

# gender<ed> thoughts

**New Perspectives in  
Gender Research**

**Working Paper Series  
2026, Volume 2**

**Kimberly Montañez-Medina  
Catalina Quiroga Manrique**

**Gendered Histories from  
the Colombian Caribbean**

**Water Carriers, Forest  
Guardians, and  
Environmental Leadership**

**Mit einem Kommentar von  
Ana Maria Vargas**

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## New Perspectives in Gender Research Working Paper Series

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# Gendered Histories from the Colombian Caribbean. Water Carriers, Forest Guardians, and Environmental Leadership

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## *Zusammenfassung*

Der Beitrag untersucht, wie indigene, afro-kolumbianische und bäuerliche Frauen in der kolumbianischen Karibik alltägliche Praktiken der Fürsorge in sozio-ökologische Führungsformen und territoriale Verteidigung transformieren. Auf der Grundlage von mündlichen Überlieferungen, die im Rahmen kollaborativer Forschung zu Wassergovernance und Klimawandel erhoben wurden, analysieren wir, wie Emotionen und ökologisches Wissen in der Verteidigung von Land, Wasser und kollektivem Wohlergehen zusammenwirken. In den Regionen La Guajira, Bolívar und Sucre zeigen die Initiativen von Frauen, dass Fürsorge als politische Praxis fungieren kann, die Gemeinschaften angesichts von Klimavulnerabilität und extraktivem Druck trägt. Unter Rückgriff auf dekoloniale feministische Ansätze und die Feministische Politische Ökologie verortet unsere Analyse diese Narrative in breiteren Geschichten von Ausgrenzung und Umweltveränderung. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass sozio-ökologische Führungsformen von Frauen keine Erweiterung institutioneller Macht darstellen, sondern relationale Praktiken sind, die in Fürsorge, Reziprozität und Stärke verankert sind und Umweltgovernance von unten neu definieren.

## **Schlagworte**

Umweltgovernance, weibliche Führung, kolumbianische Karibik, territoriale Verteidigung, Fürsorgebeziehungen, Klimaanpassung

## ***Abstract***

The paper explores how Indigenous, Black, and *Campesinas* women in the Colombian Caribbean transform everyday practices of care into socio-environmental leadership and territorial defence. Based on oral histories collected through collaborative research on water governance and climate change, we examine how emotions and ecological knowledge converge in defending land, water, and collective well-being. Across La Guajira, Bolívar, and Sucre, women's initiatives show that care can function as a political practice sustaining communities amid climate vulnerability and extractive pressures. Using decolonial feminist thought and Feminist Political Ecology, our analysis situates these narratives within broader histories of exclusion and environmental transformation. The stories show that women's socio-ecological leadership is not an extension of institutional power, but a relational practice rooted in care, reciprocity, and strength, redefining environmental governance from the bottom up.

## **Keywords**

Environmental Governance; Women's Leadership; Colombian Caribbean; Territorial Defence; Relations of Care; Climate Change Adaptation

## 1. Introduction

This paper emerged from a series of conversations, reflections, and shared field experiences across the Colombian Caribbean. Over several years of working in the region through different research and community projects, we –women researchers from distinct disciplinary backgrounds– found ourselves returning to the same question: why is it so often women who take the lead in sustaining communities and defending nature under conditions of crisis? The paper addresses that concern through the following research question: how do women in the Colombian Caribbean transform practices of care and survival into forms of environmental leadership and territorial defence?

In dialogues about our doctoral projects, we realized that, despite the long history of rural and community resistance in the Colombian Caribbean (Márquez Pérez 2024; Ojeda and González Sua 2018), whenever we encountered practices of caring for nature, it was women who most often empowered themselves through those activities. This pattern shaped the initial questions from which the research developed, including what women’s leadership entails in practice, how it reshapes everyday life, and what risks it involves. These questions are presented here as the research’s point of departure, rather than as a set of questions the paper seeks to answer exhaustively.

One guiding question shaped our reflections: what is the story behind the care and territorial defence work of *Campesinas*<sup>1</sup>, Indigenous, and Black women in contexts of exclusion and climate risk? This question arose not from theory but from lived encounters with women whose daily actions sustain life amid scarcity, extrac-

tion, and inequality. In La Guajira, Bolívar, and Sucre, we met women whose leadership stems not from institutional recognition but from an ethical and emotional commitment to care for others, for the land, and for their communities.

Traditionally seen as caregivers (Bull 2001; Lassman 2000; Revenson et al. 2016), these women have also emerged as socio-environmental leaders and practitioners of both traditional and innovative water and nature governance. Their practices –fetching water, tending gardens, healing with plants, reforestation mangroves, restoring wells– constitute forms of environmental governance often rendered invisible (Quiroga Manrique et al. 2025; Ulloa et al. 2008). This paper seeks to make these practices visible and understand how care becomes a political and ecological force.

Rather than approaching environmental leadership as a formal position, we examine it as a lived process grounded in gendered labour, affective ties, and situated ecological knowledge. Through a feminist oral history approach (Gluck and Patai 1991; Perks and Thomson 1998), we share the stories of three women – Jakeline, Roberta, and Victoria – whose experiences reflect different socio-ecological realities but converge in their ethics of care and resistance. Their narratives invite us to rethink the boundaries between domestic life and environmental defence, between survival and governance.

The Colombian Caribbean provides a compelling context for this exploration. Its intertwined histories of land concentration, racialized inequality, and displacement have produced landscapes of both ecological fragility and collective resistance (Leal and Van Ausdal 2013; Ojeda 2016). Today, climate variability, extractive industries, and uneven development intensify these pressures, revealing how environmental degradation is inseparable from social injustice. Within these shifting conditions, women’s organizing efforts represent acts of continuity and resistance, sustaining life in the face of neglect. Guided by decolonial feminist thought,

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Campesina* is used here intentionally, rather than its approximate English translation peasant. In Latin American contexts, *Campesina* refers not merely to a person engaged in small-scale farming, but to a broader social, cultural, and political identity rooted in land-based livelihoods, collective organization, and struggles for territorial rights.

the paper centres women's voices as sources of empirical insight and epistemic authority, situating their oral histories within broader processes of exclusion and socio-environmental transformation.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This paper draws primarily on decolonial feminist perspectives to construct the collective histories presented, as these approaches allow us to understand the environmental crisis as a complex and historically rooted process shaped by coloniality, gendered inequalities, and racialized relations of power (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2007). Decolonial thought is understood here not as a description of the colonial past, but as a critical project that questions the persistence of the colonial matrix of power in contemporary forms of knowledge production, governance, and scientific practice. While acknowledging broader contributions from decolonial studies in geography, cultural studies, and social theory (Asher 2013; Hall and Schwarz 2017), we place particular emphasis on decolonial feminisms, which foreground how coloniality operates through gendered and racialized bodies, everyday practices, and relations of care.

From this perspective, decolonial feminist theory not only helps to trace the roots of socio-environmental crisis but also makes a political and epistemic call—together with feminist theories of recognition—to acknowledge the individual and collective histories of women that sustain the reproduction of life. Following Nancy Fraser (1995; 2000), we understand recognition as a key dimension of justice alongside redistribution, and misrecognition as a form of status subordination that excludes women's labour, knowledge, and authority from legitimate political and public domains. Latin American feminist scholars have expanded this framework by addressing the colonial and racial dimensions of misrecognition, showing that recognition must go beyond inclusion to challenge epistemic hierarchies and dominant regimes of meaning. In this sense, decolonial thought becomes

an epistemic and ethical commitment to producing knowledge otherwise, attentive to lived experience, memory, and relational ontologies that disrupt Eurocentric and linear understandings of modernity, as captured in the notion of a *ch'ixi* world (Cusicanqui 2018).

Within this tradition, María Lugones (2007; 2010) demonstrates that modern gender systems are inseparable from the coloniality of power, which imposed Western gender binaries while erasing Indigenous and Black epistemologies and practices of care. This critique resonates with Ochy Curiel's (2009) argument that feminist theory itself has been shaped by colonial relations of knowledge production, reproducing Eurocentric genealogies that obscure long histories of women's resistance in the Global South. Similarly, Yuderkys Espinosa-Miñoso (2014; 2019) calls for a decolonial politics of recognition that challenges not only social exclusion but also the epistemic criteria that define what counts as valid knowledge.

