

**Examining the Relationship Between Food Insecurity and Women's  
Autonomy in Rural Colombia**

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## Abstract

Women play an essential role in the achievement of food security, yet they are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, malnourishment, and poverty. There is a growing consensus that women's autonomy is positively related to food security. However, the evidence is inconsistent and the specific nature of the links between the two factors remains unclear. Few studies have examined the connection between women's autonomy and food insecurity in Latin America, especially among Indigenous women.

This dissertation begins by providing an overview of food insecurity in Colombia. Using data from the Gallup World Poll, the dissertation ascertains changes in the prevalence of food insecurity in Colombia between 2016 and 2019; examines which population subgroups (urban women, rural women, urban men, and rural men) were most vulnerable to food insecurity during this period; and assesses which individual-level characteristics predicted adult food insecurity in these two years. Results show that food insecurity increased by 7 percentage points in Colombia from 2016 to 2019 (from 33% to 40%), with rural women consistently reporting the highest prevalence (50% in 2019). Results from logistic models confirm that income, unemployment, and lack of social support were significantly associated with food insecurity across years, while in 2019, gender, low education, and lack of autonomy were also significant factors.

Drawing from this macro-level overview, the dissertation focuses on investigating the relationship between women's autonomy and food security among rural Indigenous women in Nariño, Colombia who are members of *Los Pastos* ethnic group. Using Participatory Action Research methodologies the subsequent analysis includes: 1) a qualitative assessment of how *Los Pastos* women define women's autonomy; 2) the identification of facilitators of and barriers to

autonomy; and 3) an examination of how women's local understanding and experience of autonomy is related to food security.

The findings show that *Los Pastos* women in Nariño, Colombia, identify many of the more contemporary conditions for autonomy—which are often discussed within the development community and experienced by other women regardless of race, class, or gender—as important in their own definitions. For instance, *Los Pastos* women focused on issues related to independence, decision-making, capacity-building opportunities, mobility, violence, representation, and economic and resource control. However, they also stressed the importance of cultural and collective autonomy for their own autonomy as women and emphasized the enduring impacts of colonization, which have been largely overlooked in current discourses. Further, the results reveal that numerous economic, social, cultural, and political constraints affect women's autonomy, and, in turn, hinder their ability to ensure a nutritionally adequate diet for their households and threaten food security more broadly. Economically, key constraints include the lack of remuneration for women's work, a lack of education, and restrictive gender roles and discrimination in the agricultural realm. Social constraints center around the inadequate recognition and valuation of women's work, gender stereotypical roles, and gender-based violence. With regard to the cultural domain, the women identified a lack of traditional knowledge transfer, a shift in the agricultural landscape, and environmental degradation as critical constraints. Further, they asserted that the dearth of political representation and participation of rural Indigenous women has direct implications for food security and facilitates the legitimization and institutionalization of the constraints identified across other areas. Identified constraints were often interconnected and grounded in structural issues and discrimination rather than a lack of individual agency or motivation.

This dissertation provides important empirical evidence of a worsening food security situation in Colombia and offers a nuanced understanding of women's central role and agency in securing food and better nutrition for their families. Findings highlight the complexities linking food insecurity, gender-inequality, discrimination, and poverty, while examining how intersectionality impacts these dynamic processes by recognizing women's points of view and perspectives—in this case—of one of the most vulnerable underserved, and under-researched segments of the Colombian population – Indigenous women. The need to intentionally work to understand local experiences and to recognize marginalized groups as critical actors when designing programs and policies to effectively support women's autonomy and food security is underscored throughout. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners must move away from treating women in Colombia and beyond as passive victims of their often-precarious situations and rather fully engage them in moving the agenda of food security forward.

## Résumé

Les femmes jouent un rôle essentiel dans la réalisation de la sécurité alimentaire, mais elles sont démesurément affectées par l'insécurité alimentaire, la malnutrition et la pauvreté. Il y a un consensus croissant que l'autonomie des femmes est liée positivement à la sécurité alimentaire. Cependant, les preuves se contredisent et la spécificité des liens entre ces deux facteurs sont flous. Peu d'études ont examiné la relation entre l'autonomie des femmes et l'insécurité alimentaire en Amérique latine, notamment chez les femmes autochtones.

Cette dissertation donne un aperçu de l'insécurité alimentaire en Colombie. En se fiant sur les données du Sondage mondial Gallup, cette dissertation vérifie les changements dans la prévalence de l'insécurité alimentaire en Colombie de 2016 à 2019, notamment en examinant les sous-populations (femmes urbaines, femmes rurales, hommes urbains et hommes ruraux) les plus vulnérables pendant cette période et de déterminer quelles caractéristiques, au niveau individuel, servent à prédire l'insécurité alimentaire chez les adultes pendant ces deux ans. Les résultats indiquent que l'insécurité alimentaire a augmenté de sept points de pourcentage en Colombie de 2016 à 2019 (de 33% à 40%) et que les femmes rurales rapportent systématiquement la prévalence la plus élevée (50% en 2019). Les résultats des modèles logistiques confirment que le revenu, le chômage et le manque de soutien social sont liés de près à l'insécurité alimentaire au fil des ans, tandis qu'en 2019, le genre, le peu d'éducation et le manque d'autonomie sont aussi d'importants facteurs.

En se basant sur cet aperçu de niveau macro, cette dissertation porte une enquête sur la relation entre l'autonomie des femmes et la sécurité alimentaire chez les femmes autochtones rurales à Nariño, Colombie qui sont membres du groupe ethnique *Los Pastos*. En se servant des méthodologies de la recherche action participative, l'analyse ultérieure comprend 1) une

évaluation qualitative de la définition de l'autonomie des femmes selon les femmes *Los Pastos*, 2) l'identification des facteurs favorables ou nuisibles à l'autonomie et 3) une réflexion de comment la compréhension locale ainsi que l'expérience des femmes envers l'autonomie ont rapport à la sécurité alimentaire.

Les résultats de la recherche démontrent que les femmes *Los Pastos* de Nariño, Colombie considèrent que plusieurs conditions contemporaines pour l'autonomie—discutés au sein de la communauté du développement et vécus par d'autre femmes sans considération pour la race, la classe sociale ou le genre—sont importants pour leurs propres définitions. Par exemple, les femmes *Los Pastos* se concentrent sur des enjeux liés à l'indépendance, la prise de décisions, les occasions de renforcement de capacités, la mobilité, la violence, la représentation, l'emprise économique et le contrôle des ressources. En revanche, elles soulignent l'importance de l'autonomie culturelle et collective pour leur autonomie en tant que femmes ainsi que l'impact durable de la colonisation qui a été largement ignoré dans les derniers discours. Les résultats indiquent que de nombreuses contraintes d'ordre économique, social, culturel et politique affectent l'autonomie des femmes et qu'en retour, elles enfreignent leur habilité d'assurer une alimentation adéquate pour leurs foyers, menaçant donc leur sécurité alimentaire de manière générale. Certaines contraintes économiques clés comprennent le manque de rémunération pour le travail des femmes, le manque d'éducation, les rôles restrictifs pour chaque sexe et la discrimination dans le domaine de l'agriculture. Les contraintes sociales tournent autour d'une reconnaissance inadéquate du travail des femmes, le stéréotypage en fonction du genre et la violence fondée sur le sexe. Pour le domaine culturel, les femmes ont reconnu comme contraintes majeures le manque de transmission du savoir traditionnel, la réorientation du paysage agricole et les dégradations environnementaux. Elles ont affirmé que la représentation

politique ou la participation de femmes autochtones rurales demeurent rares, ce qui comporte des répercussions immédiates sur la sécurité alimentaire, voir la légitimation et l'institutionnalisation des obstacles susmentionnés dans d'autres secteurs. Les contraintes étaient souvent liées et ancrées à des enjeux structurels ou de discrimination plutôt qu'un manque de capacité d'agir ou de motivation.

Cette dissertation offre d'importantes preuves empiriques qui démontrent l'aggravation de la sécurité alimentaire en Colombie ainsi qu'une compréhension nuancée du rôle central des femmes—dont leur capacité d'agir—dans l'approvisionnement des aliments ainsi la promotion d'une meilleure nutrition pour leurs familles. Les résultats de recherche accentuent les complexités entre l'insécurité alimentaire, l'inégalité des sexes, la discrimination et la pauvreté en examinant l'entrecroisement de ces processus dynamiques, tout en reconnaissant les perspectives des femmes, voir même les femmes autochtones, qui sont parmi les segments de la population colombienne les moins servis ou étudiés. Cette dissertation réaffirme le besoin de comprendre volontairement les expériences locales et de reconnaître les groupes marginaux en tant que participants essentiels dans l'élaboration de programmes ou de politiques qui visent à soutenir efficacement l'autonomie des femmes et de la sécurité alimentaire. Les chercheurs, les responsables politiques et les praticiens se doivent d'intégrer pleinement les femmes pour faire avancer le travail de la sécurité alimentaire en Colombie au lieu de les traiter comme des victimes passives qui vivent des situations souvent précaires.

## **Contributions to Knowledge**

This dissertation provides a recent overview of food security in Colombia at a vital juncture in the country's history, the signing and enactment of the Peace Agreement, marking the end of a 52-year-old war, as well as novel empirical evidence in support of culturally relevant approaches to enhancing women's autonomy in relation to food security among Indigenous women in Nariño, Colombia.

## **Chapter 3**

- I provide an overview of the food security situation in Colombia in 2016 and 2019. I found that from 2016 to 2019 food insecurity increased by 7% (33% to 40%) in Colombia. Across these years, the gender gap in food insecurity nearly doubled (from 7% in 2016 to 13% in 2019), with rural women consistently reporting the highest prevalence, peaking at 50% in 2019. Results from logistic models confirm that income, unemployment, and lack of social support were significantly associated with food insecurity across years, while in 2019, gender, low education, and lack of autonomy were also significant factors.

## **Chapter 4**

- Acknowledging that women's autonomy is increasingly recognized as a catalyst for improved food security and nutrition but also that the way in which autonomy is defined often fails to consider the local context and participants' understandings, this chapter qualitatively assessed how female Indigenous smallholding farmers from Nariño, Colombia, define women's autonomy. In addition, the chapter identified facilitators of and barriers to autonomy using the Participatory Action Research method photovoice.



Based on Nancy Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice (Fraser 2006, 2009), the analysis found that Indigenous women in Colombia face precarious conditions due to their marginality across all three distinct types of injustices: cultural/symbolic, socioeconomic, and political. Findings revealed that these women identified many of the more contemporary conditions for autonomy that are often discussed within the development community and experienced by other women regardless of race, class, or gender, as important in their definitions. For instance, they focused on issues related to independence, decision-making, capacity-building opportunities, mobility, violence, representation, and economic and resource control. However, the women also emphasized the importance of cultural and collective autonomy as conditions for their own autonomy as women and emphasized the enduring impacts of colonization in this regard, concepts that are largely overlooked in current discourses.

## **Chapter 5**

- Building on the participants' local understanding and conceptualization of women's autonomy, I examined how the identified constructs are linked to food security. The analysis showed that many of the identified themes are grounded in structural constraints and discrimination rather than a lack of individual agency or motivation. More specifically, the chapter highlights and explains the trajectories linking women's autonomy to food insecurity across four domains: economic, social, cultural, and political.

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## **Contribution of Authors**

My thesis follows a manuscript-based format in accordance with the Guidelines Concerning Thesis Preparation stipulated by McGill University; consequently, there is some repetition in text. For all chapters, I, Kate Sinclair, am the primary author. Hugo Melgar-Quíñonez, Theresa Thompson-Colón, Sara Eloísa Del Castillo Matamoros, and Eucaris Olaya co-authored Chapters 2–4 and provided academic supervision, intellectual input, methodological and theoretical development, and writing support for all chapters. Additionally, Alexandra Bastidas-Farm co-authored Chapters 3 and 4. She offered input on the research design and assisted with data collection and analysis. Permission to reproduce the manuscripts in this thesis has been granted by all co-authors; they will be submitted to agreed target journals for publication.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **Introduction**

#### **Background and Rationale**

Food security is a multifaceted phenomenon. Despite prolonged global efforts, food insecurity remains prevalent; in fact, after years of decline, it is now on the rise<sup>1</sup> (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2021). Devising strategies to effectively address food insecurity requires a sound understanding of the factors that influence this insecurity at different societal levels and across different population groups. Failing to tackle food insecurity will have far-reaching effects, continuing to aggravate poor nutrition and health outcomes as well as the overall well-being of individuals and society (Black et al., 2013; Hawkes, Ruel, Salm, Sinclair, & Branca, 2020; Jones, 2015; Korkalo et al., 2017; Melgar-Quinonez et al., 2006; Ruel, Harris, & Cunningham, 2013; Torheim & Arimond, 2013).

In the Colombian context, despite economic growth, food insecurity continues to plague the country. According to the most recent National Nutrition Survey, 54% of the population experienced food insecurity in 2015 (Social Protection Ministry, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, & Health National Institutes, 2017). Vulnerability to food insecurity is exacerbated among Colombian female-headed households (58% compared to 52% among male-headed households) (Social Protection Ministry et al., 2017), rural dwellers (58% compared to 38% in urban areas) (Social Protection Ministry, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, & Institutes,

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<sup>1</sup> The research study presented herein was conducted prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and results are reflective of that context. However, food insecurity is now being threatened in unprecedented ways. Although too premature to assess the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic recession it has triggered, have had on food security, it is estimated that, roughly one-third of people in the world (2.37 billion) lacked access to adequate food in 2020, representing an increase of almost 320 million people from the previous year (FAO, 2021).

2011) and minority groups, such as Indigenous populations (77%) (Social Protection Ministry et al., 2017).

Both in Colombia and globally, women are more likely than men to experience food insecurity (FAO et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2019). Thus, unsurprisingly, reducing gender inequalities has been linked to improved food security outcomes (Carlson, Kordas, & Murray-Kolb, 2015; Smith, Ramakrishnan, Ndiaye, Haddad, & Martorell, 2003; Sraboni, Malapit, Quisumbing, & Ahmed, 2014). Within the realm of gender and development, women's autonomy is an area of particular interest, for its intrinsic value but also for its ability to amplify progress in other development outcomes, such as food security and nutrition (Clement et al., 2019; Cunningham, Ruel, Ferguson, & Uauy, 2015; H. Malapit et al., 2019; H. J. L. Malapit, Kadiyala, Quisumbing, Cunningham, & Tyagi, 2015; Ruel, Quisumbing, & Balagamwala, 2018; Sraboni et al., 2014). Despite a growing recognition of the importance of autonomy and an increase in the number of initiatives aiming to enhance it, researchers lack a thorough understanding of what autonomy means to different groups of women and men, particularly those at the margins of society (Kuokkanen, 2006; Laverack & Pratley, 2018; H. Malapit et al., 2019; O'Connor, 2018; Richardson, 2018).

The propensity to rely heavily on etic perspectives of autonomy, rather than identify and incorporate emic meanings, despite knowing it is a highly complex, culturally specific concept that changes with time, has led to programs, policies, and research that are not sensitive to the norms, beliefs, and experiences of the target populations. This tendency has also left practitioners grappling with how to measure autonomy and assess a project's ability to generate improvements in this area, especially across contexts. Due to these shortcomings, many initiatives have failed to deliver "promised" results and the evidence linking women's autonomy and food security

remains mixed and inconsistent while the ability to contextualise results continues to be inadequate (Carlson et al., 2015; Clement et al., 2019; Galiè & Kantor, 2016; H. Malapit et al., 2019; Richardson, 2018). This is particularly true in Latin American, and even more so among Indigenous populations, largely because there is a dearth of local qualitative research that can guide the development of strategies that contribute to women's autonomy and/or can support the use of current measurement tools or inform the development of new ones (Carlson et al., 2015).

Although often targeted by government and development programs that aim to enhance women's autonomy, either as an explicit objective or as a gateway to other benefits, Indigenous women have largely been left out of the conversation, particularly beyond academic spaces designated specifically for Indigenous points of view. As such, their perspectives are not captured by current hegemonic discourses on the conceptualizations of autonomy nor are they adequately considered in program design, implementation, and evaluation.

## **Research Objectives**

Concerned with bridging these gaps, the overall objective of this research was to better understand the trajectories linking women's autonomy and food security in rural Colombia, from the perspective of Indigenous women in Nariño, Colombia. The prioritization of the use of a community-based participatory research methodology facilitates the contextualisation of this research and permits local narratives, knowledge, and urgencies to be voiced, in turn generating findings that can be readily translated into action.

### *Chapter 3*

To begin, on a more macro-level, this research provides an overview of the food insecurity situation in Colombia. Specifically, the chapter ascertains changes in the prevalence of food insecurity in Colombia between 2016 and 2019; examines which population subgroups (urban

women, rural women, urban men, and rural men) were most vulnerable to food insecurity during this period; and assesses the which individual-level characteristics predicted adult food insecurity in these two years.

Next, the analysis shifts to the micro-level. Taking advantage of the opportunity to work with an existing nutrition-sensitive agriculture project this research dives deeper into understanding the relationship between women's autonomy and food security among a vulnerable, under-served, under-researched, population group: Indigenous women. More specifically, from the perspective of rural Indigenous women from *Los Pastos* ethnic group residing in Nariño, Colombia, the research addresses the two objectives described in the following paragraphs.

#### *Chapter 4*

Firstly, the research qualitatively assesses how female Indigenous smallholding farmers from Nariño, Colombia define women's autonomy and identifies the facilitators of and barriers to autonomy.

#### *Chapter 5*

Secondly, building on the findings from manuscript two (Chapter 4), manuscript three (Chapter 5) examines the relationship between these women's local understanding and experience of autonomy and food security.

### **Theoretical Background**

This research explores the multidimensional phenomenon of food security, largely focusing on the potential influences of women's autonomy among rural Indigenous women, a group identified as facing various forms of discrimination and oppression in the Colombian context, as

is the case elsewhere. To conceptualize these issues, I have drawn primarily on three areas of scholarship: post-colonialism, intersectionality, and Nancy Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice. Using the lenses of these three discourses offers a more holistic understanding of the various constraints and opportunities simultaneously influencing Indigenous women's vulnerability to constrained autonomy and poor food security as well as the relationship between the two.

### *Postcolonial Theory*

Although there is a lack of unanimity surrounding the definition of postcolonial theory, at its core the theory seeks to address the legacy of colonialism, accounting for the political, cultural, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of "Western" or European colonial rule around the world. This perspective examines the responses of those who were colonized and seeks to understand their struggles during and after colonialism (Young, 2001). Hence, as Browne, Smye, and Varcoe (2005) explained, "The notion of 'post' in postcolonial implies not that we have moved past or beyond inequitable social and power relations but that emergent, new configurations of inequities are exerting their distinctive effects." Not only did I draw on postcolonial theory for the analyses, it was instrumental in the overall motivation and design of this research. Central to postcolonial discourses regardless of the disciplinary perspective, of which there are many, is the need to critically examine the experiences of colonialisms and their current manifestations while ensuring that the perspectives of those who have been marginalized are at the center of knowledge construction (Gandhi, 1998; Kirkham et al., 2002; McConaghy, 2000); these two core aspects were prioritized in this work as the research team and I sought to expand the hegemonic understanding of women's autonomy in relation to food security.

Postcolonial scholarship does not inherently include a strong gender dimension. This shortfall was addressed by incorporating the theory of intersectionality into postcolonial discourses to analyze people's experiences as shaped by intersecting factors.

### *Theory of Intersectionality*

Intersectionality, which emerged from critical race theory, is a term first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw to describe how race, class, gender, ethnicity, and other individual characteristics “intersect” with one another and overlap, thus impacting how individuals are viewed, understood, and treated. As a result of these intersecting identities, some individuals may be impacted by a host of social justice and human rights issues, while others may have access to unique opportunities and privileges (Cooper, 2018; Crenshaw, 1990, 1991). Intersectionality goes beyond a traditional gender analysis and other feminist theories by exploring how gender intersects with an individual's other social identities including race, ethnicity, class, location, among others, and examines how the injustices associated with these multiple identities interact, often exacerbating one another. This perspective forces researchers to unearth and examine the deep structural and systemic issues related to discrimination and inequality, placing specific challenges faced by marginalized population groups at the forefront, and thus, highlighting issues that have usually been largely ignored or dismissed (Cooper, 2018; Crenshaw, 1990, 1991). A recent systematic review of affective gender-transformative programming that examined the evidence from the last 25 years stressed the need for more emphasis on intersectionality, which has yet to revive due attention. In fact, the study found that less than 10% of reviewed studies used an intersectional approach, thus limiting the ability to be truly transformative and generate broad sustainable change (Levy et al., 2020).

### *Nancy Fraser's Tripartite Theory of Social Justice*

Finally, this research includes a recognition that the inequalities and injustices faced by the study population are a product of not only the different systems of domination and oppression associated with the intersecting personal identities of rural Indigenous women but also the intersection of colonialism, racism, poverty, and social exclusion (Foro Internacional de Mujeres Indígenas, 2006). To approach these complex issues and conceptualize the findings in a coherent fashion, I draw on Nancy Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice. This theory argues that groups in a society may suffer three distinct types of injustices: cultural or symbolic, socioeconomic, and political. Fraser (1995, p.71) explained that cultural injustices are rooted in social patterns of "representation, interpretation, and communication, [and manifest in] cultural domination, nonrecognition, and disrespect." Socioeconomic injustices, which Fraser (2008) often referred to as "maldistribution," are related to the unequal distribution of material resources and the structural conditions that uphold and fuel these inequalities. Lastly, political injustices encompass representation-related injustices or "political voicelessness" (Fraser, 2008). Fraser maintained that each domain of injustice can be remedied through an affirmative or transformative approach. The former, which tend to "resolve only the inequalities that arise from the organization of social relations without challenging these relations" (Woolford, 2005, p.31), are relatively temporary solutions and obviously less preferred than transformative approaches, which aim to correct "inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework" (Fraser, 2005, p.73). I extend Fraser's tripartite model of justice to women's autonomy contexts, foregrounding notions of recognition, redistribution, and representation as critical conditions for enhancing Indigenous women's autonomy, both in its own right and in relation to food security.



Using post-colonial theory, intersectionality, and Nancy Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice the research approach, instruments, and analysis were developed for this dissertation. Further, aspects of these theories were applied to the analytic approach employed, including in the development of codebooks and coding, as well as interpretation of data, particularly for chapters IV and V.

## **Study Setting**

Colombia is located in northwestern South America and is the fourth largest country in the region. It has a population of roughly 49 million people and is organized into 32 decentralized departments across six natural regions based on their ecosystems, climate, and geographical characteristics (Amazonian, Andean, Caribbean, Orinoco, Pacific, and Islands). Despite economic growth, longstanding inequalities continue to hold strong and Colombia remains one of the region's most unequal countries in terms of income, second only to Honduras (Serrano, 2018); in 2017, the top 10% of earners accounted for nearly 40% of the country's income (Massel & Reinhart, 2019). There is particularly dramatic inequality between urban and rural settings. Much of the rural areas' vulnerability is due to factors linked to the incidence of armed conflict; limited access to goods and services such as drinking water, aqueducts, and sewerage and sanitary solutions; and energy, health, and food security. These inequalities are intensified among minority groups, namely Indigenous Peoples and Afro-Colombians (Hodson de Jaramillo, Castaño, Poveda, Roldán, & Chavarriaga, 2017).

### *Indigenous Population*

According to the National Institute for Statistics and Censuses, roughly 3.4% of Colombia's citizens identify as Indigenous (1,378,884 people in 2014), the majority of whom inhabit 254,879 square kilometers of the country (the total area of Colombia is just over 1.14

million square kilometers) (O'Connor, 2018). The Indigenous population is diverse with 87 distinct Indigenous cultures/peoples and 64 languages (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2007). Indigenous populations' historical claims to cultural and territorial autonomy can be traced back to developments that began in the Spanish colonial era, as far back as the second half of the sixteenth century. However, in Latin America in the 1970s, there was a strong resurgence of ethnic awareness, including powerful activism among Indigenous peoples. There was substantial resistance against the government's "indigenist policies," which sought to modernize Indigenous people, who were seen as "underdeveloped," and integrate them into "mainstream society" (Rodolfo Stavenhagen, 1992; R Stavenhagen, 1994). This massive Indigenous social mobilization, which fought for the enforceability of the rights of Indigenous Peoples, eventually led to multicultural reforms. Colombia was the first country on the South American continent to promote a constitutional reform. In 1991, for the first time in its history, Colombia enacted a new constitution that recognized the cultural, social, political, and environmental rights of Indigenous Peoples (O'Connor, 2018). The new constitution also formally recognized Indigenous jurisdictions in semiautonomous regions in defined ancestral territories known as *resguardos*. Indigenous governing institutions operate within these territories, whereby only members of Indigenous communities are permitted to take part in local government (Van de Sandt, 2007).

### *Los Pastos*

The main population of interest in this study is Indigenous women from *Los Pastos* ethnic group. This community of pre-Hispanic origin bases its worldview on the importance of the territory,

the land, and the Pachamama<sup>2</sup> (Erazo Benavides, Moreno Román, & González González, 2013). *Los Pastos*, a population of approximately 69,789 individuals, live in the mountains and valleys of the Andean chain in the department of Nariño, occupying an area covering approximately 121,218 hectares, divided into 19 reservations and five councils (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2010). Nariño borders the Pacific Ocean to the west, the department of Putumayo to the east, and Ecuador to the south. At one time, the area's inhabitants spoke *Pasto*, a purported and now extinct Barbacoan language. Now, the local language is Spanish. The economic activities of most Pasto communities are centered on agriculture, although given the close proximity to the Ecuadorian boarder many engage in commercial exchange (Tovar-Restrepo & Irazábal, 2014). Because their geographical homeland is used as a corridor for illicit drugs, this Indigenous population continues to be subjected to drug related-violence and social disruptions. The study focused on two neighbouring rural Andean municipalities, Cumbal and Guachucal, where the majority of the population are Indigenous Peoples from *Los Pastos* group. The primary data collection for this research was conducted within these two communities.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Pachamama* translates to Mother Earth and is a fertility goddess revered by the Indigenous people of the Andes who presides over planting and harvesting and is concerned with fertility, plenty, the feminine and generosity, and also provides protection (Dransart, 1992).

**Figure 1.1. Map of Study Area**



Geographic Location of the participating municipalities in the research. “Image: Monica Contreras: <http://paradigmaweb.com/>” in Nutritional Situation of Rural Communities in Nariño, Colombia (2013) by S. E. Del Castillo Matamoros et al.

### **Positioning Myself in the Research Process**

I acknowledge the importance of being reflexive about my positionality while conducting social science research, especially because my social position has the potential to influence the research process, including the way in which I view the research participants and vice-versa. Throughout this project, I recognized the multiple identities I possess and the way in which these may have influenced the perceptions of research participants, research assistants, members of the local university’s team, and members of the community in which I was residing, particularly related to perceived social class and cultural beliefs and practices, as a non-married white woman from Canada.

Further, I would like to acknowledge that this was a challenging experience for me, particularly with regard to the analysis and preparing the final results. As a Ph.D. student, I appreciated the importance of bringing in theory and linking data to current discourses, but I also wanted to stay true to the words of the participating women. I did my best to tread this fine line, and I adopted strategies to minimize the potential for appropriating the voice of others. For instance, local researchers and the communities were involved at each stage of the research process. Ideally, I would have been able to have participants themselves review all publication material presented herein, however, due to funding constraints and logistical issues this review step was not feasible. Nonetheless, various dissemination efforts aimed at reporting, verifying, and triangulating the results with community members and other stakeholders were implemented. Firstly, the use of photovoice, a photography-based Participatory Action Research method, meant participants were involved in the initial stages of data analysis, thus reducing the reliance on researcher interpretation. Secondly, the participants and the research team jointly organized and held seven photo exhibitions (open to the public) at the local, departmental, and national level, which offered a grassroots perspective on women's thoughts and concerns related to the meaning and their experience of autonomy and food security. Community leaders, policymakers, academicians, and members of the broader community attended. During the photo exhibitions, participants shared their stories and concerns, extending recommendations for improving women's situation and overcoming food insecurity. Finally, research assistants who were involved in the design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination of this research and who have longstanding experience working with these Indigenous communities reviewed my thesis to ensure the results accurately reflected their memories and perceptions. Incorporating these dissemination activities was particularly important to me given the sensitive nature of the

data and the fact that among Indigenous Peoples, the decision to share traditional knowledge and experiences is not taken lightly. I felt a great responsibility to accurately portray the women's narratives and lived experiences. This experience and the resulting knowledge will surely influence my future research and professional experiences.

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## CHAPTER II

### Review of the Literature

#### Food Security

Food security is a complex phenomenon that has been at the center of the international development stage for decades. The 1996 World Food Summit Plan of Action defined food security as existing “when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” (FAO, 1996). From 2000 to 2015, the world witnessed a prolonged decline in the overall number of hungry people; however, recent estimates, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is expected to threaten food insecurity in unprecedented ways, indicated that this number is on the rise. The 2020 “State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World” (SOFI) report produced by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) stated that nearly 690 million people worldwide were hungry in 2019—10 million more than in the previous year and almost 60 million more than in 2015—and that globally, 2 billion people experience moderate or severe food insecurity (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2020). Although too premature to quantify the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic recession it has triggered, have had on food security, this year’s SOFI estimates that in 2020, between 720 and 811 million people in the world faced hunger (up to 161 million more than in 2019) and roughly one-third (2.37 billion) lacked access to adequate food, representing an increase of almost 320 million people from the previous year (FAO, 2021).

