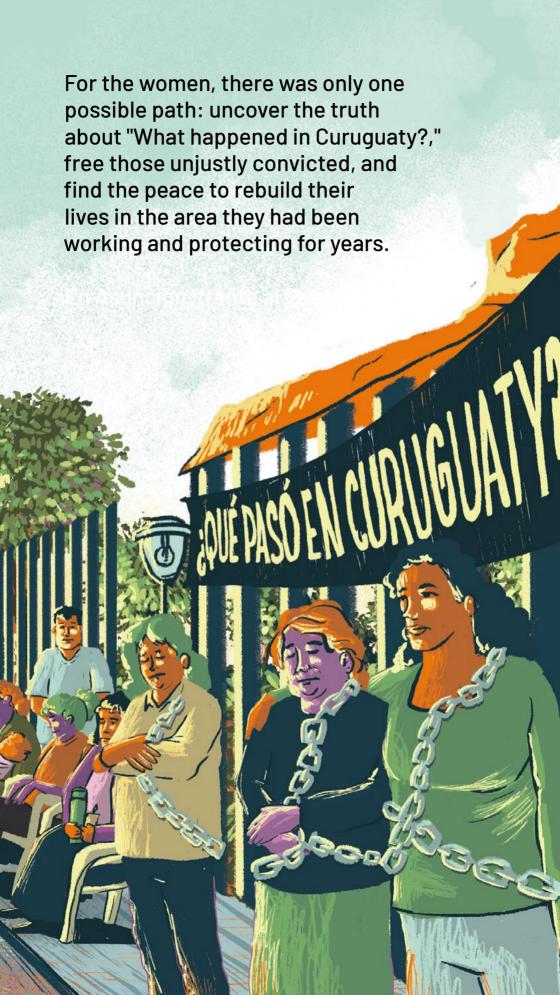
The only guilty parties persecuted by the legal system were the men and women from the rural area. The deaths of police officers were investigated, but no investigation was made into who shot at the campesinos. Thus, the Mujeres de la Comisión de Víctimas de la Masacre de Curuguaty began their valiant struggle to hold onto their piece of land and obtain justice.*

* For more information see *Justicia*, *Tierra* y *Libertad*. *Marina* kue, diez años después at https://bit.ly/Marinakue-2022. Codehupy (2022).



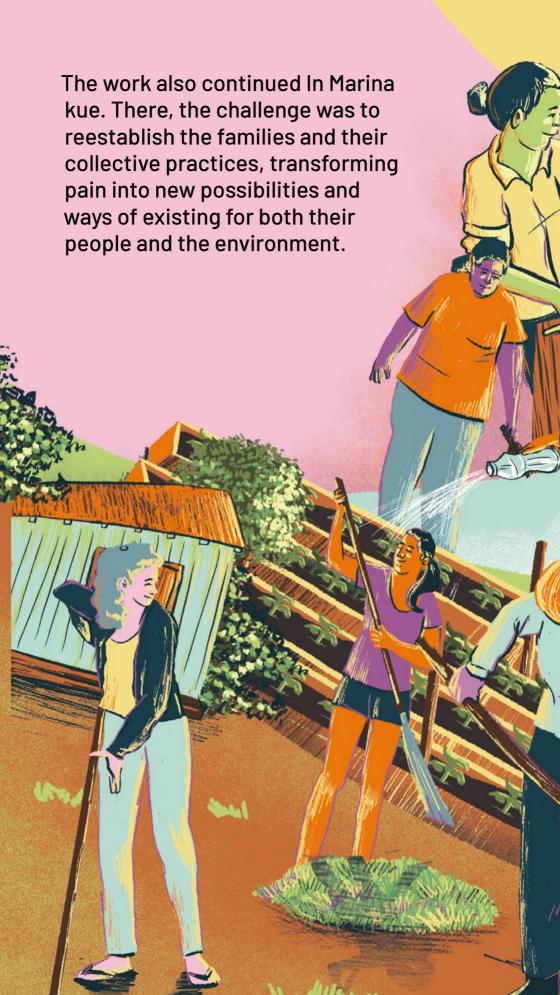
The women leaders of Marina kue had to confront a whole system of privileges. In Paraguay, 90 percent of lands are in the hands of five percent of the population, thus, considered to be the greatest land inequality in the world. Although the criminalization of land struggles existed prior to the 2012 massacre, this moment marks an inflection point in the political history of the country.