To anchor these debates explicitly in environmental questions, we draw on feminist political ecology and environmental history, which situate nature at the intersection of power, knowledge, and social relations. Feminist political ecology provides critical tools to analyse how environmental change, resource governance, and socio-ecological inequalities are gendered and racialized, and how everyday practices of care, labour, and territorial engagement become deeply political (Arriagada Oyarzún and Zambra Álvarez 2019; Buechler and Hanson 2015; Elmhirst 2017; Ulloa 2016). Following Donna Haraway (1988), we emphasize the importance of situated knowledge and concrete practices in shaping forms of environmental stewardship at the local level.

Finally, drawing on Rita Laura Segato (2011), we understand gender violence, environmental dispossession, and state neglect as interconnected expressions of the colonial-modern order, in which women's bodies and territories become sites of appropriation and control. By centring the situated knowledges of Black and Indigenous women (Lamas et al. 2021; Soto-Alarcón 2022), and engaging with feminist analyses of

care and affect (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012), this framework allows us to analyse women not merely as victims or participants (Norofña 2024), but as agents of environmental transformation whose leadership emerges through care, territorial rootedness, and collective practices that politicize nature and everyday life.

### 3. Methodological Framework

This study employs oral history as its primary research method. Oral history offers access to personal experiences, collective memories, and knowledge systems that are often excluded from written records, particularly those of historically marginalized groups (Perks and Thomson 1998; Portelli 1998) such as Black, *Campesinas*, and Indigenous women in the Colombian Caribbean. As a dialogical method, oral history situates knowledge within the encounter between interviewer and participant, recognizing that narratives are co-constructed through shared time, emotion, and reflection (Gluck and Patai 1991). This approach facilitates not only the reconstruction of past events but also the articulation of the emotional and political meanings that women ascribe to their experiences of territory, nature, and leadership.

Oral history, in this sense, becomes a feminist and decolonial methodology, one that centres women's voices as producers of theory, not merely as sources of data (Lugones 2010; Mendoza 2016). It allows the researchers to trace how gender, ecology, and power intersect in women's everyday practices of care, resistance, and adaptation. By listening to how women narrate their relationships to water, land, climate change and community, the study highlights what decolonial scholars have described as situated epistemologies, forms of knowing that are embodied, relational, and anchored in lived experience rather than abstract universalism (De La Cadena 2015; Haraway 1988).

As authors of this study, we understand positionality as an integral part of both the analytical and methodological process. We are two Latin American, Colombian doctoral research-

ers, trained in different but complementary disciplinary traditions within Colombian academia. One author brings a background informed by engineering and economic history, engaging questions of infrastructure, production, and the organization of social life. The other author approaches the research from anthropology and human geography, with a focus on socio-environmental relations and feminist political ecology.

Our trajectories converged in academic discussion spaces located in a university in Northern Europe. Working from that institutional location made explicit a central concern: how to think, narrate, and recognize Colombia from settings shaped by Eurocentric epistemic traditions, without reproducing hierarchies of knowledge. This concern guided our methodological choices and our attention to accountability in representing participants' voices and priorities.

As Colombian women, we also accessed relational spaces and forms of conversation that were often different from those available to other researchers, particularly in contexts where everyday interaction, care, and trust are central to community life. Thinking and writing from these spaces enriched our dialogue with diverse women who produce knowledge in multiple ways –academic, technical, experiential, and community-based– and helped situate oral histories within the broader socio-environmental relations they describe.

#### 3.1. Fieldwork design

Fieldwork was conducted across different ecological and social settings of the Colombian Caribbean between 2023 and 2024 (see Appendix A: Table 1), covering both coastal and inland rural zones. The sites included La Guajira, Bolivar, and Sucre, each representing distinct configurations of environmental stress, resource governance, and gendered organization.

The primary data collection method consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews focusing on women's life histories, with particular

attention to their roles in defending water, forests, and land. These interviews sought to document how women interpret and respond to environmental transformations, droughts, contamination, deforestation, and land dispossession, within the broader processes of political and social change in the region.

Methodologically, the collective histories developed in this paper emerged through multiple, sustained dialogues with women engaged in socio-environmental organizing in the Colombian Caribbean. Rather than essentializing identities or fictionalizing narratives, we aimed to foreground the complexity of everyday life and to show how collectivities are constituted through doing, caring, defending, and politicizing nature. In this sense, storytelling is treated as a relational and political practice: a space where environmental leadership is forged through shared labour, affective ties, and situated struggles over territory, water, and life.

Although we approached the field from different disciplinary backgrounds and project goals, after reviewing our respective frameworks and interview designs, we agreed on a common set of guiding questions to ensure comparability across sites and coherence in interpretation. The guiding questions were as follows:

1. What are the main threats affecting their territories (e.g., water scarcity, environmental degradation)?
2. What motivates these women to become leaders or to engage in community work?
3. Why is nature important to them, and how do they understand the value of environmental resources?
4. What community management strategies do they use to sustain collective organization and local governance?
5. What personal care strategies do they develop, and how do these reflect the relationship between the individual and the collective?
6. What sacrifices do they make in their leadership roles – what is left behind in the process of caring for others and the territory?

In addition to interviews, participatory methods were used to strengthen the research's relational dimension. These included workshops and social cartography sessions, which invited participants to draw, map, and narrate their territories from their own perspectives. These exercises, inspired by feminist and decolonial methodologies (Cabnal 2010; Rojas Becerra 2023), foreground the body as the first territory of experience, linking personal memories to broader ecological and political processes.

Table 1

Please consult the Appendix A.

Across these regions, interviews were conducted primarily in Spanish, in some cases, translation support was provided for participants who spoke *Wayunaiki* –the official language of the Wayúu people–, often within participants' homes, community centres, or outdoor gathering places. Conversations lasted between one and two hours and were recorded with informed consent. Transcripts were anonymized, translated selectively into English for analysis, and cross-checked with field notes to ensure contextual accuracy.

### 3.2. Methodological and Ethical Challenges of Constructing Compositional Narratives

Constructing joint or compositional narratives entails a set of methodological and ethical challenges that are central to feminist and decolonial research, particularly in contexts marked by displacement, violence, land conflicts, and water scarcity. Given the sensitivity of the topics discussed, all names and identifying details were changed. The study followed ethical guidelines for oral history and feminist fieldwork (Gluck and Patai 1991; Perks and Thomson 1998). Participants were informed that they could withdraw at any time, and their anonymity was ensured throughout the research and writing process. Ethical protection was not treated as a

purely procedural requirement, but as a constitutive element of the research design that shaped data production, analysis, and narrative construction.

The narratives of Jakeline (La Guajira), Roberta (Bolívar, Cartagena de Indias), and Victoria (Sucre) are composite and anonymized accounts that bring together the experiences of several women whose voices and struggles overlap within similar socio-environmental contexts. Rather than aiming to represent individual biographies, these compositional life-stories were constructed to capture shared processes, recurring practices, and common political trajectories observed across multiple interviews, informal conversations, and prolonged engagement in the field. This compositional approach preserves the emotional depth and experiential truth of lived realities while protecting participants' identities and avoiding the risks of exposure in contexts marked by violence and dispossession. Specific personal details –such as surnames, occupations, and specific crop names– were omitted or generalized, and community or geographic names were replaced with descriptive equivalents –e.g., “the community’s well”.

This anonymization not only safeguards confidentiality but also shifts the analytical focus from individual biography to collective experience, in line with feminist methodologies that privilege relational and processual understandings of agency (Riaño-Alcalá 2006). In this sense, compositional narratives function as analytical devices rather than fictional reconstructions, allowing us to foreground how leadership, care, and environmental defence are collectively produced through everyday practices and shared histories. While compositional storytelling necessarily involves abstraction and simplification, we approached these decisions reflexively, grounding them in empirical regularities rather than narrative invention.

From an analytical standpoint, data were examined through thematic interpretation rather than mechanical coding. Transcripts and field-notes were read iteratively, identifying recurrent themes such as scarcity, care, displacement,

community organization, and the body–territory relationship. Particular attention was given to silence, emotion, and metaphor-elements emphasized in the narrative turn in anthropology as crucial for understanding how social actors make sense of crisis, violence, and environmental change beyond explicit discourse. This interpretive strategy strengthens analytical accountability by anchoring narrative construction in patterns that emerged consistently across different encounters and socio-ecological contexts.