During the 2009 World Summit on Food Security, four dimensions were identified to better define food security (FAO, 2011). These included *food availability* (sufficient quantities of appropriate quality food are available to the population); *food access* (individuals have physical and economic access to food); *utilization* (incorporates nutritional well-being, knowledge, and

food safety issues); and *stability* (individuals are able to maintain a food secure state despite political, environmental, or social shocks). Further, food security is understood as comprising two main dimensions: *chronic* (persistent shortage in food supply and/or inability to access sufficient food) and *transitory* (acute and usually caused by a crisis) (FAO, 2011). This framework facilitates the analysis of food insecurity and allows for the identification of entry points from which to address inadequacies in the current approaches to achieving food security for all.

### **Determinants of Food Security**

A wide variety of cultural, social, political, economic, and environmental factors influence food security; these factors span multiple levels: individual, household, national, and global (FAO et al., 2020; Smith, El Obeid, & Jensen, 2000). At the national and global levels, some of the most influential factors are associated with the production of a stable and nutritionally adequate food supply, market influences, investment in an environment that supports food security (for example, sufficient transportation and infrastructure and the absence of conflict), and the creation and implementation of public policies and laws that uphold the right to food (e.g., social protection programs, climate change mitigation strategies, trade policies) (FAO et al., 2020; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2019; International Food Policy Research Institute, 2020). At the household level, the most common factors are linked to physical and economic access to adequate food for all household members as well as cultural and family dynamics related to food (e.g., gendered food distribution and decision-making). Finally, common determinants of food security at the individual level include gender, income, educational attainment, rurality, and restricted social resources, among many others.

Although this brief list of influences on food security is certainly not exhaustive and may vary across contexts (FAO et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2019; Smith & Haddad, 2000; M.D. Smith, Kassa, & Winters, 2017; Michael D Smith, Rabbitt, & Coleman-Jensen, 2017), it draws attention to the need to examine food security through a comprehensive and holistic lens. Often approaches to food and nutrition security are too narrow in scope and thus do not sufficiently account for the extent of the problem and fall short in explaining the determining factors in all their complexity (Del Castillo Matamoros, 2010). Further, it is widely recognized that vulnerability to food insecurity is not equally distributed. Women in developing countries, especially rural women, are one of the most vulnerable populations with regard to food insecurity (ADB, 2012; Brunelli & Vivani, 2014; FAO, 1996; FAO et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2019). Effectively addressing this phenomenon requires understanding the full range of factors that contribute to food insecurity among different population groups and at different societal levels.

### **Food Insecurity, Nutrition, and Health**

Although the consequences of food insecurity are far reaching, one of the most notable is the undeniable, albeit complex, effect on nutrition and health. One of the first coping strategies households implement when facing food insecurity is reducing dietary diversity and quality (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000). Prior studies have confirmed that food insecurity is negatively correlated with dietary diversity (Jones, 2015; Melgar-Quinonez et al., 2006; Melgar-Quinonez, Zubieta, Valdez, Whitelaw, & Kaiser, 2005; Ntwenya, Kinabo, Msuya, Mamiro, & Majili, 2015). Poor dietary diversity, in turn, is a strong predictor of micronutrient deficiencies (Arimond et al., 2010; Korkalo et al., 2017; M. Ruel, Harris, & Cunningham, 2013), which can lead to negative health outcomes (Von Grebmer et al., 2014). Compared to men,

women have a disproportionately high risk of developing micronutrient deficiencies (Hyder et al., 2005; Torheim & Arimond, 2013; Von Grebmer et al., 2014), which can have detrimental consequences for both themselves (Say et al., 2014) and their children (Black et al., 2013; Hackett, Melgar-Quinonez, & Álvarez, 2009; Victora et al., 2008; Von Grebmer et al., 2014; Wu, Bazer, Cudd, Meininger, & Spencer, 2004). Beyond issues of undernutrition, several studies have shown that food insecurity is positively associated with malnutrition and poor health, especially among women (Franklin et al., 2012), in the form of overweight and obesity (Pan, Sherry, Njai, & Blanck, 2012) as well as non-communicable diseases such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes (Ford, 2013; Seligman, Bindman, Vittinghoff, Kanaya, & Kushel, 2007). Further, food insecurity is one of the immediate causes of inadequate nutritional intake during infancy and early childhood, which has profound consequences for all forms of malnutrition later in life and can increase the risk of acquiring a non-communicable disease (Hawkes, Ruel, Salm, Sinclair, & Branca, 2020).

### **Food Security and Nutrition in Colombia**

Both food insecurity and malnutrition remain problematic in Colombia. According to the most recent National Survey of the Nutritional Situation in Colombia (Social Protection Ministry, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, & Health National Institutes, 2017), 54% of the national population was food insecure in 2015 (31.9% mildly, 13.8% moderately, and 8.5% severely). These figures reflect an 11% increase in food insecurity since 2010 (when 43% of the population was food insecure, 28% mildly, 12% moderately, and 3% severely) (Social Protection Ministry, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, & Health National Institutes, 2011). FAO's "Voices of the Hungry" report suggested an even more severe situation, in that 25% of the adult



population of Colombia was identified as either moderately or severely food insecure (Nord, Cafiero, & Viviani, 2016).

Within Colombia, the problem of food insecurity varies as it is affected by several factors. For example, Encuesta Nacional de la Situación Nutricional (ENSIN) 2015 found disparities based on the sex of the head of household, such that female-headed households had a higher prevalence of food insecurity than male-headed households (58% vs. 52%) (Social Protection Ministry et al., 2017). While the 2015 survey did not present statistics disaggregated by residence area, in 2010, rural areas experienced higher levels of food insecurity than urban areas (58% vs. 38%, respectively) (Social Protection Ministry et al., 2011). Similarly, food insecurity varies by region; Nariño is among the departments with the highest prevalence of food insecurity, with rates approaching 70% (Social Protection Ministry et al., 2011). Finally, ethnicity is perhaps the social marker associated with the most glaring disparities in food insecurity in Colombia. Prior research has consistently found that the country's Indigenous populations are disproportionately affected by food insecurity. In 2015, 77% of Indigenous households experienced some form of food insecurity (30% mild, 25% moderate, and 22% severe) (Social Protection Ministry et al., 2017).

With regard to malnutrition, despite a 40% drop in the proportion of undernourished people from 1990 to 2015, 4.4 million people remain undernourished in Colombia (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, & World Food Program, 2015). In 2010, among children under five years of age, 13% were stunted, 28% were anaemic, and 5% were overweight or obese. Compared to national averages, the situation in Nariño is particularly grave: 16% of children age 0-5 were stunted and the prevalence of anemia among children 6-59 months exceeded 39% (Social Protection Ministry

et al., 2011). At a more granular level, a study of the nutritional status of rural families in five predominantly Indigenous municipalities in Nariño described an even more worrisome situation (Del Castillo Matamoros, Mosquera Vasquez, Suárez Higuera, & Heredia Vargas, 2014). In these communities, among both children age 0-5 and those age 5-17, the rate of stunting was more than double the department rate and almost three times the national rate. Similarly, among children under five, the prevalence of overweight (BMI > 2 standard deviations above the mean) was twice as high as the prevalence in the department and national data, and 18% of households were facing the “double burden of malnutrition,” which in this study was defined as having an overweight adult and a stunted child in the household (Del Castillo Matamoros et al., 2014). The double burden of malnutrition is of growing concern in Colombia and a recent study highlights its interconnectedness with food insecurity, whereby moderately food insecure rural households in Colombia were significantly more likely to experience the double burden of malnutrition compared to food secure households (Sansón-Rosas et al., 2021). These findings illustrate that in the Colombian context, as elsewhere, individuals who subscribe to multiple disadvantaged social markers (e.g., woman, rural resident, member of an ethnic minority) may be particularly susceptible to food insecurity and malnutrition.

Some serious efforts have been made to address food insecurity in Colombia. For instance, since 2012 the Colombian government holds a National Policy on Food and Nutritional Security. This plan, which was based on a framework of shared responsibility between the government and civil society, aimed to protect the people of Colombia from hunger and inadequate nutrition, ensure access to quality food in a timely and adequate manner, and integrate different inter-sectoral and multi-institutional interventions (Food and Nutrition Security Platform, 2018). Nonetheless, this policy was implemented relatively recently, and the

effectiveness of the platform has not been thoroughly assessed (Food and Nutrition Security Platform, 2018).

The Colombian government has also implemented various programs specifically designed to improve the food security, health, nutrition, and education of poor families. The two largest government programs are: (1) *De Cero a Siempre*, which focuses on the provision of integral early childhood care, and (2) *Más Familias en Acción*, a conditional cash-transfer program offering financial assistance to families with young children that comply with a series of childcare obligations (e.g., school attendance, vaccination, and regular medical check-ups). While the latter is thought to have the greatest potential to reduce food insecurity in Colombia, it has been criticized for not considering the local context of beneficiaries (OECD, FAO, & UNCDF, 2016).

Moreover, currently, Colombian food security and nutrition policies do not account for the fact that women and men perform different roles in society (Oxfam, 2014). The design of policies and programs often do not consider women's particular needs, educational background, cultural practices, perspectives, and expectations. Consequently, these food security and nutrition initiatives have been relatively unsuccessful in generating the desired outcomes, particularly at scale (Oxfam, 2014). Likewise, Colombian food security and nutrition programs reinforce women's obligation to be solely responsible for their children's health and education, when in fact, children are the joint responsibility of both parents. As a result, participating in such programs means that women are subject to a bureaucratic process that increases their already significant time burden (Martínez-Restrepo, Ramos-Jaimes, Espino, Valdivia, & Yancari Cueva, 2017). Colombians are in need of gender transformative interventions that strive to simultaneously improve food security, nutrition, and gender inequality among the most

vulnerable populations.

## **Gender**

### **Gender, Food Security, and Nutrition**

One social marker that has been recognized persistently for its influence on food security and nutrition is gender. Unlike sex, which refers to the biological differences between males and females, gender (in simple terms) refers to the socially constructed characteristics of women and men, including norms, roles, expectations, and practices, which can vary from one individual or culture to the next. Embedded in a community's culture and institutions, these norms often present as unspoken rules that dictate how individuals should behave and be treated (Levy et al., 2020). As a result of many of these entrenched norms, despite their level of interest (or lack thereof) and regardless of the other productive and re-productive demands they face, women tend to play many vital roles in achieving and maintaining food security; for instance, women are often food producers, caretakers, income earners, peacekeepers, and mediators of food access (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2020).

At the same time, women's own food security and nutrition needs are often neglected, and women remain among the most marginalized groups in many countries, disproportionately suffering from chronic poverty, malnutrition, poor health, illiteracy, inadequate education, and low social status (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2020; Quisumbing, Brown, Feldstein, Haddad, & Peña, 1996; Sinclair et al., 2019). Globally, women, especially rural women, are disproportionately affected by food insecurity and health problems (Broussard, 2019; Dallmann, Miller, & Melgar-Quinonez, 2016; Levy et al., 2020; Sinclair et al., 2019). Data from the Voices of the Hungry project showed that in nearly two thirds of the 141 countries examined, women were more likely than men to report food insecurity (UN Women, 2014). In

fact, at the global level, even “after controlling for socio-economic characteristics, women still had about a 13 percent higher chance of experiencing moderate or severe food insecurity than men, and close to 27 percent higher chance of being severely food insecure,” with this global gender gap in food access continuing to increase (FAO et al., 2020).

The reasons for this gender disparity are largely rooted in discriminatory gender norms, structural conditions, and cultural practices. For instance, women often have lower social status and less power than men and they tend to have limited access to resources such as land, education, financing, services, and productive inputs (e.g., agriculture or technology inputs). At the same time, women are often responsible for gender-determined labour and shoulder the majority of the care and domestic work while receiving little, or often no, remuneration. All of these factors hinder women from achieving food security and realizing their livelihood potential (BRIDGE, 2014; International Food Policy Research Institute, 2020). Further, in many contexts, gender inequalities related to the intra-household distribution of food and care practices that favour men and boys, especially related to nutrient-dense foods such as rich sources of protein, place women and girls at a heightened risk of malnutrition and poor health (Hyder et al., 2005; Sraboni, Malapit, Quisumbing, & Ahmed, 2014; Torheim & Arimond, 2013). Overall, women’s and girls’ low status and lack of access to resources leave them among the groups most disadvantaged by the inequitable global economic processes and global trends (such as climate change) that govern today’s food systems.

Given this context, it is not surprising that global food security discourses promote gender equality as an effective tool for improving food insecurity; some researchers and experts have even recognized gender equality as “the single most important determinant of food security” (ADB, 2012). Empirical research has found a strong relationship between a reduction

in gender inequality and improvements in global hunger. For instance, a comparison of the 2009 Global Hunger Index rankings and the World Economic Forum's 2008 Global Gender Gap Index showed that countries with the most severe hunger problems also had the most pronounced gender inequality (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2009). Between 1970 and 1995, an estimated 55% of the reduction in hunger in developing countries was the result of improvement in women's conditions within these societies (Smith & Haddad, 2000). Further, a study of the relationship between women's status (namely women's power relative to men's power) and children's nutrition in 39 countries found that women's status significantly affected not only children's nutrition but also their own nutritional status as well as their childcare practices (Smith, Ramakrishnan, Ndiaye, Haddad, & Martorell, 2003). Hence, increasing gender equality not only has intrinsic value but also plays an instrumental role in amplifying progress in other development outcomes such as health, nutrition, poverty, and overall well-being (Cunningham, Ruel, Ferguson, & Uauy, 2015; Malapit, Kadiyala, Quisumbing, Cunningham, & Tyagi, 2015; Narayanan, Lentz, Fontana, De, & Kulkarni, 2019; Ruel, Quisumbing, & Balagamwala, 2018; Sraboni et al., 2014; Sraboni & Quisumbing, 2018).

### **Women's Autonomy**

Women's autonomy, which broadly refers to "a woman's ability to have control or influence over choices that affect herself and her family within her own particular context" (Carlson et al., 2015, p. 452), is one component of the wider gender equality and women's empowerment discourse that has shown promising results in terms of its influence on food security and nutrition. There are various mechanisms by which autonomy may have an effect on food security, particularly, research has found that women's autonomy related to household decision-making and control over income and resources are key determinants of food security (Clement et

al., 2019; Duflo, 2012; Fafchamps, Kebede, & Quisumbing, 2009; Hoddinott & Haddad, 1995; Malapit et al., 2019; O'Brien et al., 2016; Quisumbing & Maluccio, 2003). This is thought to be largely due to differences in men's and women's preferences about nutrition and the allocation of household resources; evidence suggests that women are more likely to prioritize nutrition and to allocate household resources to meet the health, nutrition, and education needs of household members, particularly their children (Carlson, Kordas, & Murray-Kolb, 2015; Cunningham et al., 2015; Quisumbing et al., 1996; Quisumbing & Maluccio, 2003; Smith et al., 2003). Studies have shown that when women are able to autonomously make decisions and allocate resources to support good nutrition and health it contributes to a wide range of food security related benefits, for instance, greater per capita household energy availability (Sraboni et al., 2014), improvements in the dietary quality of adults (Sraboni & Quisumbing, 2018), greater dietary diversity, lower body mass index, and lower rates of anemia (Narayanan et al., 2019). Further, when women are able to exercise autonomy they tend to have better access to health care (Bloom, Wypij, & Gupta, 2001; Rahman, Mostofa, & Hoque, 2014; Upadhyay & Hindin, 2005) and are more likely to adopt better care practices (Smith et al., 2003), contributing to higher child survival rates (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009). Long-term reductions in women's fertility are also witnessed (Anderson & Eswaran, 2009).

Accordingly, even though women's autonomy is, and should be, an end goal in and of itself, it is also recognized as an essential tool for promoting food security and nutrition (Clement et al., 2019; Malapit et al., 2019). Consequently, many programs, policies, and interventions aimed at improving food security and nutrition view the enhancement of women's autonomy as a key pathway to achieving their desired outcomes (Malapit et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, the connections between autonomy and food security and nutrition are highly complex and the evidence remains relatively mixed overall (Gupta, Pingali, & Pinstруп-Andersen, 2019; Laszlo, Grantham, Oskay, & Zhang, 2017; Malapit et al., 2019; Malapit et al., 2015; Sraboni et al., 2014; Sraboni & Quisumbing, 2018; Sraboni, Quisumbing, & Ahmed, 2013). Much of the extant research in this area examines the links between autonomy and children's nutritional status. Although the research on this topic in the Colombian context is relatively limited, a recent study by Castillo-Guerra (2019), which assessed women's autonomy in Colombia using data from the 2000, 2005, and 2010 Demographic Survey and Health Surveys (examining who makes the final decisions in five domains: personal health care, daily expenses, large household expenses, food to cook, and visits to relatives), found that women's decision-making autonomy was associated with reduced acute and global malnutrition. While two recent systematic reviews showed that in general, women's autonomy tends to be associated with improvements in children's nutritional status, they both noted that findings remain mixed (Carlson et al., 2015; Cunningham et al., 2015).

In the review conducted by Carlson et al. (2015), which examined broad global regions, Latin America had the most mixed and least significant results supporting the relationship between women's autonomy and children's nutritional status. For instance, Smith et al. (2003) measured women's status in nine Latin American and Caribbean countries and found a significant positive association with child's weight-for-age in Peru, a marginally positive association in the Dominican Republic, a marginally negative association in Brazil, and no association in Colombia, Paraguay, Bolivia, Guatemala, Haiti, and Nicaragua. Similarly, Heaton and Forste (2008) measured women's decision-making across five Latin American countries and found a negative association with child's height-for-age in Haiti but no association in Colombia,



Peru, Nicaragua, and Bolivia. In these studies, positive relationships may be obscured by a low level of validity of the definition and measurement of these concepts, which are highly contextual and culturally specific (Carlson et al., 2015; Cunningham et al., 2015; Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Kabeer, 1999; Laszlo et al., 2017; Malapit et al., 2019; Narayan-Parker, 2005; Njuki, Parkins, & Kaler, 2016).

### **Defining and Measuring Women's Autonomy**

To date, no single definition that encompasses the various dimensions of autonomy is widely accepted. Instead, a multitude of definitions and conceptualizations are used in the literature surrounding women's autonomy. Researchers often describe autonomy through a relatively individualistic lens, emphasizing freedom from external control or influences. For instance, Basu (1992) defined autonomy as the capacity and freedom to act independently, while Mason (1995), characterized it as the ability to make independent decisions about personal matters of importance. The latter part of this second definition alludes to another factor often included in discussions of women's autonomy: the intrinsic value of the decisions made by women.

Specifically, exercising autonomy should allow for the advancement of goals women value, and thus not all decision-making opportunities are equated with autonomy (Vaz, Pratley, & Alkire, 2016). Women developing a critical consciousness of their own aspirations, capabilities, and rights enables them to make decisions that have intrinsic value (Batliwala, 1994; Freire, 1972; Kabeer, 1999; Komter, 1989). Moreover, some research explicitly prioritizes control over resources, including income, and overall financial independence, while other studies highlight the importance of self-efficacy and the ability to formulate strategic choices. For example, Dyson and Moore (1983, p. 45) described autonomy as “the ability—technical, social, and psychological—to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one's

private concerns and those of one's intimates"; they also included being able to do so even in the face of resistance or opposition from men and other women as a necessary condition for true autonomy.

Some scholars have moved beyond the individual rights-based approach; for example, Castoriadis and Curtis (1991) and Gow (2008) emphasized the importance of both individuals' and social groups' capacity to act and exert power in ways that enhance life satisfaction, namely through decision-making and the ability to fulfill needs and interests. Other scholars have noted the direct linkages between autonomy and developing perspectives about the world in which they live, the ability to construct collective identities and influence (Escobar, 2011, p. 178) and generate new social forms and identities; hence, autonomy is seen as a precursor for political action and social change (Tovar-Restrepo, 2012). Similarly, in addition to recognizing self-evolution as foundational to enhanced autonomy, Daza Ramos (2017) acknowledged the need for more meaningful transformations in society and structures of domination. These approaches recognize the importance of external influences and acknowledge that oppressive systems and structures also constrain women's ability to exert autonomy; they seek to understand the complex web of social norms, roles, and responsibilities that dictate women's lives (Esplen & Brody, 2007). These more relational approaches to defining autonomy, however, remain outliers. In essence, autonomy is largely understood as being positioned on a continuum with the ability to alter one's environment at one end and passive helplessness at the other. The nature of the prioritized changes required in order to move along this continuum, the way in which they are achieved, and the level of attention given to external influences and oppressive systems vary across conceptualizations, definitions, fields of study, and contexts.

Given the complex, multidimensional nature of women's autonomy, efforts to measure it entail significant challenges. To date, researchers have often used proxy measures such as education level, control over income, and employment status to capture autonomy. This practice can be problematic because the proxy used may not accurately represent autonomy and may simultaneously influence autonomy and the outcome of interest. Thus, in many instances, studies fail to accurately measure autonomy, potentially resulting in misleading interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations (Meinzen-Dick, Rubin, Elias, Mulema, & Myers, 2019; Vaz et al., 2016). Researchers have developed a few more precise indicators of women's autonomy. The most widely utilized measures are the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) indicators, which include a set of questions related to decision-making in multiple domains including health, income, and mobility. Two additional measures have recently gained popularity: (1) the Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (WEAI), which is a multidimensional index based on five domains of empowerment—agricultural production, resources, assets, leadership, and time use (Malapit et al., 2019)—and (2) the Relative Autonomy Index (RAI), a direct measure of motivational autonomy based on self-determination theory (Vaz et al., 2016). However, these measures are not without their own limitations, and there is currently no gold standard for assessing women's autonomy.

Of particular concern is the fact that the extant measurement tools are based primarily on the results of qualitative research conducted in South Asia and Africa and are not necessarily generalizable to other world regions (Carlson et al., 2015). There is little research on the validity of measures of autonomy when used in different cultural contexts. The few studies that have addressed comparability across cultures suggest that autonomy measures are often not valid across multiple contexts (Carlson et al., 2015; Laszlo et al., 2017). In the Latin American

context, there is a dearth of qualitative data to support or inform the use of the currently available tools or to contribute to the development of new ones. A recent review by Carlson et al. (2015), which assessed the associations between women's autonomy and children's nutritional status, found that none of the identified studies conducted in Latin America used a questionnaire based on local qualitative research, nor had any of the measurement tools been validated locally using diverse qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. This finding draws attention to the fact that the academic discourse on autonomy remains heavily quantitative and fails to adequately account for context. This shortcoming has deleterious implications for both the measurement of women's autonomy and the quality of evidence generated to inform the design and implementation of programs and policies that seek to expand women's autonomy (Clement et al., 2019; Richardson, 2018). Researchers are increasingly acknowledging that despite a growing body of research and the recognition of the inherent importance of women's autonomy as well as its influence on various development outcomes, the field lacks a sound understanding of what autonomy means to specific groups of women and men, namely those who are most often subject to the research initiatives in this area (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). Importantly, academic conceptualizations of autonomy may diverge from local understandings, especially across diverse cultural and economic contexts, which raises the question of whose autonomy researchers are really assessing. Qualitative research has been gaining long-overdue recognition for its ability to help fill these data gaps.

### **Gender Inequality and Women's Autonomy in Colombia**

Scholars consider Latin America and the Caribbean one of the most unequal regions in the world, in part due to gender inequities (González Vélez & Diniz, 2016). Within the Colombian context, many aspects of women's status have improved notably over recent decades. Since

1990, women's education rates have increased, the proportion of women in the workforce has grown, maternal mortality has declined, and women have made legal and political gains (World Bank, 2018). Further, Colombia has ratified all current international treaties on women's rights and has created policies and passed laws that seek to improve gender equality. For example, the Victims and Restitution of Land Law, which encompasses critical provisions on gender equality, were approved in 2011; the Comprehensive Plan, which seeks to ensure women have a life free of violence and the Public Policy Guidelines for Women's Gender Equality were approved in 2012; and Law 1719, which seeks to guarantee access to justice for victims of sexual violence, was passed in 2014 (UN Women, n.d.). Since 1990, constitutional reform, new legislation, and policy measures have also created space for women to access the formal political system, particularly through the quota law of 2000 (Law 581), which stipulates that women must occupy at least 30% of appointed positions in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches and at all levels of government. Finally, Colombia has enacted stricter laws in order to curtail impunity related to violence and discrimination against women (Overseas Development Institute, 2015).

Despite these improvements, structural challenges to women's autonomy persist and there has been limited uptake of programs and policies that aim to improve women's conditions and address gender-based inequality and discrimination. Colombia is ranked 94<sup>th</sup> out of 189 countries in gender equity,<sup>3</sup> and its assessed level of gender equity falls below the Latin American and Caribbean regional average (United Nations Development Programme, 2019). Nationally, unemployment rates are higher among women than men (16% vs. 9%, respectively),

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<sup>3</sup> This ranking is based on the Gender Inequality Index, which measures gender inequalities in three aspects of human development: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status. Higher GII values indicate greater inequality between women and men and thus greater loss to human development. Gender Inequality Index in Colombia versus the regional average: 0.411 and 0.383, respectively.

and the disparity is much greater in rural areas, where the women's employment rate is 38% compared to 76% for men and 58% for urban women (Botello-Peñaloza & Guerrero-Rincón, 2017). Women who are employed are paid, on average, 20% less than men in most occupational sectors (World Bank, 2019). Overall, women in Colombia tend to be engaged in informal labour for which they are over-qualified, unprotected, and receive an unstable income. Informal labour is especially common among rural women (88%, compared to 63% of urban women) (Botello-Peñaloza & Guerrero-Rincón, 2017). Further, women shoulder the bulk of the unpaid domestic and care labour, which are not captured by economic statistics. According to time-use surveys, Colombian women spend nearly twice as much time as men on household chores and four times more time caring for children (Aguirre & Ferrari, 2014; Peña, 2013).

Precarious employment prospects are far from the only challenge facing women in Colombia. As a result of a 50-year conflict, the longest armed conflict in the Americas (Domingo, Menocal, & Hineostroza, 2015), violence has overshadowed most of Colombia's recent history, which has had ramifications for gender inequality and has influenced gender roles. Longstanding "traditional attitudes about marriage, patriarchy, and how women should be—religious, private, self-sacrifice, and invisible" persist in Colombia (Drewry & Garcés-Palacio, 2020). Further, violence itself permeates the domestic sphere and remains an everyday reality for many Colombian women (Pitarque, 2015). According to the 2015 DHS, 32% of women reported having been physically abused by a partner or ex-partner (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social y Profamilia, 2017).

Women do not experience gender-based inequalities evenly. Circumstances such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, culture, and religion overlap and intersect in women's identities, strongly influencing their vulnerability to discrimination and oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). In

the Colombian context, the interwoven impacts of gender, ethnicity, class, and geography situate rural Indigenous women at a high risk of discrimination and subordination. Further, Indigenous women in Colombia endure distinct types of social injustices due to their marginality. Relative to both non-Indigenous women and Indigenous men, Indigenous women are more likely to receive little or no education, have limited access to healthcare, lack the opportunity to participate economically and politically, and are more likely to be poor, experience violence, be displaced and endure cultural domination (Bouvier, 2016; Jaspers, Montaña, & Mujeres, 2013). For example, a report by the Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe (Jaspers et al., 2013) found that in Colombia, the Indigenous population had substantially lower rates of completing each level of education than non-Indigenous women and men. In this report the latest statistics offered were for 2005, indicating that, only 48.5% of Indigenous girls between the ages of 15 and 19 had completed primary school, compared to 84.5% of their non-Indigenous counterparts. A parallel disparity was observed with respect to higher education. The true extent of the inequalities experienced by Indigenous women remains uncertain because the relevant data for this population are inadequately captured in most population-based surveys. Consequently, because often what is measured (and what is not) influences the discourse and gives weight to certain issues while rendering others invisible, many of the inequalities faced by Indigenous women are overlooked entirely. Further, for the limited programs and policy do seek to address such inequalities, this lack of data limits researchers' ability to understand their lived realities and thus impedes intervention effectiveness.

Indigenous women are the focus of various development programs in Colombia, many of which consider strengthening women's autonomy to be one of their objectives. However, as discussed above, there is little research on women's autonomy in the Colombian context and

even less research on autonomy among Colombian Indigenous women—a population whose worldview, including their conceptualization of and beliefs about autonomy, likely varies significantly from the perspectives of other groups of women (Cabnal, 2010; De La Cruz et al., 2020; Huerta, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; y Mayor, 2000). Given the lack of understanding of how Indigenous women perceive, define, and experience autonomy, it is not surprising that researchers and international practitioners have often failed to account for Indigenous women's perspectives when designing strategies and programs to improve their well-being, a failure that has contributed to the lack of progress to date (Cabnal, 2010; De La Cruz et al., 2020; Huerta, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; y Mayor, 2000).