The women pitched the "Resistance Tent" in front of the Justice building. They occupied this symbolic space, raised in 2018, for two years. Through rains and storms, they insisted on making their case and creating alliances with other organizations by holding commemorative acts and vindicating their struggle. They even sold the products grown in their community.







The first thing they did was identify the needs and priorities they had as rural women, mothers, daughters and sisters. They had to educate themselves to be able to gain financial independence, build a school for their children, and find alternative ways of feeding their families and caring for the common resources.



The feminization of their territory began almost without it being noticed. With the support of the FMS they learned to make clothes, homemade pasta, and tend community gardens. A multigrade school was opened for the boys and girls of the community and snacks and supply kits were obtained from the State.

They developed practices with a view to conservation and sustainable land management in light of the consequences of the climate crisis, building a model community reminiscent of the Ligas Agrarias Cristianas (Christian Agrarian Leagues) formed in the 1970s during the Stroessner dictatorship.* They aimed for the utopian ideal of having "un tierra sin mal" (land without evil) with communal property and education based on experiential knowledge that provides for all the families.

^{*} For more information see *El sueño de una educación* emancipadora at <u>ventanasabiertas.org.py</u> (2022).



These women took up a narrative cut short and made history, in both their territory and Asuncion, where on July 26, 2018 the Supreme Court absolved the 11 men and women condemned for the massacre and freed the four who were in prison.

Six years later, the people returned to Marina kue and the women's leadership was disputed. It was a challenge, but they reestablished the roles that cost them such hard work to establish. A sense of autonomy —the capacity to manage resources and the wellbeing of the community, is their joy.

In 2023, the State enacted a law recognizing ownership of the land by the people who had been settled there. Currently, more than 150 families live there. The horizon of "land, justice, and liberty" moved a step closer on the road to Marina kue.



TAPESTRY OF ISLANDS

Through their expeditions, the members of Taller Flotante (Floating Workshop) are interweaving riverbanks, wetlands and islands in the southern and central basins of the Plata and Paraná rivers, in the Argentine littoral. They spread out nets of resilience, cooperativism, art and popular education so that the river and its surroundings can be more community oriented and feminist. On their rounds, they construct identity while simultaneously denouncing everything that threatens the territory around the wetlands and their inhabitants.





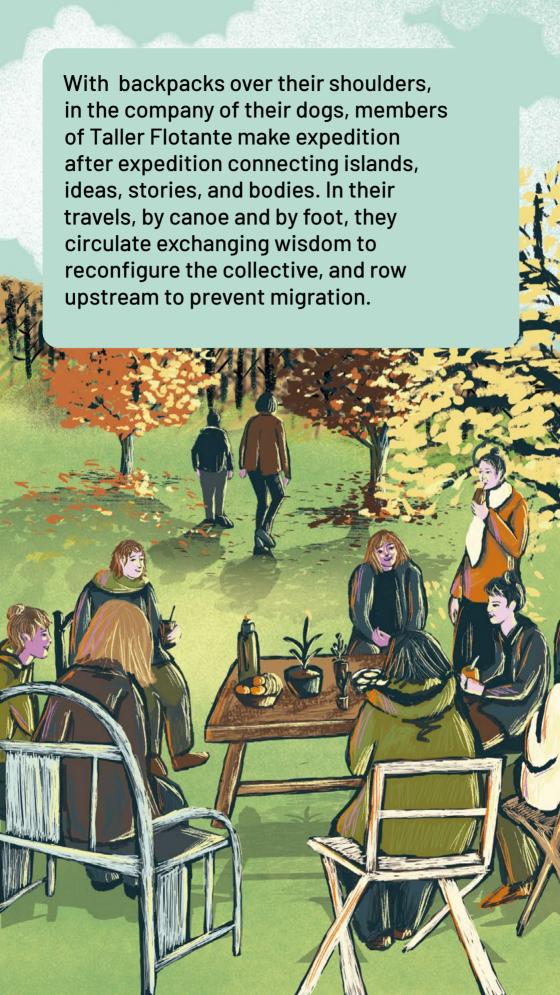
To the south of Entre Ríos and across from Rosario, Argentina's third most populated city, some 425,000 hectares of the Paraná delta form the wetlands and islands of Victoria. Water lilies and reeds greet the passing brown waters that ebb and rise over dark gray-green clay banks. Here, 180 species of fish, 200 birds and many other animals live; some of them in a fragile dance with the changes in the environment in a struggle against the risk of extinction.