In writing the narratives, we adopted an ethnographic storytelling approach that preserves the texture of oral expression while maintaining analytical depth. Storytelling is used here not as a literary strategy, but as a methodological and theoretical tool that enables the articulation of complexity, contradiction, and situated knowledge. The three composite figures represent distinct but interrelated socio-ecological realities: Jakeline, an Indigenous Wayúu woman from La Guajira, embodies water scarcity, ancestral knowledge, and leadership grounded in care; Roberta, a Black woman from Cartagena de Indias, Bolívar, reflects urban and peri-urban struggles for environmental justice in coastal ecosystems; and Victoria, a *Campesina* leader from Sucre, captures the nexus between land scarcity, agrarian conflict, and women's rural leadership.

The analytical dimensions of leadership derived from these narratives, including those presented in the final table, should be understood as heuristic abstractions developed inductively from the empirical material. These simplifications do not seek to exhaust the complexity of lived experience, but rather to render visible recurring patterns that allow for comparison across cases while remaining grounded in the narratives themselves. This composite method aligns with feminist oral history's commitment to narrative plurality, representing marginalized women not as isolated subjects but as part of collective processes of resistance and knowledge-making (Portelli 1998; Rojas Becerra 2023). Taken together, this approach provides both empirical validity and theoretical robustness, ensuring that the stories presented are

firmly anchored in sustained field engagement while remaining ethically responsible and analytically transparent.

#### **4. Colombian Caribbean: Situating the Women's Oral Histories in Historical and Political Context**

The socio-environmental crises shaping women's lives and leadership in the Colombian Caribbean are not recent or accidental. They are the outcome of long historical processes through which violence, racialised dispossession, and uneven development have been systematically produced and reproduced. Environmental degradation, poverty, and climate vulnerability must be understood as historically constituted conditions, embedded in colonial land regimes, capitalist expansion, and state-led development projects that have disproportionately affected Indigenous, Black, and *Campesino* communities (Fals Borda 1979; LeGrand 1986; Palacios 2006; Ulloa 2016).

Since the late nineteenth century, the Caribbean region has been a strategic frontier for agrarian expansion, extractive economies, and infrastructural interventions oriented toward national and global markets. Processes of land concentration intensified throughout the twentieth century, particularly during the liberal agrarian reforms and subsequent counter-reforms that favoured large landowners, cattle ranching, and agro-industrial production (LeGrand 1986; Machado 1998). These dynamics were accompanied by persistent political violence and forced displacement, especially from the mid-twentieth century onward, when rural conflict, paramilitarism, and state neglect converged to dispossess peasant and Indigenous communities of land and water sources (CNMH 2016). For women, this history translated into layered forms of vulnerability: exposure to violence, loss of livelihoods, erosion of social networks, and the feminisation of care and survival strategies (Meertens 2016).

Today, these historical trajectories remain visible in the region's socioeconomic indicators.

In 2023, cities such as Riohacha –La Guajira– and Sincelejo –Sucre– reported poverty rates exceeding 40%, among the highest in the country (DANE 2023). Income inequality remains structurally entrenched, with a national Gini coefficient of 0.539, reflecting the persistence of unequal development patterns that disproportionately affect Caribbean territories (World Bank 2023). Climate change exacerbates these inequalities, as rising temperatures, declining rainfall, and more frequent extreme events intensify pressures on water, land, and ecosystems upon which local livelihoods depend (IDEAM 2024). Importantly, these are not abstract risks but lived conditions that shape everyday struggles for water access, housing, food security, and bodily well-being, particularly for women.

In this context, the three departments we visited –La Guajira, Bolívar and Sucre– (see Figure 1) share histories of land grabbing, violence and unfolding environmental problems, yet each reflects a distinct facet of the region's broader history of exclusion.

In La Guajira, historical neglect and extractivism intersect in acute ways. The semi-arid ecology of the peninsula has long required sophisticated Indigenous water governance systems based on rainwater harvesting, seasonal mobility, and communal sharing. However, large-scale coal mining and, more recently, renewable energy projects have disrupted hydrological systems, appropriated land, and deepened humanitarian crises among Wayúu communities (Ulloa 2020; 2023). These interventions reflect what political ecologists describe as hydrosocial displacements, whereby state and corporate projects reconfigure relations between water, territory, and social reproduction, often undermining Indigenous governance and women's central roles in sustaining life. Wayúu women's struggles around wells, health, and water access must therefore be situated within a longer history of colonial extraction and contemporary green capitalism, rather than framed solely as responses to scarcity.

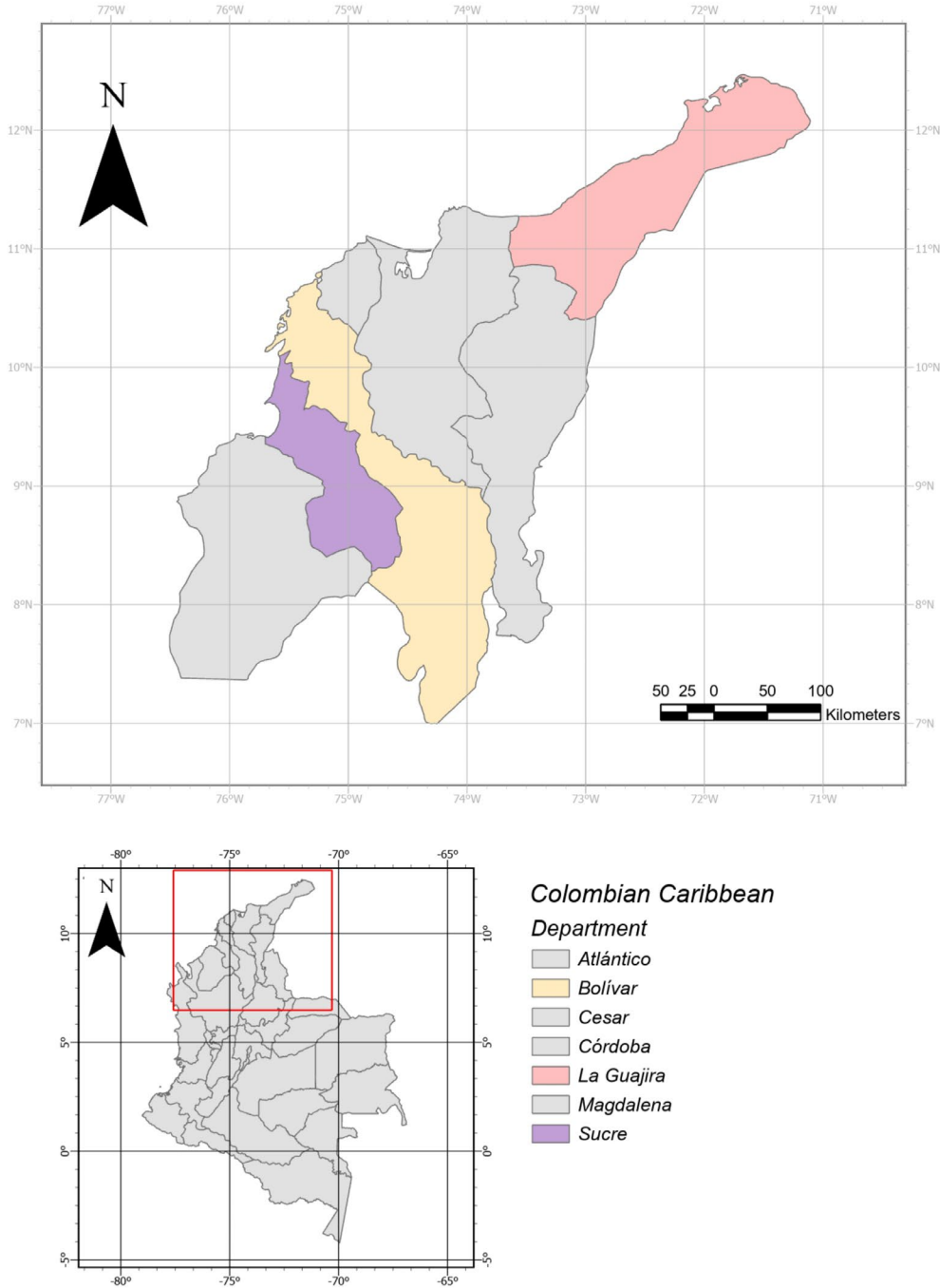


Figure 1. Map of the Colombian Caribbean region showing the three departments where fieldwork was conducted, La Guajira, Sucre, and Bolívar.