### **Community-Based Participatory Action Research**

The social development literature has long advocated for enhanced efforts to understand the lived experiences of marginalized populations – those who face intersecting economic, cultural, social, and political inequalities and who tend to be most vulnerable to food insecurity and poor nutrition and health outcomes (Cabnal, 2010; Chambers, 1995; Hulme, Moore, & Shepherd, 2001; Napier et al., 2014). Although not all researchers prioritize understanding these lived experiences, doing so is critical for developing interventions that effectively address inequalities. There is growing momentum to adopt Participatory Action Research (PAR) approaches to better understand local experiences and improve intervention outcomes (Suprpto et al., 2020). PAR has the potential to decolonize more traditional research approaches—those wherein “outsiders” tend to be responsible for determining research objectives as well as deciding which tools to use, interventions to enact, and results to highlight. Such top-down approaches often neglect the community's priorities and inadvertently reinforce a sense of inferiority and resentment among the target population (Smith, 2012; Wang & Burris, 1997).



PAR focuses on a research topic of interest to the community and at its core is a “collective, self-reflective inquiry that researchers and participants undertake, so they can understand and improve upon the practices in which they participate and the situations in which they find themselves” (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006, p. 854). This approach prioritizes the equitable engagement of all partners throughout the research lifecycle and incorporates deliberate efforts to share power between the researcher and the researched. This collaboration and the combination of community and academic knowledge better positions the research to be conducted in a way that is culturally sensitive, inclusive, equitable, relevant, and reciprocal. Further, the reflective process employed in PAR facilitates direct linkages to action. A more nuanced understanding of the history, culture, social relationships, and local context allows the contextualisation of research findings and eases the translation of findings into meaningful locally relevant action (Baum et al., 2006; Glass & Kaufert, 2007).

The use of photovoice, a community-based PAR methodology developed by Wang and Burris (1994), allows participants to express their points of view and/or represent their communities using visual images to support personal voice, a practice that often unearths hidden or overlooked issues (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). The outputs generated from the collaborative interpretation of participants’ photographs, narratives, and group discussions allow researchers and decision-makers (e.g., policymakers) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the community in relation to the research theme, which in turn promotes dialogue and the development of solutions that better address the identified needs and issues (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). This methodology, which prior research has shown is an empowering process for participants, is largely grounded in three theoretical frameworks: Freire’s philosophy of critical consciousness, feminist theory, and community photography (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).

The use of photovoice can be particularly powerful when employed with individuals who typically do not have a voice or feel disempowered or stigmatized when they use their voice.

This study used photovoice to discern local understandings of autonomy and its links to food security from the perspective of rural Indigenous women in Nariño, Colombia. The decision to use photovoice was driven by several factors. Firstly, researchers continue to lack a sound understanding of how marginalized populations, including Indigenous *Pasto* women in Colombia, perceive and experience their lived environments. Secondly, little is known about how commonly used definitions of autonomy in the literature apply to the study population and context. These considerable gaps hinder the ability to design effective interventions to enhance women's autonomy, improve food security, and address inequalities more broadly. Finally, *Los Pastos* continue to be subjected to research and interventions conducted by outsiders, a reality denounced by the members of the focal community in the current study; the use of photovoice addresses some shortcomings of more traditional Eurocentric approaches to research, fostering an environment that supports self-representation and empowerment.

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## **CHAPTER III**

### **Food Insecurity Among the Adult Population of Colombia Between 2016 and 2019: The post Peace Agreement situation**

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## **Abstract**

Despite the country's middle-income status, the population of Colombia continues to suffer from poor human development outcomes, including food insecurity. In 2016, a Peace Agreement, explicitly addressing the right to food, was signed, marking the end of the longest war in the Americas. The expectation was that the years to follow would be marked by rapid social and political change, with the potential to improve food security. This study aims to: (i) ascertain changes in the prevalence of food insecurity in Colombia between 2016 and 2019; (ii) examine which population subgroups (e.g., urban women, rural women, urban men, and rural men) were most vulnerable; and (iii) determine significant individual-level factors predicting food insecurity in these two years. This study used the Gallup World Poll 2016 and 2019 nationally representative samples of Colombian adults aged 15 and older for the analyses ( $n \approx 1000$  per year). Food insecurity was measured using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale. Descriptive statistics and logistic regression analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Complex Samples (version 26). Results show that food insecurity among adults in Colombia increased by 7 percental points between 2016 and 2019 (from 33% to 40%, respectively); women living in rural areas in 2019 reported the highest prevalence of food insecurity (50%). Results from logistic analysis confirm income, unemployment, and lack of social support were significant predictors of food insecurity in both years. In 2019, gender, low education, and lack of autonomy were also significant predictors. Further research on the determinants of food insecurity is necessary to inform Colombian policies and programs that address food insecurity. The urgency to act is more apparent than ever, given the worsening of the food security profile of the Colombian population even before the COVID-19 pandemic, expected only to exacerbate the situation.

## Introduction

Food security, a complex phenomenon, has been in the limelight with regard to international development for decades. The 1996 World Food Summit Plan of Action defined food security as existing “when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” (FAO, 1996). From 2000 to 2015, the world witnessed a prolonged decline in the overall number of hungry people; however, recent estimates indicate that for the first time in 15 years, this number is on the rise. In 2016, an estimated 815 million people worldwide were chronically undernourished, an increase from 777 million in 2015 (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2017). Although too premature to quantify the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the economic recession it has triggered, have had on food security, it is estimated that in 2020, between 720 and 811 million people in the world faced hunger (up to 161 million more than in 2019) and roughly one-third (2.37 billion) lacked access to adequate food, representing an increase of almost 320 million people from the previous year (FAO, 2021). Effectively addressing food insecurity through better-targeted and designed policies and interventions requires a comprehensive understanding of diverse causes and consequences of this phenomenon in different context.

Within the Colombia context, food insecurity is a longstanding issue. The most recent National Survey of the Nutritional Situation in Colombia (ENSIN for its Spanish acronym) indicates that the prevalence of food insecurity in 2015 was 54%, an increase of 11% since 2010 (43%)<sup>4</sup> (Social Protection Ministry, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, & Health National Institutes, 2017). The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations’ reported

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<sup>4</sup> When broken down by severity, in 2015, 32% of the population was mildly food insecure, 14% were moderately, and 8% were severely, while in 2010, the distribution was 28%, 12%, and 3%, respectively (Social Protection Ministry, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, & Health National Institutes, 2017)

an even more severe situation in Colombia: 25% of the adult population was either moderately or severely food insecure in 2014 (FAO, 2016).

In Colombia, armed conflict has contributed to the country's sustained food insecurity vulnerability. Conflict and food insecurity go hand-in-hand, and the 2017 "State of Food Insecurity and Nutrition in the World" report stated that armed conflict is the primary source of food insecurity in Colombia (FAO et al., 2017). Colombians have endured over 50 years of war, the most prolonged armed conflict in the Americas (Domingo, Menocal, & Hinestroza, 2015), causing continued social instability, exclusion, and inequalities. More than 220,000 deaths can be attributed to this conflict, and more than 10% of the population, roughly six million people, have been displaced. This group is the second largest displaced population in the world, followed only by Syrians (United Nations Refugee Agency, 2015). Most of the armed conflict in Colombia has occurred in rural areas, disproportionately affecting women, especially in terms of displacement. Women make up nearly 60% of the internally displaced population. Victims of conflict are at an increased risk of experiencing food insecurity (FAO et al., 2017). This armed conflict has impacted rural women's development and opportunities, influencing where they reside, how they travel, which crops they grow, which foods they eat, their livelihood opportunities, and their perceived security. These constraints have the potential to further impede Colombian women's food security, reinforcing the importance of understanding gender differences in relation to food security within the Colombian context (Bouvier, 2016).

Although conflict is deep-rooted in Colombian history, in 2016, the government signed a Peace Agreement with its largest rebel group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, marking not only the end of a 52-year-old war but also promising a new era. The Peace Agreement is unique in that it speaks to uphold the right to food and adequate nutrition.

Specifically, the agreement states:

In the area of food and nutrition, the Agreement to End the Armed Conflict, the Comprehensive Rural Reform, aims to ensure that the entire rural and urban population in Colombia has sufficient access to and availability of the foodstuffs they need for proper nutrition, in terms of opportunity, quantity, quality and price, especially in the case of boys and girls, pregnant or breast-feeding women, and the elderly, prioritising the production of food and the generation of income. (Oficina del Alto Comisionado Para la Paz, 2016, p.11)

With the implementation of the Peace Agreement, the expectation was that the years to follow would be characterized by rapid social and political change, with the potential to improve the food security status of Colombians. However, as of today, the improvement – or lack of – in the food security status of Colombians has not yet been assessed.

Acknowledging this gap, this study aims to: (i) ascertain changes in the prevalence of food insecurity in Colombia between 2016 and 2019; (ii) examine which population subgroups (e.g., urban women, rural women, urban men, and rural men) were most vulnerable; and (iii) determine which individual-level characteristics were associated with food insecurity in these two years. The timeliness of the data used in this study offers a novel contribution to the literature on food insecurity in Colombia. By using the Gallup World Poll's (GWP) national representative samples collected just before the signing of the Peace Agreement (2016) and the most recent public-use data available (2019), this study can serve as a baseline reference point of the status of food security in Colombia at the initial stage of the peace process and allows for the evaluation of progress (or lack thereof) made since the signing of the agreement.

### Determinants of food insecurity

The determinants of food insecurity are extensive, spanning across the four main dimensions of food security: accessibility, access, utilization, and stability. Therefore, it is important to assess the overall prevalence of food security, and equally necessary to understand which particular factors are associated with food security among the Colombian population, as these insights are critical for policymakers and practitioners to provide appropriate interventions to overcome food insecurity issues in the country.

#### *Gender and area of residence*

Gender and area of residence are common determinants affecting food security. Around the world, men and women experience varying vulnerabilities to food insecurity (FAO, 2020). Likewise, rural vulnerability to food insecurity is well-known: more than two-thirds of the world's food insecure population consists of rural subsistence farmers and small-farm wage labourers from low-income countries (FAO, IFAD, & WFP, 2014; IFAD, 2010). Women in developing countries, especially rural women, are among the most vulnerable populations (ADB, 2012; BRIDGE, 2014; Brunelli & Vivani, 2014; Sinclair, 2019); this trend holds in Latin America (Smith et al., 2017) and national statistics confirm that vulnerability to food insecurity in Colombia is not equally distributed. Estimates highlight striking disparities across population subgroups, including women and men and urban and rural resident. Specifically, results show female-headed households experienced more food insecurity than male-headed households (47% vs. 40%, respectively); and rural areas marked by more prevalent food insecurity than urban areas (58% vs. 38%, respectively) (Social Protection Ministry et al., 2011).

Therefore, when it comes to food security analysis, women, particularly those from vulnerable groups, warrant special consideration for several reasons. Firstly, women contribute

extensively to food production and preparation. They also tend to bear the societal roles of child-bearers and caregivers. At the same time, they are disproportionately prone to poor social and economic status, and have limited educational attainment, employment opportunities, and bargaining power, making them, in turn, more susceptible to experiencing food insecurity (FAO 2020; International Food Policy Research Institute, 2020). Such trends are witnessed in Colombia, for instance, 42% of rural women-led households live in poverty and, of this population segment, 10% live in extreme poverty; these figures are almost twice the national average (UN Women, 2017).

Further, the higher prevalence of food insecurity among women may be partly due to the fact that during food shortages, mothers often sacrifice their own food to protect the food security of their children (ADB, 2012; Anderson, 2000; World Food Programme, 2018). This pattern has been observed in Colombia, particularly in rural areas, where in 58% of households, someone in the family, usually the mother, goes to bed every night without eating (compared to 35% of urban households) (Del Castillo Matamoros & Vargas, 2010). Moreover, in many situations, the intra-household food distribution, especially the allocation of nutrient-dense food such as meat, tends to favour men (Hyder et al., 2005; Torheim & Arimond, 2013). This pattern, combined with the fact that women have greater micronutrient needs than men, puts women at a heightened risk of micronutrient deficiencies (Torheim & Arimond, 2013). In Colombia, 17% of women of reproductive age have an iron deficiency and 20% have a vitamin B12 deficiency (Social Protection Ministry et al., 2011). These negative nutrition outcomes can have far-reaching consequences, placing both themselves and their children at risk of a wide range of detrimental health outcomes (Black et al., 2013; Victoria et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2004). Investing in women has been shown to be an effective strategy for improving food security. In fact,



between 1970 and 1995, estimates show that 55% of the improvements in tackling hunger in developing countries were due to the advancement of women's conditions within society.

#### *Other sociodemographic factors*

Other sociodemographic factors are associated with food insecurity such as age, education, employment, and marital status (Smith, Kassa, & Winters, 2017). However, income and assets, as proxies for poverty, are perhaps the most prominent determinant of food insecurity (Gundersen, Kreider, & Pepper, 2011; Martin, 2010; Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews, & Carlson, 2010). In Colombia, systemic economic inequality and poverty surely contribute to food insecurity vulnerability. Colombia has experienced significant economic growth in recent decades, yet measures of income inequality, such as the Gini index, have continued an upward trend, reaching 52.7 in 2019 (World Bank, 2021). This places Colombia as one of the countries with the greatest income inequalities globally, second only to Honduras in the region (Serrano, 2018). Furthermore, Colombia, while classified as an upper-middle-income country (World Food Program, 2016), continues to hold relatively high poverty rates, with approximately 28% of the population living in poverty (World Bank, 2015).

#### *Psychosocial factors*

Beyond the poverty-related aspects of food insecurity, which to-date have been the primary focus of the literature, there is also a psychosocial component to the phenomenon of food security. Growing evidence support the relationship between food security and less tangible psychosocial factors such as autonomy and social support (dos Santos & Salles-Costa, 2015; Elgar et al., 2021; FAO, 2011; Hadley, Mulder, & Fitzherbert, 2007; Miller, Melgar-Quinonez, Dallmann, & Ballard, 2015; Nagata et al., 2015; Sharaunga, Mudhara, & Bogale, 2015; Smith, 2003; Smith et al., 2017; Sraboni, Malapit, Quisumbing, & Ahmed, 2014). Autonomy, broadly

defined as one's ability to control or influence choices, is often considered an essential individual capability that may impact food security through various mechanisms related to decision-making power on food choice, expenditures, and allocation (Burchi & De Muro, 2012). Moreover, although relatively understudied, social support is associated with improved food security (dos Santos & Salles-Costa, 2015; Hadley et al., 2007; Nagata et al., 2015). Indeed, social support may influence food security through various mechanisms. For example, social support may provide resources (e.g., money, food assistance/donations, culinary assistance) which can help buffer against food insecurity, this is often referred to as “instrumental support” (Hadley et al., 2007; Miller et al., 2015). Being connected to supportive social network, may also influence the ability to acquire an adequate diet (e.g., logistic support to acquire food, knowledge sharing, facilitating employment opportunities, and perception of having a social network to count on, which may reduce anxiety and stress about future food shortages) (dos Santos & Salles-Costa, 2015).

This study contextualizes the food insecure population in Colombia, by ascertaining recent trends in the prevalence of food insecurity among adults in Colombia and examining individual-level characteristics predicting food insecurity.

## **Methods**

### **Data: The Gallup World Poll**

This study used the 2016 and 2019 survey waves of the Gallup World Poll (GWP).<sup>5</sup> The GWP uses a multistage clustered sample design to draw a probability-based, nationally representative sample of the adult population age 15 and older in Colombia for each survey year

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<sup>5</sup> The survey years 2016 and 2019 were selected as they provide nationally representative food security data collected just before the signing of the Peace Agreement (2016) and the most recent public-use data available (2019).

( $n \approx 1,000/\text{year}$ ).<sup>6</sup> Observations with missing food insecurity data were omitted from the analyses. The final two-year pooled sample used for the analyses includes 1,975 respondents ( $n$  2016 = 988;  $n$  2019 = 987).

### **Dependent variables**

The study's dependent variable is food insecurity, conceptualized as an individual-level food security status, using the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES).<sup>7</sup> Respondents were asked to answer an 8-item FIES scale measuring whether they experienced a set of food security's food-access dimensions over a 12-month reference period (see Appendix A for a complete list of questions). Dichotomous responses, where "yes" coded as 1 and "no" coded as 0, were summed to quantify the personal experience of food insecurity (Ballard et al., 2013). Individuals were classified into levels of food insecurity status, classified as having *moderate* if FIES raw score equals 4 to 6, or *severe* food insecurity if FIES score equals 7 to 8.<sup>8</sup> In the descriptive analyses, we report the levels of food insecurity status. In the bivariate and logistic regression analyses, for ease of interpretation, we recoded food insecurity into a binary variable so that 1 equals *moderate* or *severe food insecurity* and 0 equals *food secure*. *Food secure* is used as the reference category in all analyses. In addition to experiencing a lack of access to a diverse and nutritious diets, individuals experiencing moderate and severe food insecurity face situations such as running out of food, skipping meals, and hunger, all due to the lack of money or other resources to access food.

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<sup>6</sup> See <https://news.gallup.com/poll/105226/world-poll-methodology.aspx> for details on GWP methodological design.

<sup>7</sup> The FIES was added to the GWP starting 2014 in collaboration with FAO's Voices of the Hungry project. The FIES measures food security at the individual level, based on the same theoretical framework and constructs of food insecurity as other standard tools, such as the ELCSA (the tool included in Colombia's National Nutrition Surveys). The ELCSA, however, measures food insecurity at the household level and includes questions referring to children living in the household (Ballard, Kepple, & Cafiero, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> The FIES categorization thresholds used in this study align with those used in the Escala Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Seguridad Alimentaria, the tool used to measure food security in Colombia's national nutrition surveys.

### **Predictor variables: Individual-level characteristics**

The set of predictor variables consisted of individual-level characteristics including respondent's gender, age, area of residence, education, marital status, employment, household income, autonomy and social support. These variables were included in this study based on their theoretical and empirical importance in the literature as determinants of food insecurity. All variables were included in the analyses as dichotomous variables, except for age and income, added as continuous variables. Gender was categorized into man (coded as 1) or woman (coded as 0). The age variable measured the age of respondent (in years) at the time of interviewed was included as a continuous variable. Area of residence was categorized into urban (coded as 1) or rural (coded as 0). Education level was assessed using the following question: What is your highest completed level of education? Responses were classified as *secondary or higher* (coded as 1) for those who had some secondary education or more and *primary or lower* (coded as 0) for those who had primary education or less. Employment was categorized as *employed* (coded as 1) if the respondent indicated working full or part-time; while those who responded as unemployed, homemaker, full-time student, retired or disabled were categorized as *not part of the labour force* (coded as 0). Marital status was classified as *married or cohabitating*, coded as 1, if respondent indicated being married or living with a partner, while those who reported being *single, divorced, or widowed* were coded as 0. Income was included in analyses as a continuous variable of the log of the household's per capita income. Respondents were asked to report their monthly household income before taxes, including income from wages, salaries, remittances from family members, or any other source. GWP generated a household income variable by converting the total sum of all income reported in local currency into international dollars, calculated using the World Bank's individual consumption Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) conversion factor. According to

the World Bank the “purchasing power parity conversion factor is the number of units of a country’s currency required to buy the same amounts of goods and services in the domestic market as U.S. dollar would buy in the United States. This conversion factor is for private consumption (i.e., household final consumption expenditure) (Gallup Inc., 2014). The GWP then divides by the total number of individuals living in the household, generating the household per capita income. For the analyses, based on linearity assessments, the log transformed household per capita income variable was used. Autonomy, measured using a proxy variable, was a dichotomous variable created from responses to the question asking whether respondents were satisfied or dissatisfied with their freedom to choose what to do with their lives. Those who answered *satisfied* were coded as 1 to equal autonomy; while those who were *not satisfied* were coded as 0 to equal poor autonomy. Social support was similarly measured using a proxy variable that assessed whether respondents had people to count on during times of need. The dichotomous variable was created from responses to the question asking: if you were in trouble, do you have relatives or friends you can count on to help you whenever you need them, or not? Those who answered *yes* were coded as 1 to equal social support and those who answered *no* were coded as 0 to equal no social support. For all dichotomous predictor variables, during analyses the reference category was set to 1.

### **Analytic strategy**

Because the GWP surveys uses a multistage cluster sampling design, we cannot overlook cluster effects as these may render invalid many traditional statistical analysis techniques. For instance, failing to account of the cluster design may lead to underestimating the standard errors of the coefficient, in turn resulting an overestimation of the statistical significance. Further, due to units within the cluster being more homogenous than units selected by a simple random sample, the

assumption that observations are independent and identically distributed is violated (Hahs-Vaughn et al., 2011). Therefore, all analyses were conducted using SPSS Complex Samples to incorporate the GWP complex sample design into our analytic strategy and weighted estimates are presented.

The data were analyzed separately by year: 2016 and 2019. We conducted initial descriptive analyses for all predictor variables; this was done for the complete sample and disaggregated respondents' food security status. The second analytical step was to conduct an initial designed-based bivariate analysis to assess the potential predictors of food insecurity and determine which should be included in the multivariate logistic models. The significance of bivariate associations between food insecurity and categorical predictor variables were assessed by calculating the design-adjusted Rao–Scott F-test statistic. For continuous predictor variables, unadjusted linear regressions were conducted for the bivariate analyses. Finally, once the final multivariate logistic model was specified, we conducted regression analyses to estimate the predicting effects of individual-level characteristics on the probability of being food insecure.

## **Results**

### Sample characteristics

**Table 3.1** presents the characteristics of sample including food insecurity status by survey year. Descriptive statistics assessing the proportion of women and men experiencing food insecurity show an unequal gender distribution. Both in 2016 and 2019, women reported higher proportion of food insecurity, compared to their male counterparts. Similarity, rural areas had higher prevalence rates of food insecurity compared to urban areas in both survey years. Results also show adults who experienced food insecurity had less years of schooling, were less likely to be

part of the labor force, had lower income, were less likely to claim being autonomous, and had less social support compared to food-secure individuals.

**Table 3.1. Characteristics of the Sample for Each Survey Year by Food Insecurity Status (%)**

		2016				2019			
Characteristics		Total Sample	Food Secure	Food Insecure	SE (%)	Total Sample	Food Secure	Food Insecure	SE (%)
<b>Gender</b>	Women	61.8	63.7	36.3	2.4	62.0	55.2	44.8	2.5
	Men	38.2	70.4	29.6	3.0	38.0	68.3	31.7	2.9
<b>Age</b>	Mean years	44	42	46	17.85 <sup>a</sup> ; 17.64 <sup>a</sup>	42	42	42	20.04 <sup>a</sup> ; 17.59 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Area of residence</b>	Rural	52.8	62.2	37.8	3.2	46.9	53.7	46.3	3.4
	Urban	47.2	71.4	28.6	2.9	53.1	65.8	34.2	2.6
<b>Education</b>	Primary or lower	33.7	54.2	45.8	3.6	24.8	50.8	49.2	4.1
	Secondary or higher	66.3	72.2	27.8	2.3	75.2	63.5	36.5	2.3
<b>Employment</b>	Employed	51.5	71.5	28.5	2.7	24.8	67.8	32.2	2.5
	Not part of labour force	48.5	61.7	38.5	2.7	75.2	53.3	46.7	2.8
<b>Marital status</b>	Married or cohabitating	48.5	70.6	29.4	2.8	45.1	60.0	40.0	2.8
	Single, divorced, or widowed	51.5	63.3	36.7	2.9	54.9	60.5	39.5	2.7
<b>Income<sup>b</sup></b>	Mean	5418.65	6912.31	2694.14	22548.50 <sup>a</sup> ; 5666.65 <sup>a</sup>	4459.01	4640.09	4198.22	5883.89 <sup>a</sup> ; 3873.36 <sup>a</sup>
<b>Autonomy</b>	Yes	84.4	66.4	33.6	2.4	81.7	61.7	38.3	2.3
	No	15.6	68.6	31.2	4.2	18.3	51.9	48.1	4.3
<b>Social support</b>	Yes	85.4	69.7	30.3	2.3	86.7	62.8	37.2	2.3
	No	14.6	45.8	54.2	5.9	13.3	43.8	56.2	4.4

**Source:** 2016 GWP (n=988); 2019 GWP (n=987).

Percentages shown for all variables, with the exception of income and age, which are presented as the mean.

When disaggregated by food insecurity, standard errors for the proportions are presented in parentheses in percentage form.

<sup>a</sup> The standard deviation (SD) of the mean is presented rather than standard error. The first number presented represents the SD of the mean of those who are food secure, followed by the SD of the mean of those who are food insecure.

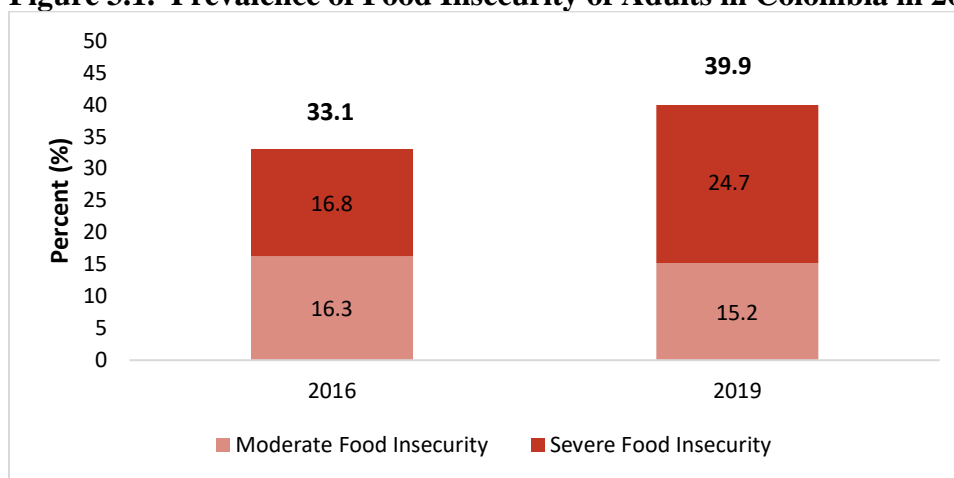
<sup>b</sup> The mean of annual household per capita income is presented in international dollars.



### Prevalence of Food Insecurity in Colombia

**Figure 3.1.** illustrates the overall prevalence of food insecurity of Colombian adults in 2016 and 2019; results show food insecurity rose from 33.1% in 2016 to 39.9% in 2019, with higher percentage increase observed among those reporting severe food insecurity (7.9% increase from 2016 (16.8%) to 2019 (24.7%)). Results from a crosstab analysis suggests a statistically significant difference in food insecurity between 2016 and 2019 ( $X^2= 7.110$ ,  $p < 0.008$ ).

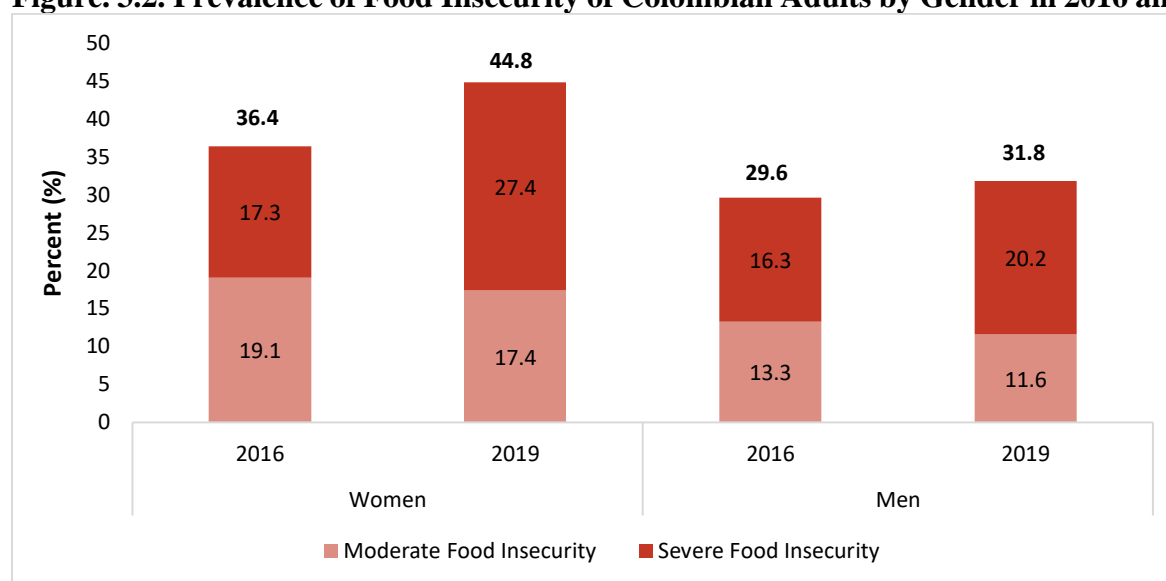
**Figure 3.1. Prevalence of Food Insecurity of Adults in Colombia in 2016 and 2019**



**Source:** microdata analysis of the Gallup World Poll data 2016 and 2019.

**Figure 3.2** presents the estimated prevalence of food insecurity of Colombian adults, disaggregated by gender, for both survey years. From 2016 to 2019, the prevalence of food insecurity increased by 8.4% for women (36.4% in 2016 vs. 44.8% in 2019) and men by 2.2% (29.6% in 2016 vs. 31.8% in 2019). Notice, however, that food insecurity was higher among women than men in both survey years, with a gender gap – almost doubling— with time (6.8% in 2016 vs. 13.0% in 2019).