The Rosario-Victoria bridge and the Paraná-Paraguay waterway cut through the furrowed island landscape. This speeds up change with no thought of the consequences. Fires, droughts, historically low water levels, polluted waters, depredatory tourism, and privatization of common and public resources are part of the issues affecting the territory.*

^{*} For more information see *Río Feminista Fanzine*Digital. https://biolink.info/RioFeminista

Changes in the ecosystem leave various areas cut off from communication, which makes communities vulnerable, particularly the women. Houses are separated from each other and isolated from the cities. Lack of public policies makes it hard to create networks and access health and legal services. Low water levels reduce the paid work of the women who live on the islands: teachers, fisherwomen, canoe and net makers who work shoulder to shoulder with men. In addition, the lack of public transportation makes it hard to mobilize. Boats, which are the only means of transportation, are generally driven by men, who have licenses.







The compass points toward the interruption of isolation. The women gather, converse, create campaigns, exercise their right to protest, promote socio-environmental policies and actions. They inquire into and look for causes of smoke and chemical pesticides falling on their schools and water, which harms their health and affects the population's food source.

That is why they joined forces to open spaces and support legislation, like the Wetlands bill, Plan for Management of the Multiple Use Reserve "Victoria Islands Wetlands", and the bill for Community-Based Tourism in the Province of Entre Ríos.

While fighting for these causes, they also create vibrant art, tell stories, paint, weave alliances for research, plant gardens, and mold clay. They want to wake up the public's interest ad mobilize for the common good with actions that are part of buen vivir.



Along with other organizations in the area, Taller Flotante assembles the Rio Feminista (Feminist River) network, with FMS's backing, since 2020. They want to meet with their peers and listen to them, allow the territory to have its own voice, and fight for the Paraná's sovereignty. With initiatives based in the river culture, they propose expanding and enriching a healthy life for the island.

As part of a community-based tourism project, along with Cuidadores de la Casa Común (Caretakers of the Common House), Taller Flotante is supporting a group of women who have decided to learn how to drive boats and get licenses. In this way, little by little, the number of independent women working in the delta is increasing, and new channels are opening for jobs that enrich their economic and symbolic labor. They hope to create a cooperative that will be funded and therefore sustainable.

Taller Flotante's work nourishes their convictions: traveling the territories, reconsidering all that is already known and being learned, getting (re)acquainted with spaces, and putting into play their desires. They pursue other dreams, such as having a headquarters, and contemplate founding a floating university to continue constructing possible worlds and imaginaries on the island.



This publication is a production of the **Fábrica Memética** for **Fondo de Mujeres del Sur**, in close collaboration with the activists and organizations whose stories appear within.

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They defend and care for their common home with tenderness, strength, and unity. Their ancestral roots are nourished by the forests, rivers, wetlands, shores, and paths. They find growth even in the arid ground. Their struggle is connected to territories, realities, ideas and people. In the middle of fires, drought, bulldozers, environmental crises and legal apathy, their stories, full of identity and legacy, float in the air, bloom in the countryside and weave together the threads of their culture. The women sow utopias that embrace their sisters, mothers, grandmothers, families, communities, and themselves. They are bound to nature, feeding the sovereignty of this feminine power that heals, produces, educates, counters violence, aims for equality, preserves languages, knowledge, and goods. They draw their own maps from ongoing change with determination to sprout a future in which they can live more fully, freely and autonomously.