In Bolívar, home to Cartagena and the mangrove systems of the Canal del Dique and Ciénaga de la Virgen, environmental inequality is inseparable from racial and spatial segregation (Quiroga Manrique et al. 2025). Rapid urbanization and tourism-driven development have degraded coastal ecosystems while marginalizing Black communities whose livelihoods depend on them (Cunin 2003; Deavila Pertuz 2019; Deavila Pertúz 2018). As Alejandro Camargo (2022) notes, Cartagena’s mangrove peripheries are spaces of both vulnerability and resistance, where communities mobilize for climate justice and recognition –revealing the tension between global sustainability agendas and local claims for environmental and racial equity.

In Cartagena, struggles against poverty and marginalisation unfold within a broader political economy shaped by tourism as an extractive, racialised, and exclusionary development model. As Orlando Deavila Pertuz (2018) shows, the consolidation of Cartagena as a “city of heritage” has relied on the prioritisation of tourism, real estate development, and global imaginaries of value, often at the expense of the “city of rights” claimed by Black and popular communities. Since the twentieth century, the historic centre and coastal areas have been produced through processes of urban renewal and heritagisation that privilege colonial aesthetics and international capital while displacing racialised populations toward peri-urban and environmentally vulnerable zones, some of them connected with mangroves (Deavila Pertuz 2025). In this sense, tourism operates not only as an economic sector but as a form of socio-spatial extraction, appropriating land, labour, and ecosystems while externalising social and environmental costs onto communities living between the marsh, the sea, and the infrastructural margins of the city. These dynamics are embedded in broader global economic circuits that reproduce uneven development and racialised exclusion, shaping the socio-environmental conditions described in Roberta’s story and resonating with

the extractive logics that also appear in Victoria’s life history.

In Sucre, the historical tension between hydraulic control and rural livelihoods reveals another dimension of the region’s political economy. Large-scale water management infrastructure, designed to regulate floodplains and support agro-industrial interests, has coexisted with persistent vulnerability among rural and fishing communities, particularly in lowland and wetland areas (Caraballo and De La Ossa 2011). Seasonal flooding, land scarcity, and environmental degradation are not simply natural phenomena but outcomes of development models that marginalise smallholders and prioritise extractive and agrarian capital. *Campesino* movements in Sucre have long contested these dynamics, drawing on traditions of collective organisation and participatory knowledge documented by Orlando Fals Borda (1979). Women’s leadership in this context emerges from these histories of struggle, as they organise water access, defend land, and sustain community life amid ongoing dispossessions.

Taken together, these regional trajectories show that violence, discrimination, and land and water dispossession in the Colombian Caribbean are not legacies of the past but ongoing projects, continuously rearticulated through extractivism, tourism, infrastructure, and climate governance. Women’s socio-environmental leadership must therefore be understood as historically situated political practice, forged in response to intersecting processes of ecological degradation, economic exclusion, and racialised and gendered violence.

## 5. Oral Histories of Leadership and Environmental Defence

The three narratives that follow were developed through feminist oral history. While each reflects a specific socio-ecological setting, together they reveal how women’s leadership emerges from lived experience and collective care, chal-

lenging structural inequalities and environmental degradation.

### 5.1. *Jakeline: Indigenous Women's Leadership in Times of Water Scarcity, La Guajira*

Jakeline is a Wayúu woman, a mother, a teacher, a nurse, a *médica tradicional*<sup>2</sup>—traditional healer—. She belongs to the Wayúu people, an Indigenous group in Colombia, whose territory extends across La Guajira Peninsula, linking the border between Colombia and Venezuela. Within this landscape, where rain is uncertain and rivers have retreated underground, women have become the primary stewards of life and continuity. Jakeline lives between the desert and the sea, where the wind carries stories and water dictates the rhythm of existence. Her voice is both singular and collective, resonating with those of countless Wayúu women who have learned to live, lead, and care in a land where scarcity has become a permanent condition. Her story speaks of resilience, but also of exhaustion; of faith in the land, and of the longing to preserve what is constantly slipping away.

Jakeline grew up in a small settlement in La Guajira, in a house built of mud walls and woven palms. From a young age, she learned that water was more than a resource; it was life itself. She remembers accompanying her mother to the jagüey—a rain-fed pond—that sustained their family and animals. The journey took hours under the fierce sun, balancing containers on a donkey or sometimes carrying them on her back. “Without water,” she says, “there is no breath, no crops, no people.” (Fieldwork Conversations 2024) The men tended the animals, while the women fetched water, cooked, and cared for

the children. The memory of duty is a reminder that survival has always rested in women's hands. Yet these arrangements were not always accepted as “natural”: they were negotiated, contested, and sometimes resented, especially when scarcity sharpened expectations about women's time and obligations.

The arrival of the first well changed everything and yet changed nothing. In earlier times, Jakeline recalls, the elders would dig a hole in the dry riverbed at dawn and by midday water would begin to seep through the sand. Today, she says, one could spend the entire day digging and still find nothing. The earth no longer answers in the same way. Climate variability has deepened this silence, turning the old signs of water into uncertain guesses. Against this backdrop, the well, drilled decades ago through international cooperation, became both a symbol of progress and a reminder of dependence. It also became a source of friction: disagreements over access, maintenance, and responsibility surfaced whenever the pump failed, the panels weakened, or the water ran low moments when cooperation could feel less like unity and more like exhaustion. Jakeline coordinated much of that process herself, mobilizing her community, speaking with local officials, and maintaining contact with visiting organizations. Through her persistence, the community not only secured the well but later installed solar panels to power it and built a small school beside it, transforming the site into the social centre of community life. “It was a blessing, but one that had to be cared for every day” (ibid.).

For her, the well is not simply infrastructure; it is an achievement born from constant negotiation, a product of her ability to translate local needs into the language of external aid. She often welcomes universities, NGOs, and international visitors to her territory, believing that visibility can open paths to survival. But visibility also comes with costs. Each visit reorders local dynamics, who is seen, who is consulted, who is photographed, and it can generate mistrust, gossip, or fatigue among those who feel that attention arrives unevenly. In this sense, her leadership reflects how Wayúu communities adapt to

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<sup>2</sup> A “*médica tradicional*” among the Wayúu people is a traditional healer, spiritual guide, and guardian of ancestral knowledge. For the Wayúu, health is not only the absence of illness, but also the balance between the body, the spirit, the land, and the community. A “*médica tradicional*” is responsible for maintaining this balance through healing practices that integrate herbal medicine, ritual knowledge, and communication with the spiritual realm.

external interventions, not by passively receiving them but by reinterpreting them through local priorities, integrating outside technologies into a broader moral economy of reciprocity and care. Still, the water that emerges from the well is brackish, with a salty, claylike taste. When the sky remains cloudy, the solar pump stops; when it runs for too long, the water acquires a muddy odor, a warning from the depths. *“We drink it that water, because we have no other choice”* (ibid.).

In Jakeline’s community, every drop of water follows a hierarchy of needs. The first use is always domestic, cooking, washing, cleaning, bathing children, then come the animals, and only after that, the crops. Yet priorities are not always straightforward. When goats weaken or crops fail, the order of needs becomes a matter of debate, and decisions about a few extra buckets can strain relationships and expose unequal burdens. Traditionally, irrigation depended entirely on rainfall, when it rained, life flourished; when it did not, fields remained dry and empty. In recent years, however, international cooperation programs have taught the community how to build simple irrigation channels to preserve food production during dry seasons. This knowledge has been vital for women, who are responsible for feeding their families. Through these exchanges, they also learned to cultivate and cook non-native species introduced by the projects, integrating them into their diets and giving new meaning to the idea of food sovereignty. What began as external aid has become part of their everyday practices, allowing them to nourish themselves and their children even when the rain no longer comes. For Jakeline:

*“This capacity to adapt, to transform what arrives from outside into something that sustains life, is a quiet form of resistance”* (ibid.).

Her understanding of nature is not metaphorical but relational. The wind, the moon, and the animals speak to her, announcing the shifts in time and season.

*“When the rabbit sings at five in the morning, rain is near, when the wind blows from the mountains, the Sierra is sending the water. When it comes from the sea, it means drought”* (ibid.).

These are empirical observations accumulated over generations. The world, she insists, has its own language, and those who listen survive. Yet she laments that the language of nature is fading. *“The world is upside down,”* her father used to say. *“The time is no longer the same”* (ibid.). He planted according to the moon, but now, she says, *“the moon no longer listens”* (ibid.). Droughts last longer, rains come late, and the trees bear no fruit. Even the sacred tree used for medicine, has nearly disappeared. Only one remains near her house, which she guards carefully, forbidding anyone to cut its bark. *“When that tree dies, a part of us will die too”* (ibid.).