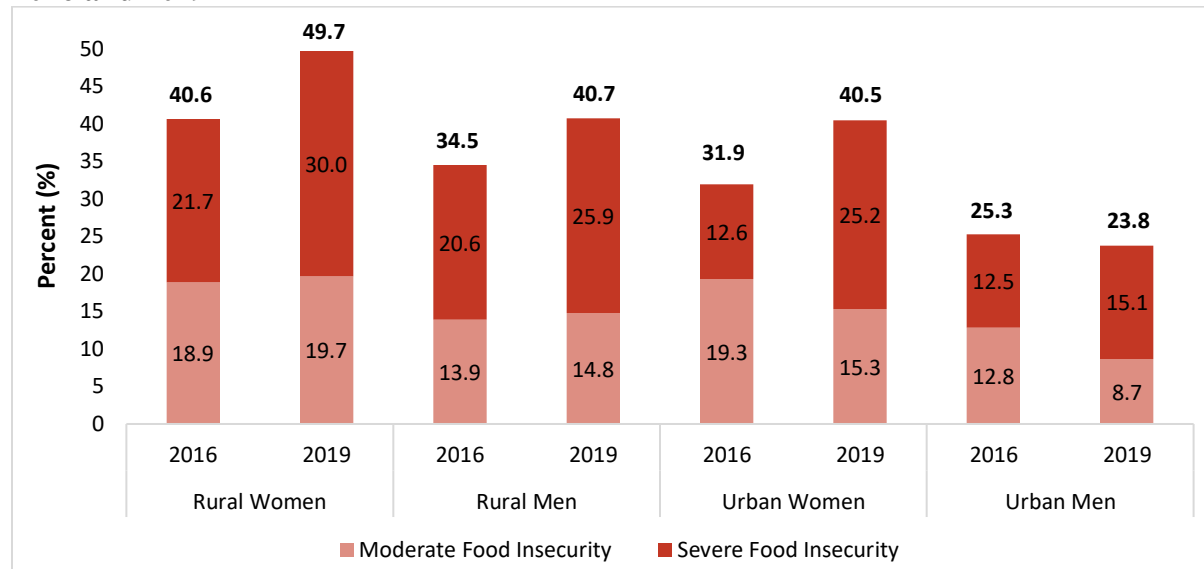
**Figure. 3.2. Prevalence of Food Insecurity of Colombian Adults by Gender in 2016 and 2019**



**Source:** microdata analysis of the Gallup World Poll data 2016 and 2019.

**Figure 3.3** presents the estimated prevalence of food insecurity in Colombia in 2016 and 2019; the graphs display differences in food insecurity by the four population subgroups—rural women, rural men, urban women and urban men. As seen, all subgroups reported an increased in the overall prevalence of food insecurity from 2016 to 2019, except urban men. The notable increase in the severity of food insecurity is particularly concerning as this represents an increase in the number of individuals experiencing hunger. By 2019, the prevalence of severe food insecurity exceeded that of moderate food insecurity across all subgroups, with more than one-quarter of rural women (30%) and men (25.9%) and urban women (25.2%) experiencing severe food insecurity. Increases were highest among rural and urban women at eight and twelve percent, respectively. In both years, rural women had the highest prevalence of food insecurity; in 2019, one in two rural women experienced food insecurity, with nearly one-third falling into the severe food insecurity category.

**Figure 3.3. Prevalence of Food Insecurity of Colombian Adults by Population Subgroups in 2016 and 2019**



**Source:** Microdata analysis of the Gallup World Poll data 2016 and 2019.

### Logistic Regression Analyses

To specify the final multivariate logistic model, as an initial analytical step, we examined bivariate associations of food insecurity with each of the potential predictor variables. **Table 3.2** presents the results of these bivariate analyses, including the Rao–Scott F-tests of association. Based on these initial association tests, all selected predictor variables appear to have significant bivariate associations with food insecurity ( $p < 0.05$ ), except for marital status and autonomy in the 2016 sample. Nonetheless, as both of these predictor variables satisfied the conservative cut-off of  $p\text{-value} < 0.25$  they were retained in the subsequent multivariable logistical models (Heeringa, West, & Berglund, 2017, p. 263).

**Table 3.2. Initial Design-Based Bivariate Analysis Results Assessing Potential Predictors of Food Insecurity for the 2016 and 2019 GWP Samples of Colombian Adults**

Categorical Predictors <sup>b</sup>	2016		2019	
	Rao–Scott F-Test <sup>a</sup>	Degrees of Freedom (df1, df2)	Rao–Scott F-Test <sup>a</sup>	Degrees of Freedom (df1, df2)
Gender	4.139*	1.0, 119	16.145 ***	1.0, 94.0
Area of residence	4.401 *	1.0, 119	8.474 ***	1.0, 94.0
Education	21.243***	1.0, 119	11.575**	1.0, 94.0
Employment	8.632**	1.0, 119	19.218***	1.0, 94.0
Marital status	3.723	1.0, 119	0.034	1.0, 94.0
Autonomy	0.624	1.0, 119	5.157*	1.0, 94.0
Social support	16.376***	1.0, 119	18.175***	1.0, 94.0
Continuous Predictors	T test; Wald F	Standard Error; Degrees of Freedom	T test; Wald F	Standard Error; Degrees of Freedom
Age (years)	-2.532***; 6.410*	1.346; 1.0, 119.0	38.291***; 0.081	1.098; 1.0, 94.0
Income (log)	7.638***; 58.341***	0.101; 1.0, 119.0	7.609***; 57.899***	0.076; 1.0, 94.0

**Source:** 2016 GWP (n=988); 2019 GWP (n=987)

<sup>a</sup> The adjusted Wald test is a variant of the second-order Rao-Scott adjusted chi-square statistic. Significance is based on the adjusted F-test statistic and its degrees of freedom

<sup>b</sup> Reference groups for categorical predictors were: male, urban, secondary education or higher, employed, married, autonomous, and social support.

\* Statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* Statistical significance at  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* Statistical significance at  $p < 0.001$

**Table 3.3** shows the pseudo-maximum likelihood estimations for the parameter coefficients for logistic models predicting food insecurity in Colombia for each survey year. Conducting separate logistic models by survey year addressed whether similar predicting variables contributed to food insecurity between the two-points time. As seen in Table 3.3, employment, income, and social support were significant predictors of food insecurity ( $p < 0.05$ ) in 2016. More specifically, not being part of the labour force increased the odds of being food insecure by 54.2% (OR= 1.542; 95% CI=1.09, 2.19) over those working. In terms of percent change, the odds for those without social support are 134.5% higher than the odds for those with support (OR= 2.345; 95% CI=1.36, 4.04). Finally, as expected, as income increased the likelihood of experiencing food

insecurity decreased. Holding all other variables constant, for each additional unit increase in income, the odds of being food insecure decreases by 53.2% (OR= 0.532; 95% CI=0.43, 0.66).

In the 2019 sample, the relationship between the selected predictors and food insecurity varies somewhat. Estimates show that gender, education, employment, income, autonomy, and social support were significant predictors of food insecurity ( $p < 0.05$ ). Holding all other predicting variables constant, the odds of women experiencing food insecurity is significantly higher (OR= 1.519; 95% CI= 1.13, 2.05), compared to men. Having little education and not being part of the labour force increased the odds of being food insecure by 55.1% (OR= 1.551; 95% CI=1.03, 2.34) and 35.8% (OR=1.358; 95% CI=1.01, 1.82), respectively. Similarly, both a lack of autonomy and social support significantly contributed to an increased likelihood of being food insecure (OR=1.507; 95% CI= 1.03, 2.20 and OR=1.789; 95% CI=1.16, 2.77, respectively). As in 2016, there was a significant negative relationship between income and food insecurity, as income increased, the odds of experiencing food insecurity decreased; holding all other variables constant, a unit increase in income decreased the odds of being food secure by 66.5% (OR= 0.665, 95% CI= 0.56, 0.79). Results highlight heterogeneity in the predictors of food insecurity across both survey years; only employment, social support and income were associated with food insecurity across time.

**Table 3.3 Logit Estimates Predicting Food Insecurity Among Adults in Colombia for 2016 and 2019<sup>a</sup>**

2016									2019						
Crude Regression				Adjusted Regression					Crude Regression		Adjusted Regression				
Predictor <sup>b</sup>		OR	95% CI lower, upper	B	SE	t-Statistic	OR	95% CI lower, upper	OR	95% CI lower, upper	B	SE	t-Statistic	OR	95% CI lower, upper
Gender	Women	1.3618*	1.008, 1.837	0.004	0.171	0.025	1.004	0.72, 1.41	1.748***	1.325, 2.307	0.418	0.151	2.777	1.519**	1.13, 2.05
Age	In years	1.011**	1.002, 1.020	0.010	0.005	1.841	1.010	0.99, 1.02	1.001	0.993, 1.009	-0.002	0.005	-0.427	0.998	0.99, 1.01
Area of residence	Rural	1.521*	1.023, 2.261	-0.092	0.214	-0.430	0.912	0.60, 1.40	1.658**	1.173, 2.344	0.261	0.179	1.457	1.298	0.91, 1.85
Education	Primary education or lower	2.186***	1.557, 3.069	0.232	0.211	1.099	1.261	0.83, 1.90	1.795***	1.273, 2.532	0.439	0.207	2.120	1.551*	1.03, 2.34
Employment	Not part of labour force	1.558**	1.155, 2.102	0.433	0.176	2.455	1.542*	1.09, 2.19	1.842***	1.395, 2.431	0.306	0.148	2.070	1.358*	1.01, 1.82
Marital status	Single, divorced, or widowed	0.718	0.511, 1.009	-0.203	0.180	-1.127	0.816	0.57, 1.17	0.997	0.757, 1.260	0.114	0.152	0.751	1.121	0.83, 1.52
Income	Income (log)	0.525***	0.435, 0.634	-0.631	0.110	-5.735	0.532***	0.43, 0.66	0.509***	0.509, 0.701	-0.407	0.087	-4.677	0.665***	0.56, 0.79
Autonomy	Lack of autonomy	0.898	0.582, 1.385	0.014	0.268	0.052	1.014	0.59, 1.72	1.494*	1.050, 2.126	0.410	0.190	2.159	1.507*	1.03, 2.20
Social support	Lack of social support	2.727***	1.646, 4.518	0.852	0.274	3.108	2.345**	1.36, 4.04	2.173***	1.505, 3.138	0.581	0.219	2.651	1.789**	1.16, 2.77
	Intercept	--	--	3.409	0.928	3.672	30.246	4.81, 190.11	--	--	1.912	0.725	2.637	6.769	1.60, 28.56

Source: micro-data analysis of weighted individual-level data from the 2016 (n=988) and 2019 (n=987) Gallup World Poll.

<sup>a</sup>Reference group for the dependent variable was being food secure.

<sup>b</sup>Reference groups for categorical predictors were: male, urban, secondary education or higher, employed, married, autonomous, and social support.

\* Statistical significance at p< 0.05; \*\* Statistical significance at p< 0.01; \*\*\* Statistical significance at p< 0.001.

OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval; B, parameter estimate; SE, standard error.

## **Discussion**

This study examined significant issues related to food insecurity in Colombia, contributing to knowledge at a critical turning point in Colombia's history. The analyses addressed several leading questions such as— what is the current food security situation in Colombia? Has progress in terms of food security been made since signing the Peace Agreement? When examining population subgroups – based on gender and area of residence - who are the most vulnerable? Finally, which individual-level's characteristics may put Colombians at higher risks of experiencing food insecurity?

### Food insecurity trends in Colombia

Results show that from 2016 to 2019, food insecurity in Colombia increased by roughly 7%. The estimated prevalence of food insecurity in 2019 was 39.9%; this means that over one-third of the adult population in Colombia experienced moderate or severe food insecurity. These findings represent a notable increase in food insecurity over the relatively short-time frame studied, reflecting a continuation of the Colombian food security profile trending in the wrong direction, with stark increases compared to earlier food security assessments in country (FAO, 2016; Social Protection Ministry et al., 2017). The increase in severe food insecurity witnessed is particularly worrisome, as it reflects an increase in the number of individuals experiencing hunger. This worsening food insecurity situation has persisted despite the enactment of a well-intentioned Peace Agreement, which explicitly seeks to uphold the right to food, regardless of the economic growth experienced in Colombia during this time frame (World Bank, 2021), and in spite of efforts by governments and international organizations to reduce food insecurity at the national and local levels. This critical national state is perhaps not surprising, given that the implementation of the Peace Agreement has been slow, with an increased resurgence in violence

in recent years (ICRC, 2021), and considering that despite economic growth at the national level, the economic prosperity among the Colombian people has been far from equal (World Bank, 2021).

### Food insecurity across population subgroups

Our findings have important implications as they underscore the fact that food insecurity is not equally distributed. Results indicate that the state of food insecurity varies across population subgroups, in this case, urban women, rural women, urban men, and rural men. This study, consistent with prior findings (e.g., ADB, 2012; FAO, 2011; Ivers & Cullen, 2011), shows women in general, but especially rural women, to be particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. In the three-year time frame studied, the gender gap nearly doubled, and by 2019, half of rural women surveyed in Colombia were moderately or severely food insecure. These disparities must be considered in programme and policy decisions, especially as resources to support food security become more scarce and require prioritization.

Rural women's particular susceptibility to food insecurity in Colombia parallels similar global patterns. This is in part due to the fact that rural women make up a large proportion of the agricultural workforce but lack access to important agriculture inputs, thus hindering their livelihood outcomes and making them susceptible to food insecurity (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2014; FAO, 2011). For example, one area of concern in Colombia is access to land—only 26% of landholdings are managed by women (Gómez & Burgos, 2017). The 2014 National Agricultural Census of Colombia indicated that women also have less access to financing, extension services, and machinery than men (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2014). The Peace Agreement, which in addition to



directly addressing the right to food, contemplates various measures related to gender aimed at addressing such disparities. However, progress continues to lag; there is an acknowledged imbalance for women and a clear need to improve the gender approach in the implementation of the Agreement. For example, with regards to the Land Fund, of the total hectares given only 36% were given to women, while the remaining majority (64%) were allocated to men (Democracia Abierta, 2021). This inequitable implementation further perpetuates existing inequalities mentioned previously, with ramifications for food security.

#### Individual-level characteristics and food insecurity

Regarding the association of individual-level characteristics with food insecurity, our results are largely consistent with other studies. Findings confirm the importance of income, employment status, educational attainment, autonomy and social support. Income has been consistently identified as a reliable predictor of food security, nutrition, improved health, and opportunities. In contrast, a lack of income can fuel a vicious cycle that traps individuals in a state of food insecurity (Barrett, 2002). Poverty impedes the acquisition of food, even when food is available (Gundersen et al., 2011; Martin, 2010; Nord et al., 2010). The increase in food insecurity seen in this study may be associated with the rise in poverty that occurred in Colombia. In 2016, for the first time in 15 years, monetary poverty increased in Colombia (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística, 2017). According to the World Bank (2021), this increasing trend has since continued, “going from 34.7 percent in 2018 based on official poverty rates to 35.7 percent in 2019, resulting in an additional 662,000 thousand people falling into poverty.” One key component of the Peace Agreement is to eradicate extreme poverty, yet, it is clear that progress is nowhere near what was expected, and the situation will only be aggravated as a result of the economic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In our study, we also find that not being part of the labour force was a significant predictor of experiencing food insecurity in both survey years. This finding coincides with the literature; for example, a recent study by Smith et al. (2017, p. 54) found that in Latin America, unemployment increases the probability of food insecurity by 6.0% and severe food insecurity by 4.0%. With regards to education, our results show that low education attainment was a significant predictor of food insecurity among adults in 2019, supporting prior results (Bocquier et al., 2015; dos Santos & Salles-Costa, 2015; Rossi, Ferre, Curutchet, Giménez, & Ares, 2017). Education helps build human capital, often leading to an increase in access to opportunities, infrastructure, and assets. The positive association between educational attainment and food security can largely be explained by the strong positive relationship between education and socioeconomic status (FAO, 2011). In fact, this positive association has been observed to have transgenerational consequences. Prior research, including studies conducted in Colombia (Hackett, Melgar-Quinonez, Taylor, & Uribe, 2010), has shown a connection between parent's education level positively influences the food security status of their children (Miller, Nepomnyaschy, Ibarra, & Garasky, 2014; Zerafati Shoaie et al., 2007).

This study also supports the importance of examining psychosocial factors to understand food security. In fact, in both sample years, the lack of social support was the strongest predictor of food insecurity. Social support can be protective against food insecurity through numerous pathways (Hadley et al., 2007; M. Miller et al., 2015). Colombia's social protection system is already strained; the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the increase in the number of natural disasters and migratory processes<sup>9</sup> in recent years will place even more stress

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<sup>9</sup> In recent years, Colombia has experienced an increase in the number of migratory processes, namely from Venezuela; it is estimated that 1.8 million Venezuelans arrived in Colombia due to political turmoil, socio-economic instability and a humanitarian crisis in Venezuela (International Organization for Migration, 2020).

on the fragile system. As a result, the importance of social support regarding food security will likely continue to grow. Thus, improvements in perceived social support could attenuate experiences of food insecurity in Colombia.

### *Recommendations*

These key findings provide valuable insights, offering inherent recommendations. Results suggest that higher incomes and effective poverty alleviation schemes could contribute to overcoming Colombia's current food insecurity challenges. The cost of food has been on the rise in Colombia (DANE, 2020). Increases in the cost of living are particularly problematic for poor households because a large proportion of the household income is spent on food. Any increase in food costs can hinder the acquisition of enough nutritionally adequate food to support a healthy and active life (FAO, 2016; Hugo Melgar-Quinonez et al., 2006). As mentioned previously, as individuals and households begin to experience food insecurity, they tend to employ coping strategies: the first often being a reduction in dietary diversity and quality (Bickel, Nord, Price, Hamilton, & Cook, 2000; Jones, 2015; Hugo Melgar-Quinonez et al., 2006; Hugo Melgar-Quinonez, Zubieta, Valdez, Whitelaw, & Kaiser, 2005; Ntwenya, Kinabo, Msuya, Mamiro, & Majili, 2015), putting them at risk of micronutrient deficiencies, poor health outcomes and reduced immunity (Kennedy et al., 2011; Arimond et al., 2010; Ruel et al., 2013; Von Grebmer et al., 2014; Gillespie and van den Bold, 2017). Although these consequences of food insecurity concern all individuals, they are more common and acute among women, leading to detrimental outcomes not only for themselves (Hyder et al., 2005; Torheim & Arimond, 2013; Von Grebmer et al., 2014; Franklin et al., 2012; Pan, Sherry, Njai, & Blanck, 2012; Ford, 2013; Seligman, Bindman, Vittinghoff, Kanaya, & Kushel, 2007; H. K. Seligman, Laraia, & Kushel, 2010; Say et al., 2014) but also for their children (Black et al., 2013; Victora et al., 2008; Von Grebmer et al.,

2014; Wu, Bazer, Cudd, Meininger, & Spencer, 2004). Therefore, equitable access to affordable, nutritious foods for vulnerable groups experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, food insecurity should be a priority.

As a critical step towards reducing food insecurity in Colombia, the government welfare policies and social protection systems should act as adequate ‘safety nets’ and ‘springboards’ out of disadvantage situations. The government needs to invest increasing local employment opportunities in regional and rural areas, to increase financial security among families, particularly among those who are “falling through the net” of social security. Findings from this study confirm the relevance of creating just fairly paid jobs and the initiation of efforts to ensure that individuals have the educations, skills, and capacities necessary to enter the job force in the future. Given that the COVID-19 crisis has since exacerbated existing labor market weaknesses, with roughly 2.5 million Colombian jobs lost in 2020 (World Bank, 2021), government’s rapid social and economic actions in this area is even more imperative.

While this study does not examine gender differences in employment, recent reports highlight substantial disparities (World Bank, 2018; World Bank, 2021; DANE, 2020). According to the World Bank, in 2016, women’s unemployment in Colombia was nearly double that of men (World Bank, 2018). The gender gap has continued to grow, reaching 70% by 2019 (International Labour Office, 2019). A recent study conducted in Colombia identified constraints that affect women’s access to paid employment, including social norms, types of jobs available, domestic care workload, time cost-benefit, violence, and transportation, among others (Martínez-Restrepo et al., 2017). The employment related impacts of the COVID-19 crisis will disproportionately affect Colombian women (World Bank, 2021). Such disparities should be addressed in mitigation measures and long-term strategies to improve the labour market.

Finally, although the promotion of social support should not, by any means, undermine the importance of devoting increased efforts to strengthening social protection systems to improve access to adequate food, this study reveals the potential of investing in efforts to understand better effective strategies for fostering enhanced social support as a means of alleviating, compensating, or buffering food insecurity. To date, relatively little evidence exists to endorse specific interventions in this area, making it difficult to make specific recommendations beyond the need to further explore.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study strengthens the understanding of food insecurity and its complexity in Colombia. It is the first to explore food insecurity at this vital juncture in the country's history: the signing and enactment of the Peace Agreement. The strengths of GWP data include the fact that GWP samples are nationally representative of the resident, non-institutionalized population aged 15 years and older in each country as well as the standardized use of validated measures, including the FIES which has been accepted broadly as a valid and reliable measure of food security. Moreover, the strength of an individual-level data analysis permits identifying sub-population groups at greater risk of food insecurity as well as the study of individual characteristics contributing to this vulnerability, thus providing essential policy insights. Of particular novelty is that this study measures food security at the individual level, unlike most food security assessments in Colombia to date. Most studies use tools to measure food security at the household level (for instance, the Escala Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Seguridad Alimentaria which is included in the ENSIN). As a result, we can identify gender differences when examining population subgroups vulnerability rather than rely on household-level measures

which require inference about individual food security based on household food security status, an assumption challenged in the literature (Brown et al., 2017).

At the same time, we underscore certain limitations when interpreting the results of the current study. First, we can only infer associations, no causality, between the selected predictors and food insecurity, due to the cross-sectional design of the GWP. Additionally, the study could not observe long-term changes in a household's circumstances, making it difficult to ascertain the drivers which explain changes between the two sample years. Similarly, the analysis could not examine the seasonal elements of food security and there is the potential for reverse causality. Further research is needed to better understand the causal relationships between food insecurity and the other factors assessed in this study.

In addition, the analysis is limited to the variables available in the GWP. For instance, concerning gender, the indicator available is simply the self-identification as a woman or a man. This study could not examine broader gender-related dynamics related to food security such as food distribution, consumption patterns, control over resources or decision-making power, nor how these are negotiated between men and women, as GWP collects no such data. On a similar note, we did not examine the effects of race and ethnicity in the current analyses due to the absence of such data in the GWP. However, national statistics from the 2015 ENSIN show that both Afro-Colombians and Indigenous populations are vulnerable to food insecurity<sup>10</sup> and malnutrition (Social Protection Ministry, 2017). If food security is to be realized by all and for all, the barriers faced by those with intersecting social identities must be acknowledged and addressed. These relationships warrant attention in future research.

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<sup>10</sup> the prevalence of food insecurity among Afro-Colombians (70%) and Indigenous populations (77%) is shown to be higher than the national average (54%) (Social Protection Ministry, 2017).

Lastly, comprehensive measures of psychosocial components of food security are still scarce in the GWP. For example, there is growing literature related to food security and autonomy (FAO, 2011; Sharaunga et al., 2015; Smith, 2003; Sraboni et al., 2014), with various theoretical trajectories to explain the relationship between autonomy and food security. In the current study, a lack of autonomy was found to be a statistically significant predictor of increased food insecurity in 2019 but not in 2016. However, the variable included in the GWP simply asked about an individual's perceived control over their lives, further research to explore different aspects of autonomy as well as efforts to unpack the mechanisms linking autonomy to food security are needed.

## **Conclusions**

This study provides a more detailed and comprehensive picture of food insecurity in Colombia by identifying possible determinants of food insecurity at two points in time: 2016 and 2019. Results confirm that, despite the signing and enactment of the historic Peace Agreement in 2016 and the recent country's national economic growth, food insecurity in Colombia worsened between 2016 and 2019, with rural women experiencing particular vulnerability. This study demonstrates that the expected improvements in food insecurity resulting from the Peace Agreement have not yet occurred. The continued increase in food insecurity calls into question the effectiveness of current policies and programs intended to address this problem. Serious reflections, as well as enhanced political will, and innovative approaches will be necessary to ensure food security in Colombia in the future. The urgency of such efforts will only continue to become more pronounced that the country's food security profile continues to trend in the wrong direction, with worrisome levels of food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to push an unprecedented number of people into poverty and exacerbate food insecurity (FAO, 2020;

World Bank, 2021). It is estimated that 3 million Colombians have become impoverished due to the pandemic. The incidence of poverty is expected to increase by over 5.5 percentage points, while the impact of food insecurity is not yet fully known (World Bank, 2021).

Even though many significant factors found to be contributing to food insecurity in this study, such as income, education, and employment, are well established in the literature, the lack of progress in securing food and diminishing hunger for the larger population, and most important, for the most vulnerable segments, highlighted by our findings call for more effective strategies. Results also convey that psychosocial factors such as autonomy and social support warrant more attention in future research, programme, and policy efforts related to food security. Further study of the factors contributing to food insecurity is necessary, especially among different population groups (e.g., ethnic groups and departmental and municipal populations), to inform Colombian policies and programs addressing food insecurity. Adequately addressing these social inequalities is imperative for realizing a reduction in food insecurity in Colombia. Monitoring and evaluation systems will be necessary to evaluate programs and policies and measure changes over time. Implementing these systems will ensure that resources are invested appropriately to accelerate progress toward the eradication of food insecurity and hunger. Lastly, a vicious cycle between conflict and food insecurity exists, acutely observed today in Colombia. Therefore, to effectively address food insecurity, there is an urgent call to commit to the realization of peace—because as Colombia’s Minister of Post-Conflict stated (FAO, 2017): “A population where food security is not assured has no possibilities for peace.”



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## Appendixes

### Appendix A. Food Insecurity Experience Scale

	QUESTION	
	Now I would like to ask you some questions about your food consumption in the last 12 months. During the last 12 MONTHS, was there a time when:	01 = Yes 02 = No 98 = Don't know 99 = Refused to answer
1	You were worried you would run out of food because of a lack of money or other resources?	
2	You were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food because of a lack of money or other resources?	
3	You ate only a few kinds of foods because of a lack of money or other resources?	
4	You had to skip a meal because there was not enough money or other resources to get food?	
5	You ate less than you thought you should because of a lack of money or other resources?	
6	Your household ran out of food because of a lack of money or other resources?	
7	You were hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money or other resources for food?	
8	You went without eating for a whole day because of a lack of money or other resources?	

## **Connecting Statement I**

In Chapter III, I examined food insecurity in Colombia at the macro-level using secondary data collected by the Gallup World Poll in 2016 and 2019. More specifically, I estimated overall prevalence trends, both nationally and for population subgroups, to assess vulnerability to food insecurity, and I examined which individual-level factors predicted adult food insecurity in these two years. I showed that the estimated prevalence of food insecurity in Colombia increased by 7% from 2016 to 2019 (33% to 40%). Although increases occurred across population groups, rural women were particularly vulnerable—they consistently had the highest estimated prevalence of food insecurity, reaching a peak of 50% in 2019.

The first three chapters provided a detailed understanding of the overall food security landscape in Colombia, outlined the study context and methodological approach, and highlighted the gaps highlighted in the literature, namely, the lack of a comprehensive understanding of autonomy informed by the perspectives of Indigenous women, which impedes the effective design of strategies aimed at enhancing autonomy as well as the ability to assess whether progress is being made in this regard. The following two chapters shift toward the micro-level. I analyze primary data collected in Nariño, Colombia, taking advantage of a larger nutrition-sensitive agriculture project focusing on Indigenous population. The data were collected using photovoice, a photography-based Participatory Action Research method.

In Chapter IV, I explore local understandings of women's autonomy from the perspective of female Indigenous smallholding farmers from two municipalities in Nariño, Colombia. In addition, I identify and discuss the factors that facilitate and hinder women's autonomy, and, finally, highlight women's suggested strategies for addressing common barriers.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Autonomy among Indigenous Women in Rural Colombia: “Free to be, think, and act in our territory”**

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## **Abstract**

There is limited qualitative research to support the use of the most common conceptualizations and operationalizations of women's autonomy, especially in the Latin American context and even more so for Indigenous populations. This study uses photovoice, a photography-based Participatory Action Research method, to conduct a qualitative assessment of how female Indigenous smallholding farmers from Nariño, Colombia, define women's autonomy and which factors facilitate and hinder their autonomy. Results show that women felt autonomous when: a) they were free to make decisions important to them and to express themselves; b) they had opportunities to be economically independent doing work they valued; and c) their cultural and collective autonomy was effectively protected. Significant barriers to autonomy included issues related to colonization, the devaluation of women's work, machismo culture, limited access to education (traditional and formal), and unjust employment opportunities. These results can inform local policies and programs, improve the interpretation of quantitative results from similar contexts, and facilitate the development of quantitative tools to measure women's autonomy more effectively.

