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Thesis Prospectus

Statement of the Problem

Indigenous groups from across the Andean region have spoken out against unfair distribution of environmental degradation, the exploitation of their natural resources from multinational corporations, and inadequate government response to climate change. Interestingly, it has been overwhelmingly indigenous women that have mobilized against these injustices, and I have taken particular interest in understanding the rhetoric they have adopted regarding their role as rural, indigenous women advocating for environmental justice. Through this thesis project, I would like to investigate 1) how indigenous women in rural Andean countries have experienced environmental issues in comparison to other class/ethnic groups, 2) if these environmental issues are disproportionately imposed on these women, and 3) the circumstances/ motivations behind their mobilization. By examining these activist groups, I would be interested to see what methods have proven effective in addressing environmental injustices in indigenous communities.

Theoretical Framework:

Increases in global temperatures over the past 150 years of industrialization has brought devastating consequences to the world's most vulnerable populations: women, people of color, and "the economically disadvantaged."¹ Although these groups are the least responsible for the greenhouse gas emissions and resource extraction practices that have brought our climate system

¹ Cuomo, 2011. Pg 690.

to this point, they are experiencing the brunt of global climate change. Our global climate is made up of networks of interconnected systems, and new weather patterns due to rising temperatures have created a chain reaction of changes that industrialized nations are not prepared to address and have thus exported onto marginalized populations. Beyond climate change, these groups are also more likely to suffer from environmental inequalities due to unequal enforcement of environmental laws, poor government management, and corporate exploitation. ²

Environmental justice, a phrase that first emerged in the 1980s, is a vague term that has been conceptualized differently based on “geographic, historical, political, and institutional contexts.”³ Due to its flexible definition, grassroots efforts have been able to shape environmental justice to fit their own experiences. Indigenous groups especially have mobilized around environmental justice frameworks to advocate against traditional “distribution inequalities” (e.g. the plotting of toxic waste sites, resource extraction, exclusion from political decision making, etc.), but have also stretched their claims to environmental justice to “preserve identity, community and traditional ways of life”.⁴

David Schlosberg and David Carruthers identified this conceptualization as the “capabilities approach” to environmental justice. This capabilities approach addresses a number of issues with respect to collective civil rights, cultural respect, and inequality. Rather than an emphasis on the unequal distribution of “environmental bads,” indigenous groups emphasize the effects environmental degradation has on their cultures’ abilities to function and places injustices faced by the community ahead of those faced by individuals.⁵

² Holifield, 2001.

³ Holifield, 2001. Pg. 78

⁴ Schlosberg, 2010. Pg. 13

⁵ Schlosberg, 2010.

In the Andean region, indigenous women specifically have found themselves especially affected by climate issues. In response to the environmental issues their communities have faced, environmental advocacy groups made up of solely indigenous women have organized coalitions across Latin America, concentrated in Andean countries (i.e. Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, and Chile). I am interested in seeing how gender roles play a major role in the formation of these indigenous environmental advocacy groups and if they can in part explain why most of these mobilization efforts are spearheaded by women.

In Latin American societies, femininities are constructed around motherhood, domesticity, self-sacrifice, and a “spiritual and moral superiority to men.”⁶ In the coalitions I intend to study, the activists explain that it is their responsibility to take action as the caretakers of their communities, citing their roles as women and mothers and referring to their relationship with the Pachamama, the earth-mother of Andean cosmology. I would be interested in finding literature that has explored gender roles in Andean indigenous societies.

Research Design

Case selection

I have reviewed the experiences and publications of several indigenous groups from both Andes highlands and Amazonian basin across Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia. The majority of these cases come from coalitions of women, indigenous activists. These coalitions, *Chaski Warmi*, *Ecuarurani*, and *Hijas del maiz* for example, organized in response to climate issues facing their communities and have expressed their concerns and proposed solutions through published proposals that outline 1) their authority in addressing these issues, 2) why

⁶ Chant, 2003. Pg 9.

women are exceptionally affected by environmental degradation, 3) what issues and policies are especially harmful, and 4) concrete steps they suggest the state take in response.

While the personal testimonies I have reviewed come from different countries, people groups, and landscapes, commonality is found in the systemic inequities they face and the ways in which these women have mobilized to defend their territories, cultures, and families.

Hypothesis

I hypothesize that, due to recent climate issues (e.g. resource extraction & climate change) in the Andean region, indigenous groups have mobilized against the state and multinational corporations utilizing the “capabilities approach,” in order to defend their territories and traditional way of life. Further, I argue that women act as the primary mobilizers due to their societal roles/expectations in rural, indigenous, Andean societies.

Data and Methods

I will primarily utilize qualitative data published by said environmental activist coalitions. Through these groups’ blogs and websites, I have found several personal accounts, proposals presented at UN conferences, news articles detailing these UN conferences, interviews with activists, and short documentaries highlighting their personal experiences and sentiments. From these primary sources, I plan to pull quotes, analyze rhetoric, and better understand how these groups have been affected by climate issues and what their motivations are in organizing against these issues.

In an attempt to integrate quantitative analysis as well, it would be helpful to find statistical evidence demonstrating the ways environmental degradation has impacted rural, Andean indigenous communities. The World Bank has published data relating food/ water security and productivity related to agriculture, and I would be interesting to see if there are

indices published within the different countries of interest for a more in-depth analysis. In addition, it would be helpful to quantify the ways women, people of color, and low-income populations are marginalized in Andean countries.

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