Jakeline’s leadership emerged from these losses. It was never an ambition but a necessity, a calling born from care. She calls herself a *gestora*—an organizer—. She coordinates visits from health brigades, organizes children’s events, and mediates with external organizations. *“Leadership is not about power. It’s about showing up.”* (ibid.). She spends her own money to travel, leaves her children to attend meetings, and negotiates with local authorities who often forget her community exists. At home, this work is not always understood. Care becomes a source of tension: the same community that relies on her may also question her absences, and family needs do not pause when meetings call. *“People think leaders are paid,”* she laughs, *“but leadership is something you pay for, with time, with strength, with your life”* (ibid.). Her persistence reflects a Wayúu principle of the moral obligation to act for the collective good. In her view, care for others and care for the territory are inseparable.

Her roles are many and overlapping. As a teacher, she instructs the children on how to plant and understand the weather. As a nurse, she treats wounds and fevers with both pharmaceutical medicine and plants gathered at dawn. As a *médica tradicional*, she listens to dreams and diagnoses what the body cannot explain. *“I’m not a witch,”* she says when outsiders doubt her. *“I don’t cast spells. I dream. The plants speak to me.”* (ibid.). Her healing combines the spiritual and the practical, boiling plants leaves for fevers, preparing others for stomach pain, and others to strengthen the blood. She

sees medicine as another form of conversation with the land, one that requires humility. *“The plant decides if it wants to heal you, if you approach with arrogance, it won’t work”* (ibid.).

The environmental transformations have made her healing work more urgent. Rising temperatures and salinity affect not only crops but also bodies. *“The water burns the plants and tires the people, even the goats abort when the heat is too strong”* (ibid.). Yet adaptation continues. Jakeline and her community have learned to combine ancestral techniques with modern tools. They use goat manure as fertilizer, install drip systems, and plant fruit trees for shade. Some of these innovations came from development projects, but the women made them their own. *“We learned to grow non-native crops but now they grow our way”* (ibid.). The community garden has become a place of learning, solidarity, and rest, a laboratory of resilience. Yet adaptation is uneven. Tools break, spare parts are costly, and “innovation” can become another obligation, maintained by women’s unpaid labour long after the project’s final report is written.

Jakeline’s leadership, like that of many Wayúu women, is sustained by sacrifice. She works without recognition, constantly negotiating between family needs and community demands. *“I leave my children, but I do it for them, so they will have water and food tomorrow”* (ibid.). At night, she sits by the well, listening to the hum of the pump and the songs of nocturnal birds. The wind speaks again, and she feels the presence of her ancestors. They remind her that staying, remaining on the land when so many have left, is also a form of resistance. *“My happiness is here, my flowers, my animals, my memories”* (ibid.).

Through Jakeline, we can see how Wayúu women transform care into politics. Their daily acts, cleaning the well, teaching children to plant, guarding trees, mixing medicine, constitute an environmental governance rooted in love rather than law. It is a politics of endurance, of subtle and constant repair. It refuses to separate emotion from expertise, or spirituality from knowledge. Feminist political ecology helps to name what Jakeline, and her peers al-

ready know that power can reside in care, that survival itself is a political act. As decolonial thinkers like Lugones (2007; 2010) remind us, such practices resist the coloniality that has long silenced Indigenous women’s knowledge.

Jakeline often says she is preparing the way for her children. Her eldest son, a policeman, already dreams like she does. She tells him that her well, her garden, and her goats are his inheritance, not for profit but for survival.

*“One day, the rains will forget us again. When that happens, remember the signs, the wind, the rabbit, the brisa, and you will find your way back”* (ibid.).

In her story, water is never just water. It is memory, labour, and hope; a thread connecting women’s hands across generations. Through Jakeline, the collective voice of Wayúu women speaks, a chorus of healers, teachers, mothers, and leaders who keep life flowing in a place where the earth is always thirsty. Their politics is one of care, their resistance one of staying, and their dream one of continuity, that even under a changing sky, the wells will keep singing, and the land will still remember their names.

## **5.2. Roberta: Black Women’s Leadership in Times of Climate Change Hazards, Cartagena de Indias**

*“I had to set up an office in my living room,”* (Fieldwork Conversations 2023) says Roberta as she serves us coffee before we begin talking about the organization of Black women in the peri-urban area of Cartagena. Of rural origin, as she herself mentions, *“I’ve lived my whole life surrounded by plants; that’s where I like to be.”* (ibid.). Roberta is around 35 years old, has three daughters, and manages the household while her husband works in the city *“doing whatever comes up,”* (ibid.) from construction to street vending.

Roberta finished high school before being displaced by violence and building her home in the Black community of Villa Gloria. After finishing school, she couldn’t continue studying, but she tells us laughing that she wants to be a

doctor –or at least sell medicine at a pharmacy in the city. After all, Cartagena is a city with about one million inhabitants– *“It’s impossible that I couldn’t find work at some pharmacy,”* (ibid.) says Roberta when we ask about her plans.

Arriving in Cartagena wasn’t easy. The city offers various opportunities, but for Black communities, many of them are concentrated in service jobs and housing located on the peripheries of the historic and commercial centre. As soon as she arrived, Roberta tells us she began renting a small place in an area near the Perimetral, on the southern edge of the Ciénaga de la Virgen. There, the football fields are surrounded by mangroves. However, she didn’t stay long because transportation was too expensive, and she couldn’t find a place with a patio. She was only 16 when she arrived in Cartagena, no children, no partner.

While doing various informal jobs, Roberta met her partner, a young Black man, the son of fishermen who lived in La Boquilla, the northern edge of the same marshland that had first received her. After several years together, around the mid-2000s, Roberta and her new family arrived to Villa Gloria, a Black community that, since the early 1990s, had been resisting on this small strip of land between the marsh and the sea. Thus, after being displaced by violence from her hometown, located in the Montes de María region –or perhaps in Valle del Cauca, or any other area affected by Colombia’s armed conflict– Roberta reached the La Boquilla sector, in northern Cartagena, where she obtained a small plot of land with a patio: a space where she could keep chickens, plants, cassava, and other things that didn’t fit inside the house.

Living between the sea and the marsh came with new challenges. During the rainy season –and due to a poor drainage system in a wetland historically affected by infrastructure interventions –roads, viaducts, airports, and the expansion of the tourist zone– Villa Gloria floods and receives much of the garbage dumped into the marsh from other parts of Cartagena’s largest continental body of water. Roberta explains that, ever since she’s lived in Villa Gloria, the

rains have brought flooding. Still, recently, the floods have become less predictable, despite all the care and preservation work that Black communities here do to protect the mangrove, a key ecosystem for climate change adaptation.

She also explains that access to water is only possible through purchase. Although there are community initiatives to have shared storage tanks, her family sometimes has to buy bottled water for cooking. Additionally, the dry season has become increasingly hot. *“Fortunately, we almost always have electricity, and we have good fans,”* (ibid.) she says. However, Roberta also mentions that some pregnant women and elderly people *“suffer a lot when the temperature rises, you can’t even stay in the shade anymore.”* (ibid.).

About four years ago, Roberta became interested in joining a women’s group led by one of the community’s founders. At first, she got involved simply because she wanted to meet people and get out of the house for a while when her daughters were at school. Later, she realized that within that space there were opportunities for temporary work, such as childcare, elder care, cleaning, or mangrove maintenance. Although, as she says, *“at first it was just to do something different,”* (ibid.) after the project financed through the prior consultation for the construction of the Gran Manglar viaduct, her interest in continuing with community projects grew stronger through the mangrove planting process.

Through this process of mangrove care and reforestation, she met a forestry engineer who encouraged her to consider studying for a technical degree. Over the past year, she has been combining family care, tending her patio, and working with the mangroves while studying to become a nursing assistant.

When we asked her about the mangrove care process, Roberta told us:

*“Well, that process starts with collecting the seeds, you have to choose the right mangrove seed... because there are pests that attack the seed, and if we don’t carefully check it, it might have a worm inside. So, we have to be attentive, if the seed shows certain signs, like little dots or small cracks where the worm entered. If we see that the seed looks like that, it*

*can't be planted. So, the whole process begins with classifying the seeds. It's also important to care for the soil where it will be planted. To improve that soil, we use, besides regular soil, sweet soil, black soil, and also a bit of white sand, salty soil.*" (ibid.).