## **Introduction**

Increasingly, members of the international development community focus on reducing gender inequalities and enhancing women's autonomy as both a goal in and of itself and a way to unlock greater social, economic and human development potential. Broadly, women's autonomy refers to "a woman's ability to have control or influence over choices that affect herself and her family within her own particular context" (Carlson, Kordas, and Murray-Kolb 2015). However, multiple definitions, conceptualizations, and measurement tools related to women's autonomy have been proposed and used (Dyson and Moore, 1982; Vaz, Pratley, & Alkire, 2016; Mason, 1995; Basu, 1992; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019; O'Hara & Clement, 2018; Laszlo et al., 2017). Thus, there are no clear scholarly conclusions about advances in women's autonomy and how women's autonomy relates to other human development outcomes (e.g., gross national income, life expectancy, educational level, health, food security and nutrition, gender equity), mostly because of questions about the construct validity of the instruments used to measure women's autonomy. Most measurement tools currently used are largely based on qualitative research conducted predominantly in South Asia and Africa, which is not necessarily generalizable (Carlson et al., 2015; Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019). The contextual and cultural specificities encompassing the local understanding and experience of women's autonomy make it difficult to achieve comparability across countries and time (Carlson, Kordas, and Murray-Kolb 2015, Cunningham et al. 2015, Ibrahim and Alkire 2007). Thus, the focus on gender and international development requires more exploratory qualitative research that sheds light on local understandings of autonomy in different contexts, capturing the nuances of gender relations. A valuable starting point is working with women living in different contexts, particularly those constrained to society's margins, to understand their definition of and perspective on what it means to be



autonomous (Laverack and Pratley 2018, Richardson 2018, Mulema 2018, Kuokkanen 2006). Most researchers in the Latin American context have not employed this approach, and it has been even less common among those working with Indigenous populations (Cabnal 2010, y Mayor 2000, Huerta 2017, Forstner 2013). This study uses a qualitative Participatory Action Approach to investigate the significance of women's autonomy from the perspective of Indigenous women in Colombia.

### *Colombian Context*

Women's status and well-being in Colombia have improved notably in recent decades. Since 1990, female education rates have increased, the proportion of women in the workforce has grown, maternal mortality has decreased, and women have made legal and political gains (World Bank 2018). Further, Colombia has ratified all current international treaties on women's rights and has created policies and passed laws that seek to improve gender equality (UN Women, n.d.). Despite these improvements, structural challenges persist, and there is limited uptake of programs and policies that aim to improve women's conditions and address gender-based inequality and discrimination. Colombia was recently ranked 94th out of 189 countries in gender equity,<sup>11</sup> worse than the Latin American and Caribbean regional average (Gender Inequality Index in Colombia versus the regional average: 0.411 and 0.383, respectively) (United Nations Development Programme 2019). Unemployment rates are higher among women than among men (16% vs. 9%, respectively), and employed women are paid, on average, approximately 20% less than employed men in most occupational sectors (World Bank 2019). Further, violence remains an everyday reality for many Colombian women (Pitarque 2015).

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<sup>11</sup> Based on the Gender Inequality Index, which measures gender inequalities in three aspects of human development: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status. Higher GII values indicate higher inequalities between women and men and thus higher loss to human development.

According to Colombia's 2015 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), 32% of women reported ever having been physically abused by a partner or ex-partner (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social y Profamilia 2017).

Research has shown that women do not experience social inequalities evenly. Circumstances such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and culture overlap and intersect in women's identities, strongly influencing their vulnerability to discrimination and oppression (Crenshaw 1989). Within the Colombian context, the overlapping impacts of gender, ethnicity, class, culture, and type of area of residence situate rural Indigenous women at a high risk of discrimination and subordination. Further, in accordance to the framework of Nancy Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice (Fraser 2006, 2009), Indigenous women in Colombia face precarious conditions due to their marginality across all three distinct types of injustices: cultural/symbolic, socioeconomic, and political. Consequently, these women have a low likelihood of receiving a quality education, having access to healthcare, and participating economically or politically, and are likely to be poor, experience violence, be displaced, and endure cultural domination (Sieder and Sierra 2010, Bouvier 2016, Jaspers, Montaña, and Mujeres 2013).

While many development programs in Colombia serve this particular population group with the goal of strengthening women's autonomy, researchers and international practitioners often fail to account for Indigenous women's perspectives when designing strategies and programs to improve their well-being (De La Cruz, et al., 2020; O'Connor, 2018). Further, critics have noted that many of these programs, grounded in feminisms originated in the global North, overlook the cosmologies and cultures of Indigenous peoples (O'Connor, 2018; Cabnal 2010, Huerta 2017, y Mayor 2000). Consequently, a more comprehensive understanding of autonomy

informed by the perspectives of Indigenous women would allow policymakers and practitioners to improve program designs and more accurately evaluate interventions and policies intended to enhance women's autonomy. To address these shortcomings of the literature, this study entails a participatory qualitative assessment of how female Indigenous smallholding farmers from two municipalities in Nariño, Colombia (1) understand women's autonomy, (2) identify facilitators of and barriers to their autonomy, and (3) perceive potential strategies for addressing common obstacles.

## **Methods**

### Study Site

This study took place in two neighbouring municipalities, Guachucal and Cumbal, in the department of Nariño, located in the Andes mountains, in the southwest region of Colombia. The population of Guachucal and Cumbal is predominantly Indigenous, with most residents belonging to *Los Pastos* ethnic community. This pre-Hispanic-origin community retains a distinct worldview based on the significance of territory, land, and the *Pachamama*.<sup>12</sup> *Los Pastos* occupy an area covering approximately 121,218 hectares, divided into 19 reservations and five councils (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2010). At one time, the area's inhabitants spoke *Pasto*, a purported and now extinct Barbacoan language. The current local language is Spanish. The community retains a separate, constitutionally recognized political organization.

### Study Participants, Recruitment, and Consent

Study participants were recruited from a group of residents attending Family Farming Communitarian Schools (*Escuelas Comunitarias de Agricultura Familiar*, ECAF) as part of a

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<sup>12</sup> *Pachamama*, which translates to Mother Earth, is a fertility goddess revered by the Andes' Indigenous people who presides over planting and harvesting and is associated with abundance, the feminine, generosity, and protection (Dransart, 1992).

larger far-reaching project named *Papas Mas Nutritivas*.<sup>13</sup> A total of 25 women were recruited using purposeful sampling techniques and were then organized into five groups: three from the municipality of Guachucal and two from Cumbal. Group sizes ranged from four to nine women, which is within the recommended range of ideal group size for this type of study (Wang and Burris 1994). The field period lasted nine months, from April 2017 to January 2018.

Full written consent was obtained from all participants, including permission to record discussion sessions, quote respondents, and display produced materials in photograph exhibitions and publications to disseminate results.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, it was agreed pseudonyms would be used for all references and direct quotes to protect participants' confidentiality.<sup>15</sup>

The final study sample included 24 Indigenous female smallholding farmers.<sup>16</sup> **Table 4.1** presents the characteristics of the women participating in the study. The mean average age of the women was 41 years; the youngest was 24 years old and the oldest 67. One quarter of the participating women were not married, roughly 1 in 5 were the household head, most reported having young children at home (75%), and more than half (54%) had not completed primary education.

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<sup>13</sup> The *Papas Mas Nutritivas* project, lead by a team of researchers from the Nacional University of Colombia and McGill University in Canada, aimed to expand the adoption of three highly nutritious, robust, and productive yellow potato varieties by working with public and private sector partners to address malnutrition and food insecurity in Colombia. (Funded by International Development Research Centre [IDRC], Canada. Project title: Scaling up the Production of More Nutritious Yellow Potatoes in Colombia; Project No. 108125). For more information, go to <https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/browse?type=project&value=108125>

<sup>14</sup> Before the start of the study, a native Spanish-speaking research assistant read aloud and explained the consent form to each group of women, providing a paper copy to each participant to keep.

<sup>15</sup> McGill Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board of the Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at McGill University (REB file#: 273-1216) and all of the study's procedures were conducted in accordance with the McGill policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Subjects, the Research Ethics Board guidelines, and the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

<sup>16</sup> After the initial session, one woman chose not to participate.

**Table 4.1. Characteristics of the Sample**

<b>Mean age, in years<sup>1</sup></b>	41	(24-67)
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Educational Attainment</b>		
None	1	4.2
Primary incomplete	13	54.2
Primary complete	5	20.8
High school complete	4	16.6
At least some university	1	4.2
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Not married <sup>2</sup>	6	25.0
<b>Head of Household</b>		
Yes	4	16.6
<b>Children under 18 Years of Age</b>		
Yes	18	75.0
<b>Occupation</b>		
Housewife	23	95.8
Service industry	1	4.2
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	24	--

<sup>1</sup> Age range in parentheses; <sup>2</sup> Single or widowed, others were married.

### Participatory Research: Photovoice

The study used photovoice, a photography-based Participatory Action Research method in which community members use photography to document their views and lived realities related to a research topic, in this case, women's autonomy. This method offers participants the opportunity to express their experiences and "speak" through photographs, rather than being passive subjects. By being part of this type of research process, women are able to share their experiences, perspectives, and knowledge, offering rich information for the development of programs and policy decisions that affect them (Wang and Burris 1994, Catalani and Minkler 2010). This grounds research in the local reality and yields a culturally responsive, relevant and respectful approach to research; by giving power to research participants the use of this method aims to decolonize research practices for Indigenous people (Smith, 2012).

The research team conducted four main project activities in three consecutive phases. First, participants attended an introductory workshop in which they were each given a digital camera, briefed on ethical considerations, and trained to use the camera. The research team led a discussion introducing broad guiding questions which were developed in consultation with the broader community during ECAF sessions. These included: what it meant to be an autonomous woman, what are perceived barriers to and facilitators of autonomy, and how can these barriers be best addressed. We then asked participants to take pictures in their surroundings that addressed these guiding questions. A member of the research team arranged a home-visit, roughly one week later, to guide participants in selecting nine photos for printing that they felt best addressed the research topic. The follow-up activity consisted of a group gathering, held roughly 10 to 14 days after the introductory workshop. Group sessions, lasting roughly three hours, were conducted privately in one of the participants' homes. Each participant received a printed copy of their selected photos and was invited to share with the group, explaining their significance. Other participants could comment or ask questions, prompting a more in-depth discussion in which participants and researchers collectively identified emerging themes and organized the pictures within these narratives. In the third activity, participants, together with the research team, selected photos and participants' quotations, classifying them according to the main themes identified in group sessions; together, they also designed the layout display for the end-of-project photo exhibitions. The final project activity consisted of organizing a total of seven open-public photo exhibitions at the municipal, departmental, and national levels, offering a grassroots perspective on women's thoughts and concerns related to the meaning of autonomy and their own experiences of autonomy. Numerous community leaders, policymakers, academicians, and community members attended the exhibitions. During the photo exhibitions,

participants shared their stories and concerns, offering recommendations for improving women's situation.

### Analysis

All participants were actively involved in the primary steps of the analysis: (1) selecting photographs, (2) describing and contextualising visual representations, and (3) identifying emerging themes across personal narratives. Two research assistants transcribed the group session audio recordings. Then, drawing from aspects of Grounded Theory, qualitative textual and visual (photo) data were analyzed inductively using thematic content analysis in Atlas.Ti software (version 8.2.4). Many identified themes were interconnected, reciprocal, and reinforcing each other. Drawing from Nancy Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice framework (Fraser 2006, 2009), the identified themes were sorted into three types: cultural, socioeconomic, and political. To validate the accuracy of the data interpretation, research assistants independently reviewed the final Spanish text interpretation and photo organization. Selected textual data were translated into English at the publication stage.

### **Results and Discussion**

Analyzing the data, we identified several critical themes regarding women's defining conditions for autonomy. One of the team's objectives was to identify both barriers to and facilitators of women's autonomy; however, for conciseness, we focus primarily on the discussion of barriers. Implied in this discussion is that supporting factors enhancing women's autonomy include efforts, strategies, or policies seeking to transcend the obstacles outlined by participants during their conversations. For example, the lack of education was mentioned as a significant barrier for women's sense of self; therefore, the corresponding facilitator implies devising and

implementing strategies to increase educational opportunities for women. We discerned a series of critical themes and other concerning factors emerging from participants' discussions and classify them following Fraser's framework of three distinct types of injustices: (1) Cultural or Symbolic; (2) Socioeconomic; and (3) Political. Therefore, we organized the overall results and discussion within Fraser's three principal dimensions, discussing significant themes and concerns mentioned within each rubric.

### **1. The Cultural Dimension**

The cultural dimension involves the need for recognition and the elimination of status and identity-based subordination. Fraser (1995:71) explained that cultural injustices are rooted in social patterns of “representation, interpretation, and communication, [and manifest in] cultural domination, nonrecognition, and disrespect.” These injustices can be conceptualized as “ideologies and norms that classify some groups of people as worth less respect than others” (Nelund, 2011, p.63). Participants viewed autonomy as being rooted in their cultural identities as Indigenous women. The cultural dimension herein includes issues related to cultural inequalities experienced by participants under the banners of both gender and ethnicity. Firstly, we examine various themes related to the norms and social structures that devalue women and fuel gender injustices, focusing on how these negatively impact (1.1) *women’s self-perceptions*, and (1.2) *decision-making power*, and (1.3) make them more prone to gender-based violence. Further, recognizing participants’ Indigenous identity and the long-lasting influences of colonization, the cultural dimension also encompasses themes linked to influences that impact women’s ability to exert autonomy in ways that respect their culture as Indigenous peoples. Key themes, derived from the women’s words, included (1.4) *cultural autonomy*, (1.5) *cosmology*, (1.6) *colonization*, and (1.7) *personal independence through creative expression*.



### ***1.1 Self-Perceptions***

Cultural injustices linked to social hierarchies and discrimination, which deem women as less worthy of respect, have implications for the way women see themselves. Participants spoke of the need for opportunities to increase their self-esteem, self-respect, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, acknowledging the need to value themselves as individuals. They considered all of these important for personal autonomy, but many struggled to achieve them. The women described several barriers to positive self-perceptions, including violence, discrimination, low social status, and negative media influences. Improvements in these areas could help women exert their autonomy. For instance, the women reported that generating strategies to help increase their self-esteem and confidence—an example of which was their participating in photovoice—in turn allowed them to participate more actively in the community. Carmenza recounted, “I used to tremble when I had to speak in public but after this [photovoice participation] experience, I have overcome my fears ... I even spoke in front of the *cabildo* [or town council].”

### ***1.2 Decision-Making Power***

Having the freedom to make important decisions is crucial to women’s autonomy, however, this freedom is often restricted by sociocultural constraints. While the women generally agreed that certain types of decisions are important, they had a variety of opinions about the importance of other personal decisions.

Being able to decide when and where to go was important. For example, Sofia commented, “I feel autonomous when I am able to decide whether I go out or not.” In addition, deciding whether to actively participate in the community was imperative. Yolanda described a time when her ability to participate was questioned by community members:

On the day of the election, when the women elected me to be the *Más Familia en Acción*<sup>17</sup> community leader, they all kept asking me, ‘But what will your husband say? Will he allow it?’ I told them, ‘I will decide. He will not take this away from me.’ In this moment I really felt autonomous.

Similarly, deciding how to be, how to act, and what to do was also deemed essential by most participants. Débora said, “Being autonomous is being able to make your own decisions, without someone telling you what to do, without having to consult anyone, or without thinking about what you ‘should’ do.” However, the women agreed that the strong macho culture in the community was a barrier to autonomy and their discussions alluded to a clear concentration of power and decision-making in favour of men. For example, Bertha explained that her brothers do not support her participation in development projects and educational opportunities, initiatives she believed would advance her autonomy. She recalled her brothers complaining, “You spend more on gasoline or bus tickets ... and what do you have to show for it? What have you brought home? What do they give you?”

The single mothers in the group stressed that decision-making is only a reflection of autonomy if you want to make decisions. Carmenza stated, “Since my husband died 14 years ago, I have to make all the decisions, not because I want to but because I have to.” Thus, she did not necessarily equate decision-making with her autonomy as a woman. Interestingly, Claudia, another single mother, explained that deciding not to have a partner was one of the most important, autonomous decisions she had ever made. She said she would rather be alone than have the pressure of having a husband:

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<sup>17</sup> *Más Familias en Acción* is a conditional cash-transfer program that provides financial assistance to families with young children who comply with a series of childcare obligations (e.g., school attendance, vaccination, and regular medical checkups).

I did not marry because I do not want that life (laughs). To suddenly have to serve a husband, take care of the animals, the home ... there is very little time left for oneself. I do enjoy doing some of these things ... but I do it because I want to, when I want to, and if I don't want to I don't. I have that freedom; it is not an obligation. I follow my own rhythm.

Choosing not to have a partner means Claudia is also able to raise her child the way she wants: "I'm autonomous in the way I raise my son. I do not want him to be macho. I can teach him to be better than that."

On the other hand, several married women shared that while they believed there is a place in families for joint decision-making, ultimately having a choice about which decisions they would rather make alone, as well as having the ability to make these decisions, is a true reflection of autonomy. Sara summarized this viewpoint:

Being an autonomous woman is being able to make your own decisions. There are things that I consult my husband [about] because he is my partner and we have a home together, but one thing is to consult, and another is to ask permission. I consult him so that he is informed, but I decide.

Several participants maintained that in many households, women discuss decisions with their husbands, but the men have the final say. Some indicated that they would consider this a joint decision, while others did not share that interpretation.

### ***1.3. Gender-Based Violence***

Participants frequently referred to another perturbing manifestation of cultural injustice: the persistence of violence in their communities. Colombia has endured the longest war in the Americas, lasting more than 50 years, and the conflict has disproportionately affected Indigenous

peoples, especially Indigenous women (Tovar-Restrepo and Irazábal 2014, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2017). Myriam concluded, “The violence that exists in our community, in our society is very serious. It has instilled fear and it means we cannot move about as we like; it limits our ability to do as we please, especially us women.” In 2016, the Colombian government and the FARC, the largest rebel group, signed a peace agreement. However, during group discussions, the women stressed that simply signing a paper would not necessarily translate into peace. Claudia remarked, “We need to start by addressing the wars going on in our homes if we want to realize peace in our country” (Fig. 4.1.J).

The participants identified gender-based violence as a severe impediment to women’s autonomy. Aura explained, “Here in the community we can see many cases of violence against women, many husbands mistreat their wives verbally, physically, emotionally, psychologically, economically, and the women do not report it.” The participants explained that one of the main reasons why women do not report abuse is that men rarely face punishment for these crimes. Breaking the cycle of abuse is difficult. The participants said that over time, many women begin to internalize and normalize this abuse—they start to believe that they deserve it, which harms their self-esteem and perpetuates the cycle, a phenomenon addressed in many discourses on autonomy (Stoljar 2013). During the discussions, participants reiterated that even when women are aware the situation is bad, they often feel trapped, “unable to leave because they have nowhere to go, few job opportunities and no savings.” Although we categorized violence under the cultural dimension, these women’s narratives demonstrate how it is mutually reinforced by the other two dimensions of injustice: politically through judicial inaction and impunity and socio-economically through material deprivation and structural inequalities.

The normalization of violence makes its eradication more challenging. Meaningful actions coordinated among Indigenous, local, regional, and national governments are needed to reduce violence and ensure impunity is no longer enjoyed by perpetrators. In addition, as Aura explained, “Our children mirror the behaviors of their parents, so if they grow up in an abusive environment, they are likely to replicate this in future relationships.” Through the discussions, participants identified comprehensive gender sensitization among all family members, via various channels, as well as improved social support for victims, as potential strategies to facilitate lasting peace. As acknowledged by the women, the inclusion of men, women, boys, and girls in these initiatives is critical because moving beyond hegemonic masculinities requires widespread shifts in social and cultural norms, behaviors, and expectations. As noted elsewhere, failing to overcome such masculinities has limited prior development efforts to improve gender equality (Lemke and Delormier 2017, Forstner 2013).

#### ***1.4. Cultural Autonomy***

In addition to suffering various cultural injustices as women, the participants described facing ethnically specific modes of injustice based on their Indigenous identity through social patterns of cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect, all of which were detrimental to their autonomy. Women defined cultural autonomy as having the freedom to retain their Indigenous traditions, customs, practices, and beliefs. Most of the women characterized an autonomous Indigenous woman as someone who has the space, opportunity, and support to share traditional knowledge and to practice her cultural customs free from discrimination. For example, Amelia stated that being autonomous means being “free to be, think, and act in our territory.” The need for both cultural and collective autonomy, as Indigenous people, emerged as a unifying theme. Participants emphasized that they achieve autonomy by recognizing the environment, culture,

community, and family. This vision aligns with the ancestral principles of *Los Pastos*' culture, namely, "the principle of relationality, where everything is linked to everything. The most important thing [value] for *Los Pastos*, are not beings, but the bonds that are established between them, which can be emotional, ecological, ethical, or productive in nature" (Erazo Benavides, Moreno Román, and González González 2013). Further, many of the women stated that cultural autonomy and women's personal autonomy are inherently interconnected and cannot be discussed in isolation. However, cultural and collective autonomy have been underrepresented in the international development community's discussions about women's autonomy, particularly in academic contexts, and none of the current tools used to measure women's autonomy capture these concepts (Cabnal 2010, y Mayor 2000, Paredes 2010).

### ***1.5. Cosmology***

Cultural domination has been a longstanding issue in feminist discourses. *Los Pastos* community approaches feminism<sup>18</sup> from a perspective that differs from the one typically taken in Western feminisms. Participants explained that the concept of *dualidad*<sup>19</sup> lies at the heart of their Indigenous culture yet has no Western equivalent. This cultural view claims that everything from living beings to natural phenomena, even time-periods, is masculine or feminine. For harmony to exist, the people must establish, adapt, and preserve an equilibrium between complementary opposites. Participants acknowledged that certain precolonial practices oppressed women, however, the imposition of Eurocentric patriarchal system exacerbated those conditions. These observations echo comparable viewpoints expressed by *feministas comunitarias*<sup>20</sup> in other parts

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<sup>18</sup> The use of the term "feminism" here is the researcher's interpretation; the term is used to make an analytical comparison. Many Indigenous women do not embrace this term as it is often associated with Western discourses, racism, and colonization.

<sup>19</sup> Duality is the direct English translation.

<sup>20</sup> We retained the Spanish term in the text to avoid translating the main conceptual ideas of the *feminismo comunitario* movement into English.

of Latin America (e.g., Cabnal [2010] and Paredes [2010]). Participants noted the difficulties in contradicting heteronormativity, which is marked by the cosmogony of duality and complementarity in their culture. Nevertheless, the women were rethinking gender roles, demanding more opportunities, advocating for their role as creators and carriers of knowledge, and visualizing a redistribution of productive and reproductive roles. At the same time, the participants argued that recovering ancestral principles was an essential step toward preserving their cultural roots and a necessary part of their journey toward gender equality and justice.

### ***1.6. Colonization***

Participants reported that most barriers to cultural autonomy in their communities are rooted in colonization, which “robbed [the community] of its collective and cultural autonomy,” thus limiting their autonomy as Indigenous women—the participants frequently described this process as “*blanqueamiento del pensamiento*” or “whitening of the thinking” (see Fig. 4.1.A).

Christianity and its teachings were identified as a barrier to both cultural and personal autonomy. Although the most participants identified as practicing Catholics, they noted that Catholic teachings often encouraged them to disregard their traditional beliefs and practices. For example, Claudia explained, “as we all know, our ancestors, they had their own customs ... and through religion ... they took them away ... We know that the Spaniards took everything and forced us to worship.” The women also commented that the church’s teachings introduced a hierarchal understanding of gender, promoting and reinforcing discriminatory gender norms (favouring men) in the community. Bertha observed, “They [the Catholic priests] tell us that the woman is the one who submits; the woman is the caregiver, the one who cleans. The man is the one who commands.” These statements reveal a reality that is often neglected in current discussions, in

which the assumption is that women everywhere have always been oppressed, despite contradictory evidence that Indigenous societies were not “oppressively patriarchal prior to the experience of colonialism” (Grey 2004, 11). For *Los Pastos* women, questioning this assumption entails the risk of discrimination because the church continues to hold extensive power within their homes and communities.

The women also identified the formal school system as a manifestation of colonization and, in some regards, a hindrance to autonomy. Participants claimed that this is especially true now because most teachers come from outside the community; have little to no knowledge of the local traditions, values, practices, and beliefs; and neither value nor create spaces to share this ancestral knowledge with schoolchildren. Monica summarized the barriers built into the educational system:

Lack of knowledge is not only [the] lack of a university education. When we were children, the school system was more related to our culture and customs; they taught us the meaning of the sun, the meaning of the *churo*,<sup>21</sup> the significance of having *la vara de mando*.<sup>22</sup> And now, rarely is this taught to our children, especially in the institutions. So how can we be autonomous?

The women prioritized the inclusion of cultural values and practices in local institutions, especially schools, as a means of overcoming cultural injustices. Participants also observed a

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<sup>21</sup> The *churo* is an ancestral symbol of the grass that appears in many sacred places. It represents life, death, and rebirth and reflects the cycle of the sun, "being born every morning, dying each night and reborn every morning again" (Erazo et al., 2013). In the same way, it represents duality: up-down, day-night, light-dark, man-woman, sun and moon (Erazo et al., 2013).

<sup>22</sup> A symbolic baton that represents accepting the responsibility to implement good government, held by the governor and the councillors.



need to increase efforts to transfer knowledge from one generation to the next and asserted that sex-differentiated teachings should be discontinued. Yolanda explained her reasoning as follows:

Girls and boys should have equal access to this ancestral knowledge ... It is important for our autonomy and culture, that our knowledge is still cultivated, and planted throughout the community among our girls and boys ... this is essential because it generates equity between the children.

Another manifestation of colonization that the women saw as a barrier to autonomy was the continuous introduction of technology and the subsequent changes in the attitudes and practices of community members, particularly the youth. Several women noted, for example, that cellphones are replacing community gatherings, and gas stoves are replacing traditional wood burning stoves (*fogón*), which have always been “a place we can gather around, that fosters family unity, feeds us, warms us, and contributes to our household economy” (Fig. 4.1.B). The women acknowledged that these tools have a place and, in some ways, may even enhance autonomy; yet they were concerned about the misuse of and priority given to technology, which they felt was replacing their cultural norms and traditions. Amelia, for example, lamented, “Now they [the children] find everything on the internet ... in our times we asked our elders, they passed on that knowledge ... we are losing our cultural autonomy, our validity as an Indigenous Zone.”

Participants referenced the need for decolonization and indigenization to address these barriers. Like Indigenous women in prior studies (Grey 2004), the participants stressed that Indigenous women simply cannot achieve autonomy without considering the context of decolonization. Throughout the activities, *Los Pastos* women strongly emphasized the need for

Indigenous women to come together to recover and share their ancestral knowledge, traditions, practices, and beliefs. Amelia summarized this necessity, declaring,

In the future, we as women need to be like this structure (Fig. 4.1C), we need to be big, and firm, with a deep foundation, so we can share our knowledge and our culture with the next generation and all those to come.

### ***1.7. Personal Independence through Creative Expression***

Building on the need for cultural preservation, participants indicated that their personal independence is affected by the opportunity to express themselves creatively through traditional activities such as weaving, embroidery, cooking ancestral dishes, and animal rearing. Practicing the ancestral techniques used in these activities facilitates the development of skills and the preservation of traditions. Further, especially in weaving, the resulting products are full of symbolism, allowing for both the preservation and dissemination of traditional knowledge. The women explained that when people (both inside and outside their community) value their artisanal products (e.g., food, handcrafts, art), they are recognizing and respecting their culture and skills, and thus strengthening cultural autonomy, which enhances women's autonomy.

However, the women have limited time to dedicate to these creative activities, mainly because of their cumbersome domestic workload. The women expressed the need to generate strategies that would allow them to dedicate more time to such activities and to participate in a more formal and organized manner (i.e., the creation of women's artisanal groups) (Fig. 4.1.D). At present, however, traditional arts are perceived as complementary, flexible income-generating activities, limited to domestic spaces. The general perception is these activities should not prevent women from completing their household and caregiving duties, which would be considered a failure to fulfill their role as women. This reality is not unique to *Los Pastos* community; similar patterns

and perceptions have been reported among the Indigenous women in the Puno region of the Southern Peruvian Andes (Forstner 2013).

## **2. The Socioeconomic Dimension**

The socioeconomic dimension is associated with unequal distribution of material resources and the structural conditions that uphold and fuel these inequalities. Injustices within this dimension often manifest in the form of income inequality, exploitation, economic marginalization, and deprivation (Fraser 1997, 2008). Socioeconomic injustices and their repercussions for autonomy were common topics in the women's narratives. The principal themes within this dimension were linked to (1) *income inequality*, (2) *recognition and remuneration of women's work*, (3) *education*, (4) *learning throughout the lifespan*, (5) *mobility*, (6) *leisure time*, and (7) *social support*.

### ***2.1. Income Inequality***

The ramifications of income inequalities were vast, and participants identified several obstacles impeding women's ability to earn and control a just income. The most frequently mentioned barrier to the economic autonomy of Indigenous women in their communities was their low level of economic participation. Prior research has produced national-level results that reinforce this perception: In 2010, the rate of economic participation among Indigenous women was 21%, compared to 36% among non-Indigenous women, 58% among Indigenous men, and 70% among non-Indigenous men (Jaspers, Montaña, and Mujeres 2013). As explained, even when women are able to earn an income, the power imbalance favouring men means that women often lack control over their earnings. The women also mentioned several other contributors to poor economic autonomy including lower educational attainment among women, low prices for their

artisanal products, occupational segregation, unequal care and domestic responsibilities, discriminatory norms and practices, male domination, and a lack of bargaining power. Hence, improving autonomy in the economic sphere will require a variety of societal, behavioural, political, and cultural changes that support the redistribution of material resources. For such changes to occur, Indigenous women must be able to participate as equals in the development of relevant policies and programs.