According to Roberta, the selection process is one of the most critical parts of mangrove care and reforestation. This work, carried out with professionals during the project's implementation, became the daily routine of a group of 29 women, including Roberta, who decided to turn their patios into mangrove nurseries. Participation in these initiatives was shaped by changing family needs, access to income, health, and moments of crisis, meaning that involvement was often discontinuous and uneven across time. After the seed selection comes the process of fertilizing and daily care of the mangrove plants in each patio. Roberta describes this process as follows:

*"After everything is selected, we prepare a compost made from fertilizer, usually natural fertilizer, like dried plant leaves. That compost helps the root get strong and anchor well. Also, the plants are watered twice a day: once in the morning and once in the afternoon. Why? Because, as you can see, the temperature here is very hot, and the seed dries out, it dies. So, we water it early in the morning and again in the afternoon, when the sun is lower. We also have to build shade for the plant."* (ibid.).

Like Roberta, the women who participated in the mangrove planting process balanced their household and family care responsibilities with caring for the plants. When we asked why they had participated in the mangrove project, most of them said the mangrove is the only thing protecting them from heat and flooding, and it's also the main playground for some of the children. In Villa Gloria, women have long been involved in community-building initiatives, although in uneven ways and at different moments of their lives. The mangrove care project, without a doubt, brought many of them together.

In Villa Gloria, some women have spent their entire lives defending the territory, older women who were among the first to arrive and build their homes. But Like Roberta, many of the women who participated in the mangrove

planting process attempted to balance household and family care responsibilities with caring for the plants, though not all could do so consistently or under the same conditions. For some of them, the mangrove is a new space—an ecosystem they didn't know before— but one they have become experts in. Although Roberta does not consider herself a community leader, she recognizes that her work in mangrove planting has made her an example among the women of Villa Gloria. Her dedication to the process made her increasingly visible as a reference in seed care and selection, although this recognition also came with additional expectations and demands on her time. However, combining this care with everyday life has not been easy. She explains that sometimes it's been challenging to continue with the mangrove care because it requires a lot of time, and there are moments *"when the girls get sick, my husband's out of work,"* (ibid.) or someone in the community needs her help in other ways.

Roberta continues studying, caring for her family, and planting mangroves. Yet she admits she sometimes needs a break:

*"You can't do everything, I'd like to take part in more things, but I also have to find ways to get food and take care of the girls."* (ibid.).

Roberta's leadership is grounded in her almost unconditional participation in processes of caring for nature. Beyond being the one who meets with officials, manages funds, or builds relationships with people from other communities, her role is mainly about sustaining the work of political mobilization through care and everyday labour within the projects the community manages to secure.

Roberta doesn't see herself giving speeches or participating in formal meetings, but she does see herself teaching others how to develop good mangrove care practices or working in schools to show children how to select seeds and care for the soil. As she says, political advocacy and lobbying:

*"aren't really my thing,"* but she also adds, *"we all have to help from different places, and for me, leadership means participating, learning, and keeping*

*the processes alive. If no one applies the projects, the projects don't come back.*" (ibid.).

### 5.3. Victoria: Campesinas Women's Leadership in Times of Land Struggles, Sucre

*"I'm sorry if I seem a bit distracted, a close relative passed away this morning, and I can't stop thinking about it."* (Field-work Conversations 2024). When we offered to postpone the interview and even the planned community activities, she shook her head. *"No, being here keeps me alive. It's my responsibility, and I wouldn't be at peace staying home"* (ibid.). In that moment, her words revealed a form of leadership that is not born from ambition or visibility, but from care, an ethics of responsibility grounded in the everyday labour of sustaining life amid scarcity and loss. Her decision also exposed a tension that repeats itself in her life: grief does not pause, but responsibilities do not either, and not everyone around her understands why she keeps showing up.

Victoria, a 38-year-old *Campesina* woman from Sucre, lives with her two children in the same territory from which she was displaced as a child. At seven, she escaped with her mother and sisters after her father was murdered in a land dispute; at fifteen, threats forced her to migrate again to the capital city of Colombia. Years later, she decided to return to what she calls *"the wounded land"* (ibid.) determined to transform fear into collective strength. Returning was not only defiance against external violence; it also meant re-entering a community marked by silences and disagreements, where some preferred not to reopen old wounds and others questioned the risks of organizing again. Her decision to come back was an act of defiance, a refusal to let violence and dispossession define the meaning of home.

Today she leads her community's organization, coordinating projects and managing resources for water access, food production, and education. Although she trained as an administrator and holds another job to sustain her fami-

ly, her main job is unpaid: building community resilience. *"If we don't organize, nobody will come to save us"* (ibid.). For her, leadership is both necessity and moral duty, a way to protect others from the abandonment she once endured. Leadership, she explains, is also managing friction: deciding who is prioritized, mediating complaints about distribution, and dealing with suspicion when projects arrive and benefits are perceived as uneven. Yet organizing often means waiting forms to fill, offices to visit, and intermediaries who control access to resources, turning urgency into paperwork and fatigue.

Being a *Campesina* in Sucre means having lost some land, whether due to violence or the transformations, like in Cispatá, where the sea swallowed the rice fields and brought mangroves instead. Some families now depend on mangrove work, adapting to new livelihoods.

*"There too, everything has to be organized; the only way to sustain territories amid dispossession is through social organization."* (Field-work Conversations 2023)

Mangrove work also brings disputes: between those who depend on cutting and those who fear sanctions, between conservation rules and the need to eat, and between neighbours when enforcement feels selective or unfair. Like many women across Sucre, Victoria combines multiple forms of labour, and community organization is one of them. It continues the long history of peasant movements in the region, from the ANUC –National Association of Peasant Users, by its initials in Spanish– that once reclaimed land later absorbed by agribusiness and cattle ranching.

The principal threat to her territory is water scarcity and biodiversity loss, intertwined with a deeper history of land concentration and ecological degradation. Large-scale plantations and cattle ranching have dried traditional wells and privatized aquifers once shared among smallholders.

*"The land was divided for a few; the rest of us had to learn to live with the leftovers, less soil, less water, and less trust"* (ibid.)

The arrival of powerful landowners and agro-industrial projects has not only transformed the landscape but also deepened inequalities between *Campesinos*, Indigenous, and Black groups. “*The State gives aid to them, not to us*” (Field-work Conversations 2024). She describes a politics of lists and favours, who gets registered, who gets visited, who is invited to meetings, where access to aid becomes another terrain of inequality and resentment.

For Victoria, nature is not an abstract environment, but the foundation of existence, a living companion in struggle. She speaks of the earth as something to keep alive, not to exploit. One of the community’s abandoned aquifers, once dry and forgotten, has become a symbol of resilience. Under her coordination, the residents worked collectively to restore it, transforming the site into part of a small productive system that now sustains poultry and subsistence crops. Its recovery mirrors her own path, a process of healing in which damaged ecosystems and wounded memories are mended through collective care and persistence.

Community water and forest management is complex and deeply gendered. In Victoria’s region, water is distributed only once a week, organized by neighbourhoods. Those days are also days of tension. A missed turn, an empty tank, or a rumour that someone took “more than their share” can quickly turn scarcity into conflict, and Victoria often becomes the one called to mediate. Meanwhile, the forests –especially the mangrove forests– are managed by the state, which imposes restrictions that are constantly contested by local social organizations.

The water system depends on electricity, so every power cut suspends the supply and forces households to recycle every drop. During the dry months, when temperatures rise and rainfall disappears, Victoria helps coordinate shifts at the communal tank, ensuring that the elderly and single mothers receive water first. She describes this not as charity but as justice: “*We all suffer when one house has no water*” (ibid.). Her leadership is pragmatic, balancing the scarcity of resources with the abundance of solidarity.

Yet the collective strategies that sustain the community are increasingly strained. Wells dry earlier each year, and underground reserves have been weakened by over-extraction from nearby commercial farms. The local river, once used for washing and irrigation, is now contaminated by industrial waste. At the same time, land scarcity has become a growing crisis. Large estates and urban expansion have reduced the available space for both cultivation and housing, leaving new generations with nowhere to build or farm. Many young families have been forced to construct small houses within their parents’ patios, a visible sign of the shrinking rural landscape. “*We are being cornered, not with guns, but with dryness and lack of land*” (ibid.).

Despite these constraints, she refuses to idealize rural life. She speaks critically of dependence on external aid and the loss of agricultural knowledge. Many community members have shifted from mixed crops to monoculture for industrial markets. “*The problem is not the plant, it’s the logic, we plant for money, not for food*” (ibid.). These debates divide neighbours: some defend monoculture as the only way to earn cash, others insist it undermines food autonomy, and the disagreement can strain relationships that organization depends on. Her voice carries both pride and fatigue, pride in the community’s capacity to adapt; fatigue from years of negotiating with local authorities and watching promises evaporate like the ponds in March.