In terms of the consequences of a lack of economic resources, one area participants focused on was how such a lack of resources restricted their choices, and thus decisions were not truly a reflection of autonomy. As Maria explained, “Money is not everything, but its link to our autonomy as women is undeniable, it gives us choice.” Moreover, the women reported that without economic resources they were forced to rely on their partners, which often kept them in unhealthy relationships. For example, Carmen shared the story of her neighbour: “She realizes she is in a bad situation, a situation that she does not like. She is suffering, but she is not able to get out because she lacks work and depends on him economically.” Overall, the women’s narratives made it clear that a solid financial situation was essential for fostering autonomy. As Camilla noted, “Money is an essential part of life. If you do not have money ... you can be dying of desires, but they will never be fulfilled.”

## ***2.2. Recognize and Remunerate Women’s Work***

Socioeconomic inequalities are perpetuated by the lack of remuneration and recognition of women’s work. Both the group discussions and the pictures women took highlighted strongly gendered expectations and valuations in all aspects of daily living. Monica summarized the community’s gender norms:

Many men are still very macho; they say that we women only serve to clean, to cook, or watch the children, nothing else. They do not let us go out to work. And, worst of all, they do not even value the work we do because that is what it is, work.

All but one participant identified their occupation as a housewife, however, the economic value of domestic and care duties is rarely acknowledged in the women's homes or communities. Society's failure to recognize housework as "real work" simply because it is not attached to a wage is a longstanding issue that transcends national borders—addressing this problem is a core element of feminist movements worldwide (Rousseau 2016). Aura offered a detailed description of the devaluation of women's work and concluded that this negative assessment impedes women's autonomy:

Nobody is lying when we say the work of a housewife is hard work. It is never-ending, one does not have vacations or a free day ... from Sunday to Sunday one has to work. To devalue it just because we are not paid a salary is not fair. We housewives are the first to get up and the last to go to bed; it's the job that does not end (laughs). This really hurts our autonomy. We should all admire women, they play many important roles: wife, mother, daughter, worker. (Fig. 4.1.F)

Five decades ago, Benston noted, "to pay women for their work, even at minimum wage scales, would imply a massive redistribution of wealth" (Benston 1969, 23). This declaration remains true today. In statements that align with the conclusions of other scholars (Federici 2012, Rousseau 2016), the participants condemned the absurdity of childcare and domestic work only being recognized as work when it involves the care of other people's children, elderly relatives,

or households. Nevertheless, the women observed that some women are dismissive of their own work.

Participants noted that women's work is also devalued outside the home, making it difficult for women to obtain decent jobs with fair wages. Sandra explained,

I used to be a domestic servant in Guachucal, it was so hard for me ... I had to answer to my boss's every demand and the pay was so bad ... imagine 90,000 pesos a month (~US\$30), and you even work Sundays! Just imagine!

Sandra's experience reflects the reality that "women's exploitation as household workers did not end when they left the home and worked for wages." (Federici 2012, 43). Further, while all women face employment discrimination, Indigenous women have a heightened risk of labour exploitation due to their ethnic origin and their lower average level of education (Jaspers, Montaña, and Mujeres 2013).

The women highlighted another area of gender inequality in the domestic sphere: although women often helped men with their activities, especially those related to agriculture, men seldomly helped women with work inside the home, even when women worked outside the home at a paying job. Bertha expressed her frustration about this situation: "They [the men] want everything organized, but they won't help. This work doesn't interest them. They leave it for the women... No one asks if it interests us" (Fig. 4.1.G). Previous studies conducted in Latin America have noted a similar pattern of "feminization of responsibility and obligation," in which women take on increased responsibility for generating income without any alleviation of their domestic duties (Forstner 2013). Further, many participants identified machismo and a lack of

cooperation as barriers to their participation in social and civic activities that they felt would help them gain independence and strengthen their autonomy. Monica described these limitations:

They do not realize that you want to participate in meetings or events. For them you have to wash the dishes and have everything organized. If you go and they come back and the house is not in order, there are problems. They start asking, “Where did you go? What were you doing? Wasting time?”

Marcela echoed a similar sentiment: “They [men] are unable to put themselves in our shoes. We also want our freedom. We are not just here to serve them.” There were some exceptions to this general pattern. Sandra presented a photo of her husband washing clothes and another of him helping with the children, which generated laughter, admiration, and envy among the other participants (Fig. 4.1.H).

Although the women were clear that they needed independence to be autonomous, they also indicated that, for them, independence did not mean being completely free of domestic and care duties. On the contrary, many of them valued these activities. Participants explained that before colonization, domestic roles among *Los Pastos* were highly valued and considered essential. Although women and men had different roles in this society, they were seen as complementary. The women now wanted, at a minimum, recognition for the work they did within the domestic space. Aura affirmed the value of women’s duties: “There is nothing more beautiful than doing things at home for your children and husband and them thanking you. That is very rewarding because you put time and love into everything, at least they can say thanks.”

To facilitate social and behavioral changes related to the valuation of domestic work, the participants stressed the importance of changing the perceptions surrounding gender roles. For example, Claudia emphasized the need to

teach and demonstrate that work is communal, that there is no men's work and women's work.... We have to teach our children that the housework, caring for others, taking care of our *shagras*<sup>23</sup> is the responsibility of the entire household.

The women felt it was important to instill these beliefs in children from a young age. Addressing profoundly rooted gender norms and stereotypes as well as issues of masculinities is widely seen as an essential step in redistributing responsibilities for care and housework between women and men; failing to address these issues will perpetuate gender inequalities (Fraser, 1997; Rousseau 2016, Rizavi and Sofer 2010, Kabeer 2005, Lemke and Bellows 2015).

During the group discussions, the participants speculated that if such changes could be realized, then perhaps in the future, "there will be no macho men. Men and women will be equal. The man will not be a burden on our family, but rather a help... that would be most beautiful; united, men and women, girls and boys." Carmenza observed that, in this case, women would "finally be able to decide whether or not they want to be a 'housewife'; it will be an independent choice, not an obligation." In *Los Pastos* communities and nations around the world, the management and valuation of care work can either build the capabilities and expand the choices of women and men or restrict them to entrenched gendered roles (Rizavi and Sofer 2010).

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<sup>23</sup> *Shagra* is an Indigenous term that refers to an expanded version of a home garden, involving agriculture and medicinal plant production, as well as small species production for both home consumption and sale. *Shagras* provide space for individuals to be involved with and interpret nature and are considered a site of continuous learning for families and the *Pasto* community.



Failing to address the unequal distribution of unpaid care work will perpetuate the infringement of women's rights and hinder women's economic empowerment.

### ***2.3. Education***

The participating women universally identified the structural conditions resulting in a lack of educational opportunities as a barrier to women's autonomy. Maria concluded, "The best way to start exercising autonomy is to study, to educate ourselves." Many participants said they would like to be formally employed in a job that paid fair wages, but they did not have the necessary education and training. For example, Camila declared, "We want better jobs, ones that pay at least the minimum. But we have no training. They ask us to have studied this or that, but our résumés are not suitable." When asked about barriers to completing the necessary training, Carmenza explained there were "two main reasons. One, if I have children, and I have no one to leave them with, I would have to pay someone, but I do not have any money. Two, those courses are very expensive." Carmenza's comments highlight the mutually influential relationship between education and income.

As mothers, the participants wanted nothing more than to provide their children, both girls and boys, with better educational opportunities. However, many feared that they would not be able to do so. Yolanda explained, "Education and knowledge are assets that no one can take away; it is the best inheritance a parent can leave their child." Sandra expressed a similar sentiment, saying, "I hope that in the future no child is denied their right to study. It is the safest way to get out of slavery, to escape inequity" (Fig. 4.1.K). A report by the *Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe* (2013) indicated that much needs to be done to make this hope a reality. Compared to non-Indigenous women and men in Colombia, the Indigenous population

has substantially lower education rates, especially among women (Jaspers, Montaña, and Mujeres 2013).

Further, more needs to be done to understand how gender inequality is embedded in the current education system. Many participants noted that there is often a “hidden curriculum” of school practices (e.g., teacher’s perceptions, differential focus on and messaging to girls and boys) that reinforces messages of male superiority. Less subtle are issues of gender stereotyping in the current curriculum—these stereotypes mirror and reinforce current gender inequalities (e.g., women engage in domestic duties and men are the breadwinners). The women emphasized the need to accept, support, and encourage women’s and girls’ decisions to pursue studies and career paths typically reserved for men and boys, and vice versa. In addition, social norms must shift to broaden the job market for women—as Ana asked, “What good is it to go and get well educated if you're only going to come back to cook and cook? (Laughter)” Failing to address these issues will limit the futures that girls envision for themselves and reinforce boys’ perceptions that a woman “should be” responsible for domestic duties and only hold certain types of jobs (Kabeer 2005).

#### ***2.4. Learning Throughout the Lifespan***

The participants expressed the need for broader learning opportunities beyond attending university or participating in formal educational experiences to enhance autonomy. Camila commented, “Even for those of us who are housewives, who did not graduate from high school, we need access to courses, to learn and grow.” Suggestions for additional educational opportunities included cooking courses, adult literacy programs, business training, and financing opportunities for women. The women also said that having opportunities to participate in development projects and obtain knowledge through practice and experiences would improve

their autonomy. Yolanda stated, “After nine months in the *Papas Más Nutritivas* project, I have received my diploma; with all my new knowledge I feel more autonomous and no one can interfere with that, even my husband could not stop me from participating.” Increasing access to such initiatives would help ensure the right to education throughout life.

## **2.5. Mobility**

Another personal prerequisite for autonomy was mobility, meaning the freedom to move, participate, and travel as desired, “without asking permission.” As Yolanda described, “I am autonomous in that I go visit my family [in another municipality] whenever I like. I don’t ask, I just go.” Others mentioned the importance of having some type of vehicle. For example, Sofia reported, “When we got this car, my life changed. I used to have to say no to many invitations because I would have to walk. Now I can just go.” Mirabel said, “Not all women have access to transport. At least I do. I am able to go to meetings or activities, I take my motorcycle and I leave” (Fig. 4.1.E). Participants spoke of the isolation that many women, especially those living in remote areas, experience within the community. Doris observed, “They live so far, and if there is a motorcycle the men take it to work. Women are left there alone.” Nonetheless, the participants remained optimistic about their ability to improve their mobility. For example, 62-year-old Elizabeth commented, “I want to buy a motorcycle soon and I have one son, he said he will teach me ... Just watch, next year I will show up to meetings on my own moto! (Laughter)”

In alignment with Kaufmann, Bergman, and Joye (2004), the experiences that participants discussed encompass three factors that affect mobility: access, or the availability and usability of transport infrastructure; competence, or the required skills and abilities; and appropriation, or how individuals interpret and act upon perceived or real access and skills. As

Sager (2006, 465) noted, “The link between mobility, freedom, and rights is long recognized and well established.” The experiences of the women of *Los Pastos* reveal a link between the lack of mobility and missed opportunities, showing that unequal access to mobility helps to reproduce and reinforce gender norms that undermine women’s autonomy and impedes their participation both socially and economically.

## ***2.6. Leisure Time***

A significant barrier to exerting autonomy identified by the participating women was a lack of leisure time, mainly because their time was taken up by the demands of the multiple roles they played in the home. In contrast, the men in the community had active social lives, playing sports and spending time with friends as they wished. Aura lamented, “After all our work is done, we don’t even have five minutes for ourselves.” A recent study on time-use in Colombian households highlights similar findings at the national level, concluding that “leisure and self-care are predominantly male activities” (Tovar-Restrepo and Irazábal 2014, 8). Further, when women do engage in leisure or recreation activities, they must often seek permission from their partners, or at a minimum must communicate their plans, a constraint that men rarely face. Some women avoid going out alone due to negative perceptions among the wider community. For example, Elizabeth said, “If my family cannot join me, I’d rather not go. People gossip, and I don’t want to cause any problems.”

When the women did have time for themselves, it contributed to their autonomy. For example, they said participating in the photovoice sessions facilitated their autonomy because it provided space to “relax and spend time with friends sharing, laughing, and learning ... It is a chance to de-stress” and “leave our problems at home, at least for a moment.”

## ***2.7. Social Support***

Relationships and the social support they provided helped women overcome some of the barriers that inhibited their ability to exercise their autonomy, for example, by reducing their workload and facilitating participation in other activities of interest. Claudia, a single mother, described this type of support: “I am fortunate because if there is a course, or if I want to go participate in a meeting, my mom says, ‘You go, and I will stay with him [her son].’” In contrast, Carmenza, another single mother, reported having less social support:

I am the only one in the home. It is difficult for me. I cannot go to work because I cannot leave my children alone. Sometimes I have to leave them and go to earn 4,000 or 5,000 pesos here and there just to pay for our basic services.

This pattern of responses aligns with Nedelsky’s (1989, 12) argument that “what actually enables people to be autonomous...is not isolation, but relationships—with parents, teachers, friends, loved ones—that provide the support and guidance necessary for the development and experience of autonomy” (Fig. 4.1.I). Interestingly, this exercise prompted participants to reflect on the fact that this type of support often came at the expense of other women’s autonomy, time, and ability to participate in similar activities. Male family members (e.g., brothers, fathers) were less willing to provide the same support.

## **3. The Political Dimension**

As described by Fraser (2008), the political dimension encompasses representation-related injustices, or “political voicelessness.” Moreover, it is grounded in political marginalization and the exclusion of specific individuals and/or groups, in this case Indigenous women, from participating fully as peers in decision-making processes and institutions (Fraser 2005, 7).

Participating women spoke directly about the implications of inadequate (1) *women's political participation* and (2) *knowledge about their rights for their autonomy*.

### ***3.1 Women's Political Participation***

There have been some gains in women's political participation in the focal communities, however, progress has been slow and pervasive inequalities persist. Men continue to occupy the vast majority of political positions across all levels of government in Colombia. Further, the few women who have infiltrated political spaces tend to hold gendered positions in sectors explicitly involved with women's and children's concerns (Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 2013). Even though the constitution allots a certain number of spaces for Indigenous peoples in the Colombian Parliament at the national level, "this small representative quota has always been filled by men" (Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women 2013, 22). Therefore, it is not surprising that participants stressed that the current political process and governments do not address the needs of women, especially Indigenous women, and that government programs and policies continue to subordinate and oppress women. This assessment aligns with prior findings in the literature (Forstner 2013, Martínez-Restrepo et al. 2017). The women emphasized that the machismo culture limiting women's political participation is not restricted to men; women are also guilty of perpetuating this situation. For example, Aura reported, "Nobody votes for the woman, even many of us women don't. We don't even support our own. There is still a belief that men are better suited for politics." Facilitating changes in individual attitudes and, in turn, creating demand for greater political representation may serve as a pathway to increasing women's political participation (Stoljar 2013). When discussing women's political participation, Sofia

presented a photo she had taken of the *cabildo*<sup>24</sup> *infantil* (Fig. 4.1.L), explaining that it was an example of an initiative that teaches children that women and girls, like men and boys, “can effectively govern and serve their community.” In alignment with Fraser’s (2007) work, the women stressed that their participation at all levels of governance and influence is critical for redressing the aforementioned areas of disadvantage across both the cultural and socioeconomic dimensions.

### ***3.2. Knowledge about Women’s Rights***

The women also identified a lack of knowledge about women’s rights as a barrier to full and just political representation, engagement, and justice. Maya concluded, “Many times, if I do not know my rights, it limits my autonomy to live the life I want and deserve. If I don’t know what rights I have then how can I possibly fight for or defend them?” Because the people involved in Indigenous movements for self-determination and autonomy often give precedence to collective rather than individual rights, the acknowledgement and promotion of women’s rights and gender equality are often overlooked (Forstner 2013). Although Indigenous women are increasingly becoming aware of their rights, both as women and as Indigenous peoples, organizing themselves, and asserting these rights (UN Women 2018, Rousseau 2016, Koch-Mehrin 2017, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2017), the current results show that progress has been slow and sporadic. Efforts to increase awareness and develop more responsive approaches to addressing individual and community needs are required. Finally, significant measures must be taken to protect Indigenous women and men who do organize to defend their rights in

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<sup>24</sup> *Cabildo* is often translated as “Indigenous council,” however, it has particular significance in the Colombian situation and thus the Spanish term is retained in the text.

Colombia, as these leaders continue to be the target of unacceptably high levels of violence (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2017).

## **Conclusions**

This study examines the local understanding of women's autonomy in Nariño, Colombia by drawing on the perspectives of Indigenous women from two municipalities. Using Fraser's tripartite theory of social justice, we identified barriers to women's autonomy across three dimensions of injustice: cultural, socioeconomic, and political. The gravity of most of the barriers identified across dimensions were compounded by both gender and ethnic discrimination. Addressing these barriers in meaningful ways will require not only remedying the consequences of gender- and ethnicity-based inequalities and their implications for autonomy, but also addressing the deep structural and institutional drivers of this inequality.

Despite the well-documented need to understand lived experience when addressing the complex issues related to women's autonomy and gender inequality, such insights continue to be overlooked and undervalued. Photovoice was an effective tool for the participants to voice their needs and concerns; these women possess an unmatched understanding of their lived reality, and thus their insights should drive the agenda for social action and change and inform the designs of interventions targeting women's autonomy in this community.

Current discourses on women's autonomy do not fully capture the need to understand the meaning and interpretation of cultural and collective autonomy, as stressed throughout this study, and do not adequately address the multiple overlapping forms of discrimination faced by Indigenous women. This study's results highlight the importance of understanding the local cultural context when addressing women's autonomy and gender-related issues more broadly. Scholars, development partners, and governments must recognize and respect Indigenous



cosmological beliefs as a fundamental part of their feminist visions and must incorporate these concepts into programs, interventions, and measurement tools in the future.

Members of local communities, especially women, would likely be eager to join such efforts—participants underscored that they should not be seen as victims but rather as agents of change working to better their community. In fact, *Los Pastos* community tends to view women as the custodians of their Indigenous culture, traditions, and practices. The participants demonstrated strong critical consciousness and recognized the important role they play in this regard and requested the support and space necessary to thrive in order to ensure their people's distinct culture is preserved and passed down to future generations.

Despite women playing this important role in their communities, participants' narratives reveal that Indigenous women in these communities face many barriers to autonomy similar to those often discussed within the development community and experienced by other women regardless of race and class. Participants emphasized several factors associated with women's autonomy in the areas of independence, decision-making, capacity-building opportunities, mobility, violence, representation, and economic and resource control. Unlike culturally rooted barriers, many of these factors are included in commonly used conceptualizations and measurement tools. Nonetheless, it is clear that interpretations of indicators of etic dimensions of autonomy may not accurately reflect the nuances of local or personal perceptions. For instance, with regard to decision-making power, while the women universally agreed that being able to make choices was essential, depending on the nature of the decision, they often had differing opinions about the importance of making it independently; in addition, participants varied in their experience, valuation, and perception of "joint decision-making." These types of complex understandings are often overlooked by the most commonly used closed-ended survey questions,

thus reinforcing the need to interpret responses to such questions cautiously, as failing to do so can have implications for the effectiveness of programs and policy aimed at improving autonomy and may have contributed to the lack of progress in this area to date.

Similarly, although the women considered personal independence important, the results highlight the need for taking a more relational approach to analyzing the constraints that limit autonomy. In other words, researchers must look beyond the common individualistic interpretation of autonomy, which tends to prioritize the ability to make individual, fully informed, independent decisions free from external interference. This approach fails to adequately consider the local social reality and its influence on autonomy, which as evidenced by these women's narratives, is instrumental.

The study showed that the identified themes are interconnected in complex ways both within and across dimensions, drawing attention to the intricacies of the pathways that support or impede autonomy. For instance, the results illustrate that social support can facilitate increased mobility, leisure time, access to learning opportunities, and community and economic participation, while the lack of recognition and remuneration of women's work can negatively impact self-perceptions, control over income, and decision-making power, and produces many ripple effects including outcomes linked to violence. Although these interconnections add complexity to an already convoluted concept, understanding them is imperative to designing more holistic and effective policies and programs, ones that simultaneously address multiple social, cultural, and political conditions, thus contributing to an environment that enables women's autonomy.

In alignment with Fraser's (2007) conclusions, we argue that addressing the barriers and injustices that restrict women's autonomy will require both cultural politics of recognition and

social politics of economic redistribution. Ensuring women's participation in these political processes will be critical, however, doing so necessitates redressing the interconnected forms of injustice that impede the Indigenous women in this community from participating as full partners in society (Fraser 2003, p. 36). The women proposed several strategies to help overcome the barriers they identified. For instance, they stressed the importance of increasing gender sensitization and implementing social behavior change initiatives that involve men, women, girls, and boys to shift perceptions around gender roles and facilitate lasting peace. The women especially emphasized the inclusion of men as a means of generating allies for change. They also highlighted the need for increased education opportunities, both formal and informal; greater access to fair justly paid work that they enjoy; expanded opportunities to increase their self-esteem; more support for decolonization and indigenization; and increased efforts to include cultural values and practices in local institutions.

Several limitations of the study should be noted. First, these results are grounded in the narratives of a few women among many, and as such do not represent the experience of the general population (Patton 2005). At the same time, however, this exercise provided a richness to the data that allowed us to tease out and describe experiences in a way that would otherwise not be possible and thick description is provided to support transferability. Second, researchers could not observe what was not photographed (Castleden and Garvin 2008); that is, participants presented only a few selected photos, most likely skewing the discussion toward topics participants felt most comfortable addressing. Nonetheless, this approach puts the power to determine what was most important to share in participants' hands. Third, the work entails the potential for social desirability bias; in other words, participants may have limited themselves to socially acceptable responses in the discussion groups. Considering the advantaged role of the

lead researcher and first author, who is a White Canadian Ph.D. candidate (and thus an outsider to the community), her positionality may have influenced interactions with research participants and the social and political context of this study in the community.<sup>25</sup> Nonetheless, she spent roughly one year living immersed in the selected communities, building a strong rapport with participants. Local research staff also verified all results to help mitigate potential bias.

The authors and participants alike hope the results of this study will move beyond academic spaces designated specifically for gender- or Indigenous-based points of view to facilitate a more respectful, balanced, and comprehensive dialogue moving forward. The results can be used to inform local decision-makers, public policies, and programs at the community level. In addition, the results can strengthen the interpretation of quantitative findings and inform the development of quantitative tools to more effectively measure women's autonomy.

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<sup>25</sup> As described by Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014, p. 2), "Positionality refers to the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study—the community, the organization or the participant group." Coghlan, D., & Brydon-Miller, M. (2014). *The SAGE encyclopedia of action research* (Vols. 1-2). London: SAGE Publications Ltd doi: 10.4135/9781446294406

**Figure 4.1. Photovoice Photographs by Theme**

<b>A</b>		<b>B</b>		<b>C</b>	
	Theme: Freedom from the Influences of Colonization. Descriptor: “Robbed of its collective and cultural autonomy,” and the need to preserve traditional practices		Theme: Freedom from the Influences of Colonization. Descriptor: Gas stoves are replacing the traditional <i>fogón</i>		Theme: Autonomy in Our Territory: Being, thinking, and acting. Descriptor: Women need to be like this structure...big, and firm, with a deep foundation
<b>D</b>		<b>E</b>		<b>F</b>	
	Theme: Personal Independence through Creative Expression Descriptor: Production of artisanal products		Theme: Need for Mobility: More than just transport. Descriptor: Mobility, meaning one has the freedom to move, participate, and travel as one wishes		Theme: Women’s Work: Unrecognized and undervalued Descriptor: Unfair to devalue domestic and care work of housewives because not paid a salary.
<b>G</b>		<b>H</b>		<b>I</b>	
	Theme: Women’s Work: Unrecognized and undervalued Descriptor: “No one asks if it [housework] interests us.”		Theme: Women’s Work: Unrecognized and undervalued Descriptor: Exceptions do exist; husband washing clothes		Theme: Social Support: Relationships to nurture autonomy. Descriptor: Strong relationships, not isolation, are required for autonomy.

<b>J</b>		<b>K</b>		<b>L</b>	
	<p>Theme: Gender Equality: A path to peace. Descriptor: Peace needs to start within the home.</p>		<p>Theme: Education: Planting seeds for a better future. Descriptor: Want to provide their children, girls and boys, with good education opportunities, something that was denied to them.</p>		<p>Theme: Gender Equality: A path to peace. Descriptor: <i>Cabildo infantil</i> [Children's Indigenous council]</p>

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## **Connecting Statement II**

In Chapter IV, I illustrated how the participating Indigenous women described and addressed the cultural, socioeconomic, and political injustices that hindered their autonomy as women. In addition to demonstrating that many conditions often discussed within the development community are prerequisites of autonomy, results also emphasized that cultural and collective autonomy, which are often overlooked in current discourses, were critical for the autonomy of the women in the two focal communities. This chapter developed a more nuanced picture of the local, emic understanding of autonomy. In chapter V, I examine the linkages between women's autonomy and food security from the perspective of participating rural Indigenous women.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **Women's Autonomy and Food Security: Connecting the dots from the perspective of Indigenous women in rural Colombia**

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## Abstract

There is a growing consensus that women's autonomy is positively related to food security. However, the evidence is inconsistent, and the nature of the pathways connecting the two factors remains unclear. Few studies have examined this topic in Latin America, especially among Indigenous women. **Objective:** To analyze the connection between women's autonomy and food security drawing solely from the perspective of rural Indigenous women in Nariño, Colombia. **Methods:** Focus group discussions and photovoice, a photography-based Participatory Action Research method, were conducted with 24 women. **Results:** Women elucidated numerous economic, social, cultural, and political constraints affecting their autonomy and limiting their ability to ensure a nutritionally adequate diet for their households. Women expressed that their work is not remunerated, while men's work often is. As a result, men control the money and buy only staple foods for the home instead of foods that contribute to a nutritionally adequate diet. Because women have few opportunities for formal education, it is difficult to break this cycle and obtain formal non-exploitive work. As such, women's income comes from the sale of small animals (guinea pigs, chickens, rabbits), surplus produce, or handicrafts, and is rarely enough to supplement the food purchased by their husbands or, in the case of female-headed households, to meet the needs of the family. Women also reported that limited access to productive assets and knowledge and the loss of traditional agricultural practices have hindered their production capacity for domestic consumption and sale. Further, the women explained that violence (psychological, physical, economic), frequently triggered by men's alcohol consumption, diminishes women's self-esteem and harms their spirit and state of mind, which in turn affects food security because "the food is cooked according to the mood of the person who prepares it and that is transmitted to the people who are going to consume it." **Conclusions:** Women's autonomy is highly contextual



and culturally specific and its relationship with food security is complex. This study highlights the importance of women's autonomy for guaranteeing food security. Results can inform policy and programming decisions and contribute to the contextualisation and interpretation of quantitative efforts in this context.

## Introduction

Across the globe, women are disproportionately affected by food insecurity, with the gender gap in accessing food continuing to increase, particularly in Latin America and Africa (FAO, 2020; Sinclair et al., 2019). These inequalities are grounded in complex economic, social, cultural, and political conditions. The far-reaching ramifications of gender inequality for food insecurity are well recognized and the extant evidence indicates that a reduction in gender inequality is associated with improvements in global hunger and food insecurity (Clement et al., 2019; Duflo, 2012; Malapit et al., 2019; Smith & Haddad, 2000). In the broader context of gender equality, enhancing women's autonomy—broadly defined as “a woman's ability to have control or influence over choices that affect herself and her family within her own particular context” (Carlson, Kordas, & Murray-Kolb, 2015),—is shown to have positive effects on social, economic, and human development outcomes, including food security and nutrition (Carlson et al., 2015; Cunningham, Ruel, Ferguson, & Uauy, 2015; Rahman, Mostofa, & Hoque, 2014; Smith, 2003; Sraboni, Malapit, Quisumbing, & Ahmed, 2014).

Despite these findings, scholars do not fully understand the pathways linking women's autonomy and food security. The uncertainty is partly due to the difficulty of defining and measuring women's autonomy, a highly contextual and culturally specific trait, and the lack of representation of marginal populations within the field. To date, there is no universally agreed upon definition and the varying degrees of attention across global regions has largely neglected minority populations. This exclusion is problematic given that women are far from a homogenous demographic group and the generalizability and transferability of the extant research findings are limited (Clement et al., 2019; Carlson, Kordas, & Murray-Kolb, 2015). As such, researchers have acknowledged the need for additional studies that will contribute to a

comprehensive contextually grounded understanding of the relationship between women's autonomy and food security in different contexts. Moreover, research must prioritize understanding the lived experience of populations facing intersecting inequalities based on gender; ethnicity; culture; and social, economic, and political status (Meinzen-Dick et al., 2019; Briggs & Sharp, 2004; Kwon, Tandon, Islam, Riley, & Trinh-Shevrin, 2018).

To address this gap in the literature, the current study builds on research conducted with rural Indigenous women in Nariño, Colombia, who represent a population largely ignored in the research discourse. An earlier study (see Chapter IV), employed Photovoice, a photography-based Participatory Action Research method, to examine women's local understanding of autonomy and to identify barriers and facilitators of women's autonomy across three dimensions of injustices: cultural/symbolic, socioeconomic, and political (Fraser, 2009). The cultural inequalities identified in the study were rooted in both gender- and ethnicity-based injustices. Participants spoke about the norms and social structures that devalue women and the negative influence this devaluation has on women's self-perceptions, decision-making power, and gender-based violence, all of which were considered conditions for autonomy. Results also highlight how external influences, particularly colonialism, restrict women's ability to exert autonomy in ways that respect their culture as Indigenous peoples. Other findings underscored socioeconomic constraints linked to the lack of resources and opportunities—economic resources, recognition and remuneration of women's work, education, knowledge, mobility, leisure time, and social support—as barriers to autonomy. Finally, political participation and knowledge of citizens' rights were considered as critical conditions for achieving autonomy.