Personal care, for Victoria, is inseparable from collective care. She finds rest not in isolation but in participation “*If I stay home, I think too much and the sadness wins*” (ibid.). Her well-being depends on the rhythms of the community, meetings, workshops, and everyday encounters around water distribution or reforestation. These shared activities create emotional infrastructures as vital as the physical ones. They are “*the irrigation of the soul*” (ibid.). Still, she acknowledges the toll leadership takes, long days away from her children, unpaid labour, and the emotional weight of constant mediation in local conflicts. But those same spaces can be heavy: she carries other people’s anger, disappointments, and accusations, and mediation be-

comes an emotional labour that accumulates in the body.

What she leaves behind is often invisible: personal time, security, and sometimes dignity when confronting state officials who dismiss rural women's expertise. More than once, she has been asked to "prove" the community's needs again, as if past displacement and present scarcity required endless justification. But her sense of purpose overrides frustration. "*We are not asking for luxury, just for the right to live decently with the land*" (ibid.). Through her words, care becomes political, a collective method of survival that resists both extractivism and despair.

Reflecting on her journey, Victoria links her past displacement to her present struggles against ecological loss. Violence did not end with the conflict; it changed form. Today it is exercised through water inequality, environmental neglect, and institutional indifference. Yet she insists on hope, a quiet but persistent hope that grows from below, through community meetings, shared meals, and reforestation days.

In Sucre, where drought and dispossession intersect, women like Victoria redefine what it means to lead. Their authority is neither imposed nor symbolic; it is cultivated in the daily work of sustaining life where institutions have withdrawn "*We cannot make it rain, but we can make things grow*" (ibid.).

## **6. Discussion: What does it mean to be a socio-environmental leader in the Colombian Caribbean?**

The stories of Jakeline, Roberta, and Victoria converse across landscapes—desert, mangrove, and floodplain—revealing how women's socio-environmental leadership emerges from care, responsibility, and the collective will to sustain life amid scarcity and neglect, in sum, within the context of the intensification of historical socio-environmental conflicts.

In the Colombian Caribbean, where the legacies of violence, land dispossession, and ex-

tractive development converge with climate change, women's leadership cannot be understood as formal authority but as everyday political practice (Buechler and Hanson 2015).

For Jakeline, leadership is grounded in ancestral and ecological knowledge, transmitted through water, plants, and dreams. Her motivation—collective survival—is sustained through practices of well management, ancestral medicine, and teaching. Her leadership expresses what Lugones (2010) calls decolonial agency, where care and reciprocity resist the colonial logics that fragment community and ecology.

Roberta's leadership, in turn, grows from embodied and experiential knowledge, in a context where Black bodies have been relegated from the construction of the city. Through mangrove care and environmental education, she redefines community work as a space of political participation and climate adaptation. Her motivation lies in the continuity of community projects and the protection of Villa Gloria's wetlands from both flooding and displacement. Like many Black women in Cartagena, Roberta transforms domestic and reproductive labour into ecological stewardship, what Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) conceptualizes as matters of care that sustain both people and ecosystems.

For Victoria, leadership is rooted in practical and administrative knowledge intertwined with moral responsibility. Her motivation—justice and organization—translates into collective work around water access, aquifer recovery, and social planning. Her story illustrates what Fraser (1995; 2000) describes as a feminist politics of recognition, where marginalized women's labour and ecological knowledge demand parity of participation in governance. Through persistence and coordination, she embodies leadership as political care (Tronto 2013), the invisible labour of keeping communities alive where institutions have withdrawn.

These women's experiences show that leadership in the Colombian Caribbean is relational, embodied, and gendered. It arises through situated practices—fetching water, planting mangroves, restoring wells—that blend the domes-

tic, ecological, and political spheres. Such practices reveal that care is not an apolitical activity but a mode of governance and resistance (Mendoza 2016; Ulloa 2023).

The three narratives also highlight different motivations and practices shaping socio-environmental leadership. While Jakeline leads through ancestral responsibility, Roberta through collective maintenance, and Victoria through organizational justice, all three engage in sustaining life through care and community action. Their experiences correspond to the analytical dimensions of knowledge, motivation, and practice summarized below.

<p><i>Table 2</i> <i>Please consult the Appendix B.</i></p>
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Taken together, these dimensions suggest that leadership among Indigenous, Black, and *Campesinas* women emerges not from institutional frameworks but from situated ethics of care. These ethics reflect how power, environment, and gender intersect in everyday governance. The women's stories reveal an epistemic plurality that challenges colonial hierarchies of knowledge and redefines leadership as an ongoing process of life-making, a politics that sustains rather than dominates.

In conclusion, socio-environmental leadership in the Colombian Caribbean must be understood as a decolonial and feminist practice of recognition, where care, community, and ecology converge. Through embodied knowledge, daily labour, and intergenerational solidarity, women like Jakeline, Roberta, and Victoria enact forms of governance that resist extractivism and inequality while nurturing the conditions for life to persist. Their leadership is both political and affective, an enduring form of resistance and creation that redefines justice, belonging, and the meaning of territory in times of climate crisis.

## 7. Future Research

Future research should deepen the analysis of the intergenerational dimensions of women's

socio-environmental leadership in the Colombian Caribbean. The cases discussed reveal that such leadership arises from everyday practices of care, community organization, and engagement across scales. Distinct from conventional forms, Caribbean women's leadership is rooted in lived experience and motivated by the need to sustain families, ecosystems, and collective life.

Further studies could examine how these embodied practices of care serve as channels for transmitting ecological knowledge and strengthening cooperation across generations. Attention should also be given to the connections between local and institutional leadership, exploring how women's grassroots experiences inform advocacy and collaboration with state and international actors. Understanding these continuities will contribute to a more inclusive perspective on environmental governance and resilience in the region.

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## Appendix A

**Table 1. Fieldwork Summary**

Place	Number of Semi-Structured Interviews	Complementary Activities
La Guajira (Upper and Middle Zone)	10	3 Social Cartography Sessions
Cartagena de Indias (Northern Zone)	21	1 Social Cartography Session and 1 Workshop
Sucre (Bay of Cispatá, Corozal, Sampués, and Morroa)	6	2 Social Cartography Sessions

## Appendix B

**Table 2. Dimensions of women’s socio-environmental leadership in the Colombian Caribbean**

Dimension	Jakeline –Indigenous woman–	Roberta –Black woman–	Victoria – <i>Campesina</i> woman–
<b>Knowledge</b>	Ancestral and ecological	Embodied, experi- mental	Practical and administrative
<b>Motivation</b>	Collective survival	Continuity of com- munity projects	Justice and organization
<b>Practices</b>	Well management, irriga- tion, ancestral medicine, and education	Mangrove care, nurse- ries, and environmen- tal education.	Water management, aquifer recovery, social organization.
<b>Gender Characteristics</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spiritual and relational care</li> <li>• Leadership that combines domestic, communal, and environmental responsibilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reproductive and ecological labor</li> <li>• Leadership through everyday action, invisible but essential; sustaining processes rather than formal authority</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Political care and responsibility</li> <li>• Leadership as an ethic of care; resistance; intergenerational knowledge transmission; combining domestic and collective work.</li> </ul>

## Appendix C

**Table 3. Overview of fieldwork data sources and methodological approaches<sup>3</sup>**

Code	Location	Data Collection Method	Date	Participants	Language <sup>4</sup>	Analytical Use
GUA2004	La Guajira	Semi-structured interview	August 2024	Indigenous woman	Spanish	Life history; water governance
GUA2002	La Guajira	Semi-structured interview	August 2024	Indigenous woman leader	Spanish	Leadership; care practices
GUA2003	La Guajira	Semi-structured interview	August 2024	Indigenous women	Wayuunaiki <sup>5</sup>	Collective perspectives; ecological knowledge
MAP2003	La Guajira	Community mapping	August 2024	Indigenous women	Wayuunaiki & Spanish	Territorial knowledge; water access
GUA2001	La Guajira	Semi-structured interview	August 2024	Indigenous woman	Spanish	Leadership trajectories
FC01	Sucre	Mobile interview within social cartography	August 2024	Campesina woman	Spanish	Everyday practices; territory-care relation
FC03	Sucre	Mobile interview within social cartography	August 2024	Woman leader	Spanish	Collective organisation; water management
MAP2004	Sucre	Community mapping	August 2024	Campesina women and men	Spanish	Land use; environmental change
MAP2005	Sucre	Community mapping	August 2024	Campesina women and men	Spanish	Territorial organisation; governance
VILL2301	Cartagena (Bolívar)	Semi-structured interview	August 2023	Woman leader	Spanish	Mangrove restoration; community leadership

<sup>3</sup> The citation “Fieldwork conversations (2023–2024)” used throughout the article correspond to the empirical material summarized in Table 3.

<sup>4</sup> No interviews were conducted in English; translations into English were used solely for the purposes of analysis and writing of the manuscript.

<sup>5</sup> Wayuunaiki is the native language of the Wayúu people of La Guajira. Interviews conducted in Wayuunaiki were carried out with the support of a field assistant who acted as translator and was familiar with the research context and objectives.

Code	Location	Data Collection Method	Date	Participants	Language <sup>6</sup>	Analytical Use
VILL2302	Cartagena (Bolívar)	Semi-structured interview	August 2023	Woman leader	Spanish	Environmental practices; care
VILL2303	Cartagena (Bolívar)	Semi-structured interview	August 2023	Woman leader	Spanish	Collective action; climate adaptation
CIS2301	Sucre (Cispatá)	Semi-structured interview	September 2023	Woman leader	Spanish	Mangrove governance; socio-environmental change

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<sup>6</sup> No interviews were conducted in English; translations into English were used solely for the purposes of analysis and writing of the manuscript.

## Kommentar

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Reading the article “Gendered Histories from the Colombian Caribbean: Water Carriers, Forest Guardians, and Environmental Leadership” by Montañez-Medina and Quiroga-Manrique (2026), I see more than accounts of vulnerability and resistance in the face of climate change. A key contribution of their work lies in the rich narratives that foreground alternative ways of understanding life, territory, and leadership. As I will show here, these are perspectives that challenge dominant assumptions embedded in contemporary climate adaptation governance.

A key assumption they challenge is the idea that locally led or community-based adaptation can lead to the empowerment of marginalized groups. The stories of women in the Caribbean showed that projects often reproduce dominant Western understandings of adaptation centered on management, measurable outcomes, resilience-building, and technical intervention. This is something that is already shown in the academic literature (Nightingale et al. 2020; Ribot 1995; Vargas 2026). The stories of women from La Guajira, Cartagena, and Sucre reveal alternative ontological and epistemological understandings of climate adaptation grounded in relationality, care, memory, and more-than-human coexistence. Through emotional attachment to territory, everyday practices of sustaining life, leadership grounded in unseen labor, and a more relational form of ecological knowledge, these women challenge the modern separation between nature and society, expertise and emotion, and adaptation and care. In doing so, they point not merely toward more inclusive adaptation governance, but toward alternative ways of inhabiting and sustaining the world. They question the very development paradigm and extractive rationality that produced the climate crisis in the first place.

These women are defending a different way of inhabiting the world (Montañez-Medina and Quiroga-Manrique 2026). To understand why we need to think about a different way of living and understanding the world, the work of Arturo Escobar is helpful. In his idea of the pluriverse he talks about the coexistence of multiple worlds and ways of being beyond the universalizing logic of modernity (Escobar 2018). In the stories of women from La Guajira, Cartagena, and Sucre show that nature does not appear as an external “resource” or an ecosystem providing services for human survival. Water, mangroves, winds, wells, animals, and land emerge instead as living companions in the struggle for continuity. “Without water, there is no breath, no crops, no people,” one woman explains. Another describes the well as something that “needs to be cared for” because it brought life, education, and continuity to the community. These accounts dissolve the distinction between ecology and community that remains central even in progressive adaptation discourse.

Mainstream climate adaptation governance, including resilience frameworks and community-based adaptation still treats ecosystems as functional supports for human adaptation (Venner et al. 2024; Woroniecki et al. 2020). Mangroves become “nature-based solutions,” water becomes a “resource” to be managed, and local communities become “stakeholders” capable of increasing adaptive capacity. Yet the stories from these women reveal something fundamentally different. The sea “swallowed the rice fields”; the earth is “always thirsty”; mangroves are “the only thing protecting them from the heat and flooding.” Nature here is not a passive matter waiting to be managed but an active participant in collective existence. These women inhabit what Marisol de la Cadena calls relation-

al worlds, where territory is inseparable from memory, identity, spirituality, and survival itself (De La Cadena 2015).

Current debates on locally led and community-based adaptation have made important contributions by advocating for shifting power and resources to local actors (Rahman et al. 2023; Westoby et al. 2020), and recognizing local knowledge (McNamara et al. 2020; McNamara and Buggy 2017) and institutions (Reid 2016). Despite their calls for the use of local knowledge and decentralized political agency, they largely remain within dominant policy frameworks centered on management, measurable outcomes, and climate risk governance. Recognition of “local knowledge” depends on translating it into technical expertise and policy tools.

The stories presented by Montañez-Medina and Quiroga-Manrique (2026) instead reveal forms of ecological knowledge grounded in emotion, memory, intuition, spirituality, and everyday care. Through *Sentipensar*, the refusal to separate feeling from thinking, knowledge emerges through grief, defense of the territory, embodied experience, and more-than-human relations. The women describe reading the signs of the wind, the heat, the salt water that burns plants and exhausts bodies, and the sadness produced by displacement and dispossession. As Orlando Fals Borda (2009) suggests, *Sentipensar* represents a way of knowing that refuses the modern divide between reason and emotion. To me, reading the stories of women in the Caribbean reminded me of this concept, which Fals Borda encountered among Caribbean fishermen in the 1970s (Ramos 2020). It is a way of explaining the world that remains evident in how Afro-descendant, Campesina, and Indigenous women. Unfortunately, concepts like *Sentipensar* and other relevant work of Latin American Scholars remains still hidden to most of the western science.

These stories also reveal that the labor of sustaining life is profoundly gendered. Climate adaptation governance frequently celebrates women as local leaders, resilient actors, or agents of community transformation (Lau et al. 2021; Ludoro 2024). Yet the narratives from La Guajira, Cartagena, and Sucre show the unequal emotional and material burdens hidden beneath the language of resilience. What adaptation policy discourse celebrates as “community resilience” and women empowerment instrumentalizes women’s resilience and leadership while

leaving structural inequalities and patriarchal norms intact (Bryan et al. 2024; Lau et al. 2021). It is not strange that we continue to see how the work of conservation and adaptation is linked to women’s care for nature, their families and the continuation of life.

The narratives presented in the article also suggest that the continuation of life under climate crisis emerges through emotional commitment, affective ties to territory, and everyday practices of sustaining life. “The resistance is staying,” one woman explains, expressing not simply attachment to place but a refusal to allow dispossession and ecological degradation to define the meaning of home. Another speaks of happiness as remaining “on the land, with my animals, my memories.” These accounts challenge dominant adaptation imaginaries centered on mobility, innovation, or technocratic governance. They reveal adaptation as the defense of continuity, memory, and more-than-human relations.

Importantly, these stories should not be romanticized. Their stories emerge not from harmony but from violence, exhaustion, scarcity, and abandonment. Drought and dispossession intersect. Cattle ranching dries the wells and privatizes aquifers. Access to water in Cartagena increasingly depends on purchasing it. Climate change intensifies historical inequalities tied to land concentration and ecological degradation. The women describe feelings of sadness, anger, and disappointment. Their persistence reflects what James C. Scott (1985) and later our own work (Vargas 2026; Vargas et al. 2024) call quiet forms of resistance to climate adaptation policies that fail to consider needs and aspirations of marginalized groups. These everyday practices refuse disappearance, erasure, and ecological death. They resist while nurturing the conditions for life to persist. Their leadership is not based on visibility, authority, or institutional power but on “showing up,” mediating tensions, maintaining relations, and sustaining continuity amid uncertainty and loss.

The pluriversal relations described here are relevant for imagining transformative responses to climate change. They suggest that responding to the crisis requires more than strengthening resilience within existing systems; it demands questioning the modern rationality that produced it, separating humans from nature, treating land and water as resources, and privileging technical expertise over relational ways of knowing. Women’s roles are central here: through

everyday practices of care, social reproduction, memory, and everyday leadership grounded in care, they sustain life in ways that are materially and emotionally grounded. They do not simply adapt to climate change; they enact alternative

ways of inhabiting the world. In doing so, they offer not a romantic return to the past, but a deeply political vision of everyday resistance rooted in the continuity of life itself.

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