The current study extends this prior work by examining the linkages between women's autonomy and food security from the perspective of rural Indigenous women. Indigenous

Peoples may experience food insecurity differently than non-Indigenous people (Munro, Parker, & McIntyre, 2014). For millennia, Indigenous Peoples have maintained their well-being through unique food systems that are inextricably connected to the land to provide a balanced, healthy diet (Kuhnlein, Burlingame, & Erasmus, 2013). In addition, traditional food systems have made invaluable contributions to the preservation of the world's agricultural biodiversity, having an unparalleled ability to facilitate the achievement of zero hunger (FAO, 2009; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, n.d.). Yet traditional food systems are increasingly threatened by changing environments, global market forces and colonization, therefore, impinging upon the well-being of Indigenous People, especially women and girls, who are disproportionately affected by poverty, hunger, and malnutrition (Kuhnlein, Erasmus, Spigelski, & Burlingame, 2013; Kuhnlein, 2017; Lemke & Delormier, 2017; Social Protection Ministry, Colombian Family Welfare Institute, & Health National Institutes, 2017).

In this study, we draw from the literature on intersectionality and post-colonial theory to gain a holistic understanding of multiple overlapping forms of oppression and opportunity that exist in a post-colonial context. While the post-colonial theory allows a better understanding of the “burden of history” and its influence on current experiences and new forms of inequities in rural Colombia (Browne, Smye, & Varcoe, 2005), it does not include a comprehensive gendered perspective. Therefore, to address this shortcoming, we draw on intersectionality theory that critically examines how forms of social difference or identities (race, class, gender, disability, among others) interact with each other to “circumscribe how people see themselves and how they are seen in the social milieu, leading to various forms of discrimination or privilege” (Crenshaw 1990, 1991; Hurst, 1997). Adopting an intersectional approach enriches the analyses

by providing a more comprehensive description and understanding of the complex social inequalities which exist within the context of this study.

## **Methods**

### Study Site

The study was conducted in Cumbal and Guachucal, two rural Andean municipalities in the department of Nariño, Colombia, where the majority of the population are Indigenous Peoples from *Los Pastos* Indigenous group. Nariño borders the Pacific Ocean to the west, the department of Putumayo to the east, and Ecuador to the south. The economic activities of most Pasto communities are centered on agriculture, and the local language is Spanish (Tovar-Restrepo & Irazábal, 2014). Since the enactment of a new Colombian constitution in 1991, these communities have maintained their own political organization, which is formally recognized by the Colombian government.

### Sample Selection

Using purposeful sampling techniques, we recruited 24 female Indigenous smallholder farmers<sup>26</sup>, all of whom were members of a larger nutrition-sensitive agriculture project called *Papa Mas Nutritivas*.<sup>27</sup> Table 5.1 presents the characteristics of the sample. Roughly one in six of the study participants were female heads of household, over half of the sample members had not completed primary school (54%); most reported their employment status as housewife

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<sup>26</sup> Initially 25 women were recruited but one chose not to participate after the initial session.

<sup>27</sup> This project sought to expand the adoption of three highly nutritious, robust, and productive yellow potato varieties by working with public and private sector partners to address malnutrition and food insecurity in Colombia. (Funded by International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. Project title: Scaling up the Production of More Nutritious Yellow Potatoes in Colombia; Project No. 108125.

(96%); and most households reported experiencing some degree of food insecurity (46% mild, 17% moderate, 17% severe).

**Table 5.1. Characteristics of the Sample, N=24**

Mean age, in years <sup>1</sup>	41	(24-67)
	<b>n</b>	<b>%</b>
<b>Educational Attainment</b>		
None	1	4.2
Primary Incomplete	13	54.2
Primary Complete	5	20.8
High School Complete	4	16.6
University	1	4.2
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Not married	6	25.0
<b>Head of household</b>		
Yes	4	16.6
<b>Children under 18 in Household</b>		
Yes	18	75.0
<b>Household Food Security Status<sup>2</sup></b>		
Secure	5	20.8
Mild	11	45.8
Moderate	4	16.6
Severe	4	16.6
<b>Employment</b>		
Housewife	23	95.8
Service Industry	1	4.2
<b>TOTAL SAMPLE</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>--</b>

<sup>1</sup> Age range in parenthesis; <sup>2</sup> Measured using the Latin America and Caribbean Food Security scale (Escala Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Seguridad Alimentaria -ELCSA), an additive score classifying households into food security categories. For households with children under the age of 18, scores were categorized into four groups: food secure (score: 0), food insecure (score: 1–5), very food insecure (score: 6–10), and severely food insecure (score: 11–16). For households without children, scores were categorized on a slightly different scale: food secure (score: 0), food insecure (score: 1–3), very food insecure (score: 4–6), and severely food insecure (score: 7 or more).

Before collecting any data, we obtained fully informed signed consent from all participants, who agreed to participate and granted permission for use their photographs and

narratives for publication.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, it was agreed pseudonyms would be used for all references and direct quotes to protect participants' confidentiality. Consent forms (in Spanish) were read to each participant before they signed, and each participant was given a copy. Data were collected over nine months, from April 2017 to January 2018.

### Photovoice

The study used photovoice, a community-based participatory action research methodology developed by Wang and Burris (1994) that involves participants throughout the research lifespan. This methodology, which has been shown to be an empowering process for participants, is largely grounded in three theoretical frameworks: Freire's philosophy of critical consciousness, feminist theory, and community photography (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001). Participants are asked to express their points of view and/or represent their communities using visual images to support personal voice, a practice that often unearths hidden or overlooked issues. The outputs generated from the collaborative interpretation of participants' photographs, narratives, and group discussions allow researchers and decision-makers (e.g., policymakers) to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the community in relation to the research theme, which in turn promotes dialogue and the development of solutions that better address the identified needs and issues (Catalani & Minkler, 2010).

In this study, photovoice participants used photography to document and explain their views on women's autonomy, food security, and the connections between the two domains. The goal was to include research participants as respected and legitimate stakeholders in an attempt

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<sup>28</sup> McGill Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics Board of the Faculty of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences at McGill University (REB file#: 273-1216) and all of the study's procedures were conducted in accordance with the McGill policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Subjects, the Research Ethics Board guidelines, and the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans.

to address some of the shortcomings of more traditional Eurocentric approaches to research. Marginalized populations, including *Los Pastos*, continue to be subjected to research and interventions conducted by outsiders, which tend to ignore the local population during the design and implementation process, seeking little or no input from them about which results should be highlighted (Fietje & Stein, 2015). This pattern, well documented in the research on Indigenous Peoples (Briggs & Sharp, 2004; FAO, 2009; Gonzales & González, 2015; Kuokkanen, 2006; Santamaria, García, Hernández, & Pardo, 2019), diminishes the potential of research efforts because marginalized populations tend to possess unmatched knowledge about and insight into their own community, making them well suited to derive solutions to community problems (Briggs & Sharp, 2004; Kirmayer, Dandeneau, Marshall, Phillips, & Williamson, 2011; Smith, 2012).

### Procedures

Participants were divided into five groups (three from Guachucal, two from Cumbal), each comprising four to nine women who attended five sessions. First, the women attended an introductory workshop in which they learned about the photovoice methodology, research ethics, and use of a digital camera, and were presented with the guiding questions for the two upcoming photovoice group sessions; these questions were developed in consultation with the broader community during ECAF sessions..<sup>29</sup> During this initial workshop, food security was defined, in collaboration with participants, as having access to an adequate diet composed of sufficient food that supports good health and is culturally appropriate in terms of both type and production

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<sup>29</sup> The guiding questions for the first photovoice group session asked the women to define their local understanding of autonomy as women and to identify barriers to and facilitators of women's autonomy in the community. The guiding questions for the second group session asked women to identify the barriers to and facilitators of food security, recommend approaches to improve food security, and discuss how the identified conditions of autonomy of were linked to food security.



method. After the introductory workshop, each participant was able to take as many pictures as she wished during two time periods (before the first photovoice session and between the first and second sessions). The women attended two photovoice group sessions, held 10 to 14 days in between. The first session focused on defining women's autonomy; in-depth results can be found in Chapter IV. During the second session, participants built on their emic meanings of autonomy by identifying facilitators and barriers to food security and explaining pathways that link women's autonomy and food security.

During the group photovoice sessions, each participant initially presented her pictures (which were printed by research staff before the session) and narratives to the group, sharing her understanding of and experience with food security as well as its connection to conditions of women's autonomy. Other participants could comment or interject, and the session concluded with all the participants organizing the photographs into themes. After the second group session, a follow-up focus group discussion was held with each group of women to explore further the identified pathways and other potential connections between autonomy and food security. As a final activity, the research team and participants organized photo exhibitions for the local, departmental, and national level. Overall, this study offered participants a platform to express their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives; for many, it was the first time their ideas were heard and considered by policymakers and the community more broadly.

### Analysis

In line with the photovoice methodology, participants were responsible for the preliminary steps of the analysis, namely selecting photographs, contextualising them, and identifying emerging themes (Wang & Burris, 1994). Further, with the consent of all participants, sessions were recorded with a digital device and the recordings were later

transcribed. The results presented herein are based on analysis of the recordings and transcripts. Drawing from aspects of Grounded Theory, qualitative textual and visual (photo) data were analyzed inductively using thematic content analysis in Atlas.Ti software (version 8.2.4), a computer-aided qualitative data analysis software. The themes and subthemes presented herein were developed largely by participants, although at times the researchers made modifications to fit the analytical framework while remaining as true as possible to the participants' voice.

## **Results**

The discussions yielded rich and complex narratives about the connections between women's autonomy and food security. While the women touched on a wide variety of issues, they identified certain constraints consistently and repeatedly. These constraints were organized into four domains: 1) economic, 2) social, 3) cultural, and 4) political. While these four domains are deeply interconnected, making it difficult to isolate experiences, they are analyzed separately for the sake of clarity and ease of discussion. Using an intersectionality analysis, with a particular emphasis on the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and geographical location, we examined how constraints in each of these four domains interact with women's autonomy within the context of food security. The following sections summarize the critical constraints drawn from these conversations, with direct excerpts from participants' narratives.

### **1) Economic Constraints: "Money isn't everything but its link to our autonomy is undeniable"**

The participants unanimously acknowledged that their ability to earn and control a just income was central to their autonomy. However, they noted that a variety of constraints limited their economic prosperity, keeping them trapped in a viscous cycle of poverty that has repercussions for their ability to exert autonomy in their efforts to guarantee food security for

themselves and their families. Importantly, the participants acknowledged that living in poverty was a barrier to food security regardless of gender and that some of the identified constraints were not unique to women; however, they asserted that they were more vulnerable to these effects and experienced them more gravely because of their triple marginalization as rural, Indigenous women. The economic constraints mentioned most frequently were associated with the lack of remuneration for women's work, a lack of education, and gender roles and discrimination in the realm of agriculture.

#### Lack of Remuneration for Women's Work

Throughout the photo-elicitation group discussions, the women clearly expressed that despite contributing a significant amount of labour to their households—including shouldering care and domestic duties while also helping with agricultural work and other livelihood contributions (e.g., handicrafts, construction, community service, etc.)—their work was not adequately remunerated and their opportunities to earn and control financial capital were limited (Fig.5.1. A-C). Participants reported that, unlike men's work, women's work tends to be bound to the homestead and is rarely rewarded with financial compensation. Those women who are able to access the labour market typically have jobs that are precarious and undervalued, in terms of both wages and the conditions of work, and these conditions are even more prevalent among Indigenous women due to ethnic-based discrimination and inequalities. Overall, participants concluded that the lack of just remuneration hinders their economic autonomy, which they defined as the ability to earn and control a just income, or at a minimum having the economic value of their work recognized and appreciated, thereby granting them more influence over household finances. As a result of the absence of remuneration for women's work, men tend to control the household finances and allocate only enough money in the food budget for staple

foods (usually wheat flour, sugar, rice, and oil) while not earmarking any money for the foods necessary to maintain an adequate diet, one that would promote good household nutrition, health, and overall well-being. Most women reported being able to decide what to cook, however, with few food items available in the home, their options were limited, and thus they did not necessarily perceive deciding what to cook as an expression of decision-making autonomy but rather as an obligation. This perception relates to participants' assertion that decision-making reflects autonomy only when choice and the necessary recourses are in place (see Chapter IV).

### Lack of Education

Nearly all participants spoke about the difficulties resulting from the lack of educational opportunities for women. They described the lack of formal educational opportunities as a powerful barrier to their autonomy as well as their broader prospects in life. Further, their narratives emphasized the interconnectedness between poor educational attainment, access to high-quality paid work, and women's economic autonomy. Participants explained that women's low education levels perpetuated broader discriminatory norms in the labour market, making it even more difficult for them to access the formal labour market or justly paid work. For example, Yolanda (24, married)<sup>30</sup> stated,

I think the biggest barriers are the lack of opportunity and education for rural women, because without an education you cannot access any work, nowadays it all depends on your school education. If one has at least a little job they can defend their needs without relying on others. (Fig. 5.1.D)

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<sup>30</sup> Descriptive of the women: (age, marital status)

Despite these constraints, women were able to earn some income, mainly from the sale of small farm-raised animals (e.g., guinea pigs, chickens, rabbits), surplus produce from the *shagra*,<sup>31</sup> and handicrafts (textiles, art, jewelry, etc.). A few even started their own businesses (e.g., selling beauty products door-to-door), while others convinced their parents to fund their participation in technical training that offered temporary work opportunities. Such endeavors did enhance autonomy in some cases, for example, Sandra (30, married) explained, “It’s not like I depend fully on someone. No one is telling me if today I don’t give you [money] you die,” however, the resulting income was usually not enough to adequately supplement the basic food basket paid for by their husbands or, in the case of female-headed households, to meet the family’s dietary needs.

### Gender Roles and Discrimination in Agriculture

In discussions of economic constraints, much of the conversation focused on agriculture. The women stressed that their ability to earn an income from agricultural activities was often constrained by societal gender roles as well as discrimination across agriculture value chains. Commonly identified constraints included: exclusion from the benefits of market-oriented production, limited access to agriculture inputs, and lack of fair markets.

#### *Exclusion from the Benefits of Market-Oriented Production*

Many of the women noted that while gender discrimination exists, in one form or another, across almost all agriculture value chains, it is particularly problematic in the sale of high-value market-oriented products, the most common of which are potatoes, dairy products,

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<sup>31</sup> *Shagra* is an Indigenous term that refers to a plot of land used for agriculture and medicinal plant production as well as small species production for both home consumption and sale. A *shagra* provides space for individuals to be involved with and interpret nature and is considered a space of continuous learning for families and the *Pasto* community.

and large livestock. Even in *Los Pastos* community, the persistence of gender- and asset-based barriers means that these value chains are dominated by men, while women tend to be left out, at least with regard to the benefits. The participants explained that women contribute a significant amount of labour to the production of these goods all along the value chain, until the point of sale. The sale of these goods tends to be controlled exclusively by men, who retain and control the subsequent income, which often represents a large proportion of the household's total income.

Focusing on market-oriented crops may increase household income, which theoretical and empirical evidence (Kumar, Harris, & Rawat, 2015) has identified as a potential pathway to improving diet quality due to increased economic accessibility to more nutritious foods (Qaim, 2017). However, the women revealed that an increase in income often does not lead to better nutrition. Instead, they described a dietary shift away from traditional nutrient-dense foods and toward low-cost processed, prepackaged convenience foods with little nutritional value (i.e., high in fat, salt, and sugar and low in fiber). This transition was linked, at least in part, to men's influence on the allocation of household finances, specifically their choice to place a low priority on dietary quality.

The negative repercussions of men's influence on spending for household food security were further perpetuated by discriminatory norms that limit women's decision-making in this space. For example, participants reported that women are seldom consulted about decisions regarding whether to sell or consume, how much and when to sell, or at what price to sell these products. However, the women recognized the nutritional value of these products and reported that if they were making the decisions, they would retain larger amounts of their agricultural products for household consumption. Hence, promoting the production of these nutrient-dense

products will not necessarily translate into household consumption. Participants suggested that shifting social and cultural norms to strengthen women's decision-making power in this area and increasing awareness of the nutritional importance of these products might enhance food security.

Overall, the participants observed that men and women in the community do not work in distinctly separate production systems, in fact, their work is quite integrated. Nevertheless, the ability to benefit from and make decisions about the allocation of resources and benefits within these systems differs by gender.

#### *Limited Access to Agricultural Inputs*

Women received more recognition for their contributions and maintained more autonomy in subsistence-related activities and work with the *shagra*. However, the earning potential of this type of agricultural production is limited. The lower financial rewards of this work in combination with limited control over other household financial resources, means women have fewer resources to invest in profitable livelihood strategies that could improve their production capacity, and in turn, increase household food availability and boost their ability to earn a decent livelihood. For example, participants who had managed to build small greenhouses were able to diversify their diets as well as their livelihoods. The women found such investments particularly beneficial because this type of production is largely perceived as the women's domain (Fig. 5.1.E). The women made many additional points related to their limited access to productive agriculture inputs; they asserted having disproportionately restricted access to technology, extension services, seeds, land, financing, and market information, all of which shaped their production, and thus their income-generating opportunities.

#### *Lack of Access to Fair Markets*

The lack of access to fair markets was a common concern, which is not surprising given that all of the participants' households were at least somewhat dependent on agricultural activities. Although all small-farm holders experience these limitations regardless of gender and ethnicity, the participants explained that Indigenous women faced even greater repercussions due to discriminatory norms. Carmen (25, married) echoed a common refrain when she noted, “We can sell our products to our neighbours but in reality, what we need is a market, a space where we can sell our products at fair prices without discrimination” (Fig. 5.1.F). Many of the women highlighted the lack of a market as the most influential barrier to both their food security and women's autonomy, particularly economic autonomy. The women in the discussion groups stated that the responsibility for market creation lies largely with the local government.

**Figure 5.1. Photographs related to economic constraints**



5.1.A-5.1.C: forms of women's work that are not remunerated; 5.1.D: a lack of formal education opportunities makes it difficult to access the formal labour market and hinders women's overall ability to gain economic autonomy; 5.1.E: limited access to physical assets and agriculture inputs; 5.1.F: lack of access to fair markets—women can sell to their neighbours but lack access to a fair market.



## 2) Social Constraints: “Weighing us down”

Other key constraints frequently mentioned by participants fall into the social domain. Women’s local understandings of autonomy emphasized the importance of living in an environment that fosters women’s self-esteem, self-respect, self-confidence, and self-efficacy, and values women as individuals, thus enabling them to choose to live the lives they want. Social norms had an undeniable and multi-pronged influence on these prerequisites for women’s autonomy, and, in turn, on food security. Across their narratives, participants stressed the role played by social norms in fueling: the poor recognition and valuation of women’s work, gender stereotypical roles, and the vicious cycle of gender-based violence and food insecurity.

### Poor Recognition and Valuation of Women’s Work

Women’s work not only received little to no remuneration, but was also unrecognized and undervalued, a pattern that the women attributed to social norms, roles, and expectations. Despite making significant agricultural contributions to their households, when participants were probed about their employment status they almost universally identified as housewives, whereas they considered men who engaged in comparable agriculture-related activities farmers. Thus, women’s agriculture-related work went unrecognized both by themselves and by their families and society more broadly, which reinforced the normalization of their lower social status.

This lack of recognition hindered food security in the community. The women described working tirelessly in the *shagra* often with little help from other household members. While they were proud of their ability to provide their families with “natural,” “clean,” and “chemical-free” foods, this unpaid work was underappreciated. As Bertha (33, single) observed, “No one sits down and says ‘thank you’ for your blessed hands for growing and preparing this food.” The participating women reported that, in many cases, household members were not interested in

consuming the produce they had worked so hard to grow. For example, Myriam (36, married) said, “They don’t value the work of us, women. We work and work in the *shagra* and when we finally harvest our produce, they refuse to eat it. I see it all the time in my house.” Thus, the devaluation of women’s work producing food in the *shagra* has nutrition-related implications—many women reported that their family members no longer valued these traditional, healthy foods but instead preferred processed, highly palatable, less nutritious foods that are high in fat, salt, and sugar (Fig. 5.2.A). These behavioral and food system changes represent a dietary transition that has repercussions for nutrition and food security (Popkin, Corvalan, & Grummer-Strawn, 2019) and that has created a need for more holistic programs to address all forms of malnutrition (Hawkes, Ruel, Salm, Sinclair, & Branca, 2019).

The patterns described above also undermine women’s self-esteem and self-worth. Claudia (29, single) recalled,

It really makes me feel bad, you know? I go out to the *shagra* and I am killing myself, working so hard to provide my family with food, and then they won’t even eat it. I lose all motivation. I am just wasting my time, so I tell them forget it, I will go work somewhere where they value me and my efforts.

Many women were discouraged by this lack of recognition and the preference for processed foods and as a result were unmotivated and uninspired to produce food in the future. These negative emotions, coupled with the heavy workload associated with maintaining a *shagra*, led many women to focus solely on growing grass to feed their animals, which further reduced the availability of and access to nutritious plant-based foods.

## Gender Stereotypical Roles

The women asserted that current learning opportunities and exposure reinforced, rather than weakened, the gender stereotypes and roles prescribed by social norms in the community. They conveyed that nutrition-related trainings and programs must do a better job involving men and boys. Myriam (36, married) explained,

I attend these trainings, I know changes [related to diet and nutrition] need to be made.

Thanks to my participation, I even have a good understanding of what some of those changes are, but when I get home, my husband doesn't listen. He doesn't believe me; he thinks it is all nonsense. So, nothing changes.

Myriam's description demonstrates an increase in autonomy—she acquired new knowledge and improved her self-efficacy—but an inability to exercise this autonomy as a result of social norms and gendered power relations.

The participants recommended addressing these constraints by targeting gender-related education and social and behavior change initiatives at entire families rather than just women. Women believed that educating men would help them initiate change rather than serve as a barrier to it. Men might be convinced to take on a greater share of meal preparation and cooking duties or at least place a higher value on nutrition, thus motivating them to allocate more funds to the acquisition of a more diverse and nutritious food basket.

Gender segregation also characterized transgenerational exchanges. For example, the participants revealed that women and girls do not usually receive any instruction about how to sell potatoes, the community's main staple crop. Men then use this lack of knowledge as a justification to exclude women. Further, even when women do have an opportunity to sell these products, they often lack the relevant knowledge and negotiation skills, hindering their ability to

receive a fair price. Men and boys, on the other hand, are seldom privy to domestic- and care-related teachings—as Carmenza (42, single), asked, “How can we expect them [men and boys] to help [cook, clean, care] if they have no idea what to do?” Thus, social norms related to women’s work, socialization, and education are a critical basis for the economic constraints described above.

### Vicious Cycle of Gender-based Violence and Food Insecurity

Gender differentiation in the social milieu plays a core role in the establishment of distinct social positions and a superordinate-subordinate hierarchy through which men and women experience different vulnerabilities and privileges, usually to the detriment of women. This pattern was illustrated in poignant reflections on the vicious cycle of gender-based violence and its influence on food insecurity. Alcohol consumption by men was the most commonly reported trigger for violence, although certainly not the only one. Alcohol abuse is prevalent in the community and is widely recognized as a critical public health and social problem (Gobernación de Nariño, 2012) (Fig. 5.2.B). The women explained that when men return home under the influence of alcohol, violence (psychological, physical, and economic) often ensues.

Violence affected food security via multiple pathways. First, participants reported that living in a violent environment had negative repercussions for their mental health. Aura (42, married) described her reaction to her husband’s alcoholism and violent behavior: “I feel bad, I feel really bad, I feel lonely and abandoned.” Doris (67, married) echoed this sentiment when she stated, “It diminishes their [women’s] self-esteem and harms their spirit and state of mind.” Mirabel (38, married) explained that poor mental health, in turn, affects household food security because “food is cooked according to the mood of the person who prepares it and that is transmitted to the people who are going to consume it. With violence, the quality of the meal

decreases, and this affects the entire family.” In addition, when men spent money on alcohol rather than food, families had less money for a healthy diet.

The way in which women navigated life in a violent environment also adversely affected their food security and nutrition status. The women explained that they sometimes sacrificed their food ration to please their husbands and “keep peace in the home.” They most often reported sacrificing their portion of nutrient-dense foods, namely sources of protein (meat, eggs, dairy). Consequently, women tended to consume a very monotonous diet, composed predominantly of rice, potatoes, and bread. Hence, women consumed food that was worse in both quality and quantity than that consumed by the rest of the family and that was not conducive to maintaining proper nutrition. Further, many participants noted that although women often decide what to cook, they tend to prepare meals their husbands like in order to keep them satisfied and mitigate potential problems. In this case, the women did not prioritize the nutritional quality of the meal, often preparing fried, starch-heavy meals. These constrained decisions influenced by external factors illustrate a lack of personal autonomy among women in *Los Pastos* community.

Despite these constraints, the participants were quick to discuss the strength and perseverance of women. For example, Aura (42, married) declared,

Women are so nice, so courageous, and fifty thousand times stronger than men. We face fifty thousand difficulties, but we get up, stand strong, and move on. The man dies, the man shuts down and deteriorates. In the end, it will be the woman who goes ahead. (Fig. 5.2.C)

**Figure 5.2. Photographs related to social constraints**



5.2.A: transition to the consumption of ultra-processed food rather than “natural,” “clean,” and “chemical-free” local foods; 5.2.B: alcohol abuse is prevalent and is recognized as a critical problem; it is the most common trigger for gender-based violence; 5.2.C: a reflection of the beauty and strength women possess.

### 3) Cultural Constraints: “*blanqueamiento del pensamiento*”

Cultural constraints also presented significant obstacles for participants. Through their photography and group conversations, the women raised issues they associated with “*blanqueamiento del pensamiento*,”<sup>32</sup> which they described as an enduring legacy of colonization and post-colonial culture that has negative repercussions for autonomy in relation to food security. In defining autonomy, the participants underscored the importance that being able to “be, think, and act” as Indigenous People has for their individual (as a woman), cultural, and collective autonomy. These forms of autonomy, which are continuously threatened, were perceived as interconnected and symbiotic, with implications for food security. Namely, the women identified a lack of traditional knowledge transfer, a shift in the agricultural landscape, and environmental degradation as important constraints.

#### Lack of Traditional Knowledge Transfer

Participants expressed concern that the transgenerational exchange of culture and knowledge about Indigenous Peoples’ food systems has declined, with negative consequences

<sup>32</sup> Whitening of thinking. This concept is explained in greater detail in Chapter IV.

for food security. For example, Doris (67, married) explained, “When upheld, our culture permits us to have an adequate diet...this knowledge is passed from one generation to the next... preparing our traditional foods, it is an art that must be respected” (Fig. 5.3.A). However, many of the women complained that they lacked access to traditional nutrition and culinary knowledge, which diminished their autonomy by reducing their self-efficacy related to food preparation. As Yolanda (24, married) explained, “It is a problem... we get tired of preparing and eating the same things, but it is all we know.” Maria (42, married) made a similar comment: “Even the kids complain. They are sick of eating the same, the same, the same.” Participants acknowledged the negative effect that their lack of traditional knowledge had on their dietary diversity and understood that this monotony was not optimal in terms of nutrition (Fig. 5.3.B). While the study was being conducted, some participants were taking cooking classes from a traditional Indigenous chef as part of a development project; this opportunity generated envy and curiosity among the other participants. Several women expressed interest in scaling up this type of ancestral cooking initiative. They noted that agriculture- and nutrition-related knowledge transfer need not come from “outside” or be part of a large, well-resourced program—the type that tends to be designed by “development experts” who unquestioningly uphold the validity of Western knowledge.

The participating women also raised concerns about the strong influence of Western culture on the community’s youth, which was causing them to lose their cultural autonomy and identity, with repercussions for food security, especially food availability. For example, Ana (53, married) shared:

We are losing all of our autonomy in the community; my eldest daughter for example is going to study [in the city], and she will not be taught about the *shagra*, about cultural

autonomy, about the *cabildo*,<sup>33</sup> she won't know the territory nor how to grow food. She will be overtaken by Western thinking, totally whitewashed. (Fig. 5.3.C)

Group discussions also identified the trend of youth leaving the rural areas as a significant threat to the community's food security. Olivia (57, married) lamented, "The youth today do not want to get their hands dirty; they are all leaving for the city... Who will grow our food? ... Who will sustain us then?" Other participants stressed the importance of young people learning about their Indigenous culture, concluding, "They need to know their roots."

One of the manifestations of colonial influence that women believed impaired traditional knowledge transfer in relation to food security was the misuse or overuse of technology. Carmen (25, married) described technology as "just another tool to colonize our minds." Specifically, participants reported that today's youth were no longer interested in growing food, rearing animals, or engaging in traditional practices. Amelia (36, married) summarized the situation as follows:

Technology influences us in that regard because the young people of our time, not everyone, but the majority, from the smallest to the largest, is only aware of the cell phone, the computer, the tablet. They no longer dedicate time as we did to our home garden, our animals, and everything that is derived from the crop.

The women stated that protecting autonomy and food security would require the development of strategies to combat the uncritical acceptance of Western culture among community members, particularly the youth.

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<sup>33</sup> *Cabildo* is often translated as "Indigenous community council."



### A Shift in the Agricultural Landscape

During the discussion groups, the women said that the community, influenced by the *blanqueamiento del pensamiento*, has shifted toward a monoculture focused predominantly on potatoes and dairy production, including the extensive grass feed inputs needed to support the latter (Fig. 5.3.D). This shift in the agricultural landscape, which participants attributed to Western influence, exacerbated the loss of cultural autonomy. Further, the women believed that the embrace of monoculture was a critical barrier to food security because, as Monica (54, married) noted, the practice

...leaves less space for the cultivation of food and contributes to the loss of the diversity of native products... The diversity of our diets must start from within our household. We need to conserve our own seeds and cultivate different foods, different varieties. (Fig. 5.3.E)

Participants also explained that the substantial reduction in land available for and the interest in growing nutrient-dense and diverse products in the community, particularly fruits, vegetables, and protein-rich whole grains such as quinoa, has led to decreased local availability and consumption of such products.

In relation to women's autonomy specifically, the shift toward monoculture has diminished the importance attributed to the *shagra*. After reflecting on their situation, the women unanimously agreed that restoring the importance of the *shagra* and renewing the community's dedication to maintaining the practice was an imperative decolonization effort that would support autonomy and food security. Elizabeth (63, married) explained this view:

The *shagra* is so much more than a home garden. It incorporates the production of fruits, vegetables, medicinal plants, small animals. And, just as important as the cultivation of food, is the cultivation of knowledge and values... It is an intricate system that is central to our cultural autonomy where everything is connected... but many are now disconnected from this system; we need to re-establish its roots across the community and family members. (Fig. 5.3.F)

Further, the women noted that exogenous influences have affected not only the types of crops they grow but also the way they grow them. Carmenza (42, single) complained, “Unless you grow it, you can’t find food produced without chemicals. Everyone is using them, even when they say they aren’t. We’ve become so brainwashed we no longer believe organic can produce. We’ve lost confidence in our traditional practices.” Doris (67, married) also discussed the trend of *blanqueamiento del pensamiento* and expressed her belief in the benefits of returning to traditional agricultural practices:

Our past is actually our future...I keep saying this. Some people think I am crazy, but it is true. Just think about it, we are realizing we need to recover practices from the past, like making our own organic fertilizers, like producing native products instead of consuming junk food... we want, and need, what we used to have. We were happier and healthier then; we’ve lost many of these traditions, but it is time to go back.

### Environmental Degradation

Similarly, throughout the group discussions the women emphasized that there is a disjuncture between Indigenous and Western conservation priorities and approaches. While both ideologies recognize the value of a plot of land for growing food as a means of maintaining food security, within Indigenous belief systems the importance of land extends beyond an individual’s

basic means of production. For *Los Pastos* women, the land has cultural and spiritual value, and all of the land, including rivers, forests, and sacred sites, that encompasses their Indigenous territory is perceived as essential to their autonomy. The participants maintained that protecting the *Pacha Mama*<sup>34</sup> is a way of preserving their autonomy as well as their individual and collective identities. However, this protection was threatened by competing efforts to control natural resources through either conflict or exploitation by government, private enterprises, transnational corporations, and extra-legal groups. Unlike these entities, the women recognized the land as a living entity. For example, Maya (31, single) said, “We need to foster a relationship where we give as much as we take from the land, we need to re-establish a balance, a harmony with the elements around us. We can’t continue to just deplete and deplete.” Similarly, the women characterized pollution as problematic, as shown in Marie’s (42, married) comment:

There is widespread use and abuse of agrochemicals, plus the dumping of animal waste and other garbage into our water sources. Our *Pacha Mama* gives us everything... water and land are the primordial elements... and we go and cause all this contamination.

The discussions also focused on the consequences of consumer demand for environmental degradation, with the women noting that consumers are more concerned about low prices than the quality of the product. Olivia (57, married) summarized the issue:

People's lack of consciousness is a real problem. If they see two cabbages one big and the other small [because it was grown organically], because of their lack of awareness they will pick the biggest even though it is full of pesticides and has no taste.

These preferences incentivize farmers to use larger quantities of chemical inputs (i.e., fertilizers and pesticides) (Fig. 5.3.G). In response, the participants recommended the development and

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<sup>34</sup> Mother Earth

implementation of comprehensive strategies to change consumers' perceptions and behaviors.

Amelia (36, married) highlighted the need to “create publicity,” but noted that this entailed certain prerequisites:

We need help from authorities and organizations to create demand for these clean organic products produced using traditional practices. We need to make people understand the importance of these products for the health of our bodies, culture, and land. And we need to convince them to pay a fair price. Only then will farmers go back to producing for quality rather than abundance. Like everyone, they [the farmers] are also driven by money; they have to be.

Participants reported that as a consequence of these poor environmental practices, the frequency and severity of climate-related shocks had increased in recent years and weather patterns were shifting and becoming less predictable, affecting their agricultural productivity and cultural practices. For example, Myriam (36, married) noted that with regards to potato crops, “The increased number and spontaneous timing of frosts cause great problems for our food security because we lose everything. This affects our consumption in the home and our income” (Fig. 5.3.H).

Although climate change and environmental degradation adversely affect the autonomy of Indigenous Peoples as a whole, participants maintained that they disproportionately affect the livelihood and well-being of women. Maya (31, single) explained, “We [women] have always been seen as the protectors of our environment, of the *Pachamama*, so we are more sensitive to these changes.” Indeed, the women played a unique role in managing and preserving natural resources. Participants identified several examples of women spearheading such initiatives, including recycling and reforestation activities, as well as efforts to restore and preserve native

seeds and medicinal plants. They asked to be recognized as legitimate actors in this regard and said they needed more support and freedom to expand these efforts but believed they could only gain the needed recognition, support, and freedom if the community adequately addressed gender inequality.

Women defined autonomy as rooted in their personal and cultural identities, which are continuously diminished by colonial influence. They recognized that they played an important role in realizing the movement toward the restoration and preservation of their culture because, as Amelia (36, married) explained:

The indigenous woman is a fighter, protector, conservationist, and educator in the territory. We protect our territory natural environment, cultural identity, health, and values system. We are the generators of life. If we are not well, then the community cannot be well. (Fig. 5.3.I)

However, the women noted that the current culture, which gives men the power to control women's destinies and keeps women oppressed, must shift, and such a shift "will require the restoration of reciprocity between men and women. Only then can we Indigenous women fully realize our potential as protectors" (Maya, 31, single). This societal shift will require giving space to women's rights issues within Indigenous movements for self-determination and autonomy without negating the importance of collective rights, an approach that has been overlooked to date.

**Figure 5.3. Photographs related to cultural constraints**

5.3.A		5.3.B		5.3.C	
5.3.D		5.3.E		5.3.F	
5.3.G		5.3.H		5.3.I	

5.3.A: children not learning traditional knowledge and practices; 5.3.B: lack of traditional education opportunities; 5.3.C: Western culture overtaking cultural autonomy; 5.3.D: shift toward monoculture, including dairy production; 5.3.E: need to conserve native seeds; 5.3.F: maintaining a *shagra* with the entire family as a decolonization effort; 5.3.G: overuse of agro-chemicals as a result of Western influence; 5.3.H: contamination and degradation has led to climate change causing an increase in frost that is affecting potato production; 5.3.I: women need space and support to transmit knowledge across generations.

#### **4) Political Constraints: “Unjust, inadequate, and corrupt”**

The final domain of constraints that the participants identified as hindering women’s autonomy in relation to food security were rooted in the political sphere. The representation of rural Indigenous women and their participation in the political sphere were deemed essential supporting conditions for autonomy. Participants’ narratives clearly illustrated that the influence of discriminatory political structures was transversal, helping to legitimize and institutionalize the constraints identified across the other three domains. The women discussed a long list of

examples including, among others, the lack of protection for informal labour workers, the absence of just markets, a lack of access to high-quality educational opportunities, and judiciary inaction related to gender-based violence and illegal natural resource extraction (Fig. 5.4.A).

The women reported that their underrepresentation in the political sphere perpetuated the lack of attention paid to Indigenous women's intersecting issues and inadequate political accountability regarding these issues. Yolanda's (25, married) comments focused on women's lack of political representation:

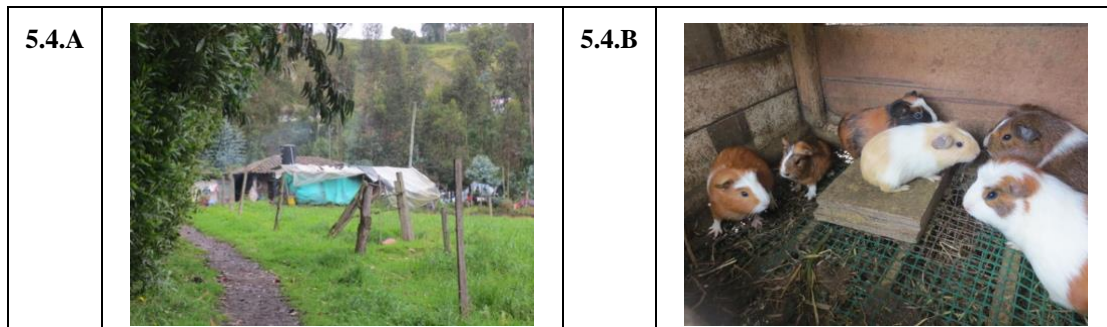
Here it would be so rare that they give a political position to a woman, at least the important positions, the ones with actual power. They leave women as a secretary, but woman can't get to the level of governor.

Participants repeatedly identified macho culture as the cause of their political exclusion, which keeps them from exercising decision-making autonomy in the public sphere. Consequently, existing programs and policies do not adequately consider women's needs, including those related to food, nutrition, agriculture, and rural development. This failure to fully consider women's needs in turn perpetuates gender inequality and impedes Indigenous women's social, economic, and cultural progress. For example, Carmen (25, married) said, "We need fair policies, ones that include both men and women. It cannot just be creating a cattle and dairy market that only men go to. Where is the gender equality in that? We are always forgotten."

Furthermore, participants noted that access to just governance was lacking and political corruption was widespread in the community. The women explained that political corruption affects food security because those in power select the beneficiaries of development programs on the basis of personal interest and networks rather than vulnerability and need and thus Indigenous women are largely overlooked. For example, participants described a government-led

program designed to provide hutches to increase *cuy*<sup>35</sup> production among vulnerable families (Fig. 5.4.B) that selected beneficiaries based on “who you know or whom you voted for” rather than who needs the help most.

**Figure 5.4. Photographs related to political constraints**



5.4.A: political inadequacies perpetuate the lack of access to basic physical assets, such as adequate infrastructure, housing, land, water and sanitation; 5.4.B: corrupt participant selection in government programs such as the provision of *cuy* hutches leaves most Indigenous people vulnerable.

## Discussion

Participants’ narratives clearly show that Indigenous women in *Los Pastos* community play a central role in achieving food security for themselves, their families, their communities, and the larger society. In addition, the women identified links between women’s autonomy and food security. However, women’s autonomy, and thus food security, were limited by constraints spanning the economic, social, cultural, and political domains. Many of these constraints were interconnected and grounded in structural issues and discrimination rather than a lack of individual agency or motivation. Thus, although women can address some constraints at the individual or household level, realizing and sustaining meaningful change will require structural change in the broader society. The participating women are not passive victims of their often-precarious situations, but rather are critical actors who have a nuanced understanding of their

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<sup>35</sup> guinea pig



situation, including the inequalities they face, and can identify pathways to improvement. At the same time, neither women's experiences nor their ability to exert agency in their current context was homogenous. When devising strategies to improve food security, policymakers and scholars should consider the constraints and the proposed avenues for progress highlighted in participants' narratives.

Women in this study emphasized that being able to exercise economic autonomy and make financial decisions was important for ensuring food security. Yet compared to their male and non-Indigenous counterparts, these women had less access to resources such as educational opportunities, paid employment, agricultural inputs, extension services, and infrastructure, as well as having limited market access, all of which hindered their ability to generate and control an income. Consequently, in alignment with robust evidence showing that households are not unitary decision-making units (Alderman, Haddad, & Hoddinott, 1997), household income was not necessarily pooled and enjoyed by household members collectively but rather controlled by individuals, usually men, which directly affected the quality of food purchased and consumed in the household. The women suggested that compared to men, they tended to allocate more resources to the well-being of the household, a pattern that reflects previous findings (Clement et al., 2019; H. J. L. Malapit, Kadiyala, Quisumbing, Cunningham, & Tyagi, 2015).

Devising community-level strategies to foster women's autonomy in these areas has the potential to contribute to the procurement of a more diverse and nutritious food basket. However, innovative approaches are needed to create decent, non-exploitive employment opportunities that might allow women to move themselves out of poverty—the continued promotion of survival-oriented income generation activities, which keep women trapped in a cycle of subsistence poverty, is insufficient and impedes women's autonomy. In the agriculture sector specifically,

scholars, policymakers, and local residents must work to improve understandings of the interweaving of the community's gender relations and value chains, because such an understanding will help the community design more effective agricultural development interventions and policies that foster synergistic relationships between high-value production and gender equity (Quisumbing et al., 2015; Westholm & Ostwald, 2019).

Many of the underlying factors hindering women's economic autonomy can be traced back to deeply rooted social norms; thus, it is necessary to adopt a social environment perspective when addressing these issues. Further, this study shows that women interact with people and institutions whose attitudes and norms govern women's autonomy in profound ways that extend beyond economic influence. For example, the lack of recognition and respect awarded to women for their substantial labour, care, and domestic and agricultural contributions hindered women's personal autonomy, which is linked to self-esteem and self-efficacy. Participants reported that the limitations on women's autonomy affect the utilization dimension of food security because the mood and feelings of a woman preparing food are transferred to the meal served, affecting the overall quality. Similarly, the profound lack of appreciation for women's agricultural efforts has a negative impact on food availability because it hinders women's motivation to produce food for the household. The mental health implications of gender inequality and the subsequent effects on human-development outcomes such as food security and nutrition deserve more attention in future research.

The norms governing relationships also contribute to the normalization of gender-based violence, which as the results demonstrate, is a significant barrier to women's autonomy in relation to food security and nutrition. This finding aligns with substantial empirical evidence supporting the relationship between violence against women and adverse nutritional outcomes

for their children (Gobernación de Nariño, 2012; Yount, DiGirolamo, & Ramakrishnan, 2011). Given that there is less research on the implications of violence for women's nutritional status (Lentz, 2018), researchers should further examine the complex relationships between violence and health and nutrition outcomes, particularly among Indigenous populations. To date, population-based surveys inform most of the literature and recommendations, however, these studies do not fully capture these relationships (Temmerman, 2015).

Nonetheless, this study illustrates the direct implications of violence for food expenditures and women's mental health, which is reflected in the quality of food served in the household. Moreover, the psychological stress linked to violence can contribute to physiological changes in women that are associated with malnutrition outcomes (Ackerson & Subramanian, 2008) and contribute to the intergenerational effects of violence (Chioda, 2017). Further, the way women navigate living in a violent environment (i.e., giving up their food rations to please their husbands) can have a negative impact on their diet quality. Too often, researchers categorize women living with violence in one of two ways: as a brave individual who left, or as a passive survivor of violence (Lentz, 2018). However, this binary conceptualization grossly oversimplifies a complex and precarious situation, especially because many women have few viable options to exit the relationship (Bellows, Lemke, Jenderedjian, & Scherbaum, 2015) as noted by participants previously (see Chapter IV). Moreover, this oversimplification diverts attention from the decisions that women make and the autonomy they assert within a violent environment with regard to food security and nutrition. Similarly, the presence or threat of violence can limit women's ability to act on information or recommendations from food security and nutrition interventions. As such, gaining a more nuanced understanding of how women navigate violence may help practitioners and policymakers more effectively address food

insecurity and nutritional issues via programming and policy interventions. Collaborative efforts that link all stakeholders, including communities, governments, researchers, program planners, implementers, and policymakers, are needed to develop evidence-based strategies for eradicating violence.

This study highlighted one topic that is particularly overlooked in research on women's autonomy in relation to food security and nutrition: the ways that cultural constraints legitimize structural inequalities and vice versa. An important manifestation of this mutual influence was the continued history of colonization and post-colonial culture, or what the women referred to as the *blanqueamiento del pensamiento*, and its sustained effects, which disconnect Indigenous Peoples from their traditional food systems and practices of intergenerational knowledge transmission. This disconnection contributes to inequalities, malnutrition, poor health outcomes, and poverty, which Indigenous populations experience at a disproportionate rate (Kuhnlein et al., 2013; Lemke & Delormier, 2017; Social Protection Ministry et al., 2017). The threat to traditional food systems and the importance of preserving and recovering traditional Indigenous knowledge, practices, and resources were mentioned repeatedly during the group discussions. Indigenous women are sources of knowledge about many traditional practices and techniques, leaving them uniquely positioned to overcome the profound challenges of current-day food systems, which will likely become even more pronounced as a result of climate change, the loss of biodiversity, centralized power structures across food systems, and the transition to ultra-processed foods (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2019). Indigenous knowledge remains a largely underutilized and underrecognized resource; the lack of legitimacy granted to Indigenous women's human capital has direct implications for food security (Kuhnlein et al., 2013; Kuhnlein, Erasmus, Spigelski, & Burlingame, 2013).

Participants explained how external Western ideologies threaten their autonomy to define and control their own food system. As alluded to by participants, one example of this is the fact that Indigenous peoples reject the individualistic notions of the body and instead put forward a collective and situated understanding of it, where by the physical body is inextricably linked to the territory or the land, with mutually reinforcing influence. What happens to one's body and what happens to the land or the territory they inhabit are interconnected. This relationality is shaped by the social, temporal and geographical context (Leinius, 2020; Ulloa, & Prieto-Rozo, 2014). For participants, there exists a clear relationship between the loss or destruction of their lands, the marginalization and discrimination they face as Indigenous women, and the underdevelopment of their communities. Hence, autonomy and food security gravitate between this inseparable body- territory dyad. Such results illustrate the need to find alternatives to current models of agriculture and trade in the community—alternatives that preserve Indigenous culture, achieve ecological sustainability, and balance the distribution of social power while simultaneously ensuring the economic viability for, and well-being of, those responsible for producing food. Prior Indigenous-focused research aligns with the participants' recognition of the fight to regain cultural autonomy over food systems as an important anti-colonial struggle in seemingly postcolonial contexts (Grey & Patel, 2015).

As such, scholars and policy makers should give due attention to narratives of sustained assaults on cultural integrity and autonomy, especially among women. Future program and policy efforts must focus on the revival of traditional agriculture practices, which prioritize the protection of the *Pachamama*, to combat the irresponsible use of Western agriculture methods (e.g., inappropriate fertilizer use, monoculture). However, reviving these practices in a way that

allows women to use their knowledge to make decisions about food security will require a shift in gendered power relations both within and outside the Indigenous community.

Addressing any of the constraints identified in this project will require strong governance. Although the Indigenous Peoples of Colombia gained the right to self-governance as part of the enactment of the 1991 constitution, which formally recognized the Indigenous governance system, both the Indigenous and “White” political systems continue to reinforce and strengthen the patriarchy. In both systems, women, especially rural Indigenous women, face structural and social barriers in terms of participation, representation, and influence. Consequently, they remain largely invisible and food security and nutrition policies and programs neglect their needs. Women’s difficulty accessing spaces of political participation, as reported herein, is consistent across Colombia and the region more broadly (Kuokkanen, 2006; Salamanca-Ávila, 2017; Santamaria et al., 2019). Thus, ensuring food security for all requires implementing initiatives to enhance women’s political participation and representation, including at the highest level of influence, as well as more meaningful and timely efforts to reduce the considerable gaps between policy and practice. Achieving gender equality is an inherently political process and enabling women’s safe participation in this space is essential for progressive reform (Salamanca-Ávila, 2017).

Finally, several caveats must be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Photography-based research itself presents a few. For example, the data are bound to the photos taken by participants, and the women had to select a subsample rather than present all the photos they had taken. Some may have chosen to present the photos they felt more at ease discussing. However, at the same time, unlike many other research approaches, this provides participants decision-making power and ownership over what results they deem important. Further, the

participants were purposefully selected, limited to a specific group of Indigenous women in two municipalities. Nevertheless, the data provides a unique richness of the women's lived experiences, offering a different perspective and cultural context, and thick description is provided to support transferability. Finally, the lead researcher, an academic and cultural "outsider" who does not master the local language. However, hired local translators and research assistants with extensive experience working in the community to ameliorated potential biases and limitations.

## **Conclusion**

The ethnographic approach employed in this study provided a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the relationship between Indigenous women's autonomy and food security in Andean communities in Nariño, Colombia. The results of the study show that women's ability to exercise autonomy is an important aspect of guaranteeing food security. It is clear that investments in food security will not simply "trickle down" to women. Enhancing Indigenous women's autonomy is a complex task that requires adequately addressing the deeply rooted economic, social, cultural, and political constraints facing women, issues that have been under-acknowledged and inadequately addressed for too long. Achieving food security in this context requires addressing the history of colonization, which continues to hinder autonomy within the community, as well as implementing efforts to abolish both colonial and ancestral patriarchy, which continue to impede equality and food security. Hence, achieving food security requires transforming Indigenous women's positions in Colombian society, both inside and outside their communities. Critical to such achievements will be the eradication of violence that has overshadowed much of Colombia's history. Although *Los Pastos* women are marginalized, their strength, knowledge, resourcefulness, and resilience are critical resources and should

become integral elements of any intervention targeting food security or development more broadly. Nuanced understandings based on this study can improve policy and programming responses and contribute to the contextualisation and interpretation of quantitative efforts in this context.

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## **CHAPTER VI**

### **General Discussion and Conclusion**

In this final chapter, we bring together the results from the preceding chapters to further our understanding of the multiple and complex associations between women's autonomy and food security. We begin with a summary of the key novel findings across chapters 3 through 5 and conclude by outlining future recommended research directions, as suggested by this study.

#### **Summary of Key Findings**

##### **Chapter III**

In chapter 3, we provide an overview of the food insecurity situation in Colombia. Using data from the Gallup World Poll, which includes the most recent national representative food security data available for Colombia, the dissertation estimated the prevalence of food insecurity across two years (2016 and 2019); examined which subpopulation groups (urban women, rural women, urban men, and rural men) were most vulnerable to food insecurity during this period; and assessed the association between several individual-level factors and food insecurity in these two years.

Although all human beings have the right to food and a life free from hunger (United Nations General Assembly, 1948), the current findings show that for many Colombians this right is not upheld. In fact, the results, derived from timely data, indicate that despite the signing and enactment of a well-intentioned Peace Agreement, which explicitly seeks to uphold the right to food, regardless of prolonged economic growth, and inspite of efforts by governments and international organizations to curtail food insecurity at the national and local levels, the trend is moving in the wrong direction. The estimated prevalence of food insecurity in Colombia increased by roughly 7% between 2016 (33%) and 2019 (40%), suggesting that more needs to be



done to guarantee improved development outcomes such as food security. This finding should serve as a call to organizations in multiple sectors to prioritize and execute effective and holistic efforts to combat the rising prevalence of food insecurity in Colombia. Food insecure individuals are more vulnerable to health problems, including malnutrition (Black et al., 2013; FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP, & WHO, 2020; Hawkes, Ruel, Salm, Sinclair, & Branca, 2020; Korkalo et al., 2016; Melgar-Quinonez et al., 2006; Ruel, Harris, & Cunningham, 2013; Torheim & Arimond, 2013), and thus failing to progress toward comprehensive food security will have far-reaching repercussions for the Colombian population and will impede progress toward peace. The urgency of such efforts will only continue to become more pronounced as the country's food security profile was trending in the wrong direction prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is expected to push an unprecedented number of people into poverty and exacerbate food insecurity (FAO, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Consistent with prior research (Ivers & Cullen, 2011; Sinclair, Ahmadigheidari, Dallmann, Miller, & Melgar-Quinonez, 2019; Women UN, 2014), not all subpopulation groups had the same likelihood of experiencing food insecurity. Compared to other groups, rural women were particularly vulnerable—across years, they consistently had the highest prevalence of food insecurity, reaching a peak of 50% in 2019. Troublingly, among rural women severe food insecurity was the most prevalent categorization. In 2019, nearly one-third of all rural women were severely food insecure, reflecting an increase in the number of individuals experiencing hunger, which places them at further risk of poor nutrition and health outcomes (Arimond et al., 2010; FAO et al., 2020; Ford, 2013; Korkalo et al., 2016; Micha et al., 2020; Ruel et al., 2013; H. Seligman, Bindman, Vittinghoff, Kanaya, & Kushel, 2007; Seligman, Laraia, & Kushel, 2010). Those responsible for devising strategies to overcome food insecurity must consider the

experiences of different segments of the population and ensure their respective needs are adequately addressed. For instance, given rural women's increased vulnerability, realizing much-needed progress will require emphasizing and investing in context-specific intersectional gender-transformative approaches.

Moreover, combating food insecurity requires having a sound understanding of the various determinants at play. Because food security is a multifaceted phenomenon, this can be a cumbersome task. Not surprisingly, the data revealed that a wide range of factors influence an individual's vulnerability to food insecurity. In alignment with much of the literature (FAO et al., 2020; Gundersen, Kreider, & Pepper, 2011; Martin, 2010; Nord, Coleman-Jensen, Andrews, & Carlson, 2010), the findings showed that income, unemployment, and lack of social support were the factors consistently associated with food insecurity across study years. In addition, the analysis revealed heterogeneity in the factors contributing to food insecurity over time. These findings reinforce that no single solution will solve the problem of food insecurity and although many of the identified contributing factors were expected, it draws attention to the fact that more meaningful efforts to address inequalities within these well establish determinants of food insecurity are needed.

Although data limitations in the Gallup World Poll prevented us from examining the vulnerability of different ethnic groups or comprehensively assessing the relationship between different aspects of autonomy and food security, the quantitative component of the dissertation shed light on rural women's heightened vulnerability and provided a valuable overview of the food security situation in Colombia, which helped to inform the qualitative component of this research. Benefiting from the opportunity of being able to conduct this research within the context of an existing nutrition-sensitive agriculture project, chapters four and five of this

dissertation were able to examine the local meanings of autonomy and their linkages to food insecurity from the perspective of Indigenous women from *Los Pastos* ethnic group in Nariño, Colombia.

## **Chapter IV**

In Chapter 4, we qualitatively assessed how *Los Pastos* women define women's autonomy and, within their lived experiences, identified facilitators of and barriers to autonomy. Various novel findings emerged, particularly related to the diverging views of autonomy and the interconnections among different aspects of autonomy.

### *Diverging views of autonomy*

The study's findings support the argument that women's ability to exercise autonomy is an important aspect of guaranteeing food security. At the same time, the results affirmed the need for more exploratory research on local understandings of autonomy, which would constitute an important step toward accurately understanding the mechanisms linking autonomy and food security in different contexts. This research provides empirical evidence of the experience and understanding of autonomy among the participating Indigenous women—women who have largely been left out of the conversation to date and whose perspectives, valuation, and experiences of autonomy often do not resonate with either those of other groups of women or the definitions of autonomy commonly used in the literature and development programming.

One of the more notable divergences was that participants viewed autonomy as being rooted in their cultural identities as Indigenous women, yet mainstream discourses on women's autonomy neither acknowledge the importance of cultural and collective autonomy nor adequately consider the implications of colonialization and post-colonial culture for women's ability to exert autonomy. Participating women explained the need to not only fight against

patriarchy but also colonialism for true progress to be made. Further, the women frequently referenced discrimination, but current discourses often focus on the economic and decision-making aspects of autonomy while overlooking how discrimination on the basis of gender and ethnicity affect autonomy beyond this narrow focus (e.g., how discrimination influences women's self-perceptions, which was an identified condition for autonomy). Further, intersectional approaches to women's autonomy are too rarely employed, and thus the literature does not sufficiently address the multiple overlapping forms of discrimination faced by Indigenous women. Moving forward, Indigenous women must be given the space to contribute to global discourses on autonomy; researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and organizations must acknowledge, respect, and utilize Indigenous women's viewpoints and unique understanding, for instance the concept of *dualidad*. Further, it is critical to adjust measurement tools so that they better reflect cultural barriers to autonomy because, ultimately, what is measured (and what is not) influences the discourse and gives weight to certain aspects of autonomy while rendering others invisible.

Similarly, most definitions of women's autonomy emphasize an individualistic approach that values independence (Stoljar, 2013). However, the current results raise questions about the adequacy and appropriateness of an individualistic approach for understanding autonomy in this context and suggest that a relational approach that adequately captures and considers the social reality is needed. The need for a relational approach is illustrated by the fact that strong supportive relationships and community connectedness not only affected the psychological well-being of participants, an identified condition for autonomy, but also improved women's ability to increase their autonomy across Nancy Fraser's three dimensions of social injustices: cultural, socioeconomic, and political. These relational benefits played out in multiple ways, for example,

by fostering interhousehold harmony and preventing gender-based violence, by recognizing and valuing women's work, and by providing the space and encouragement for women to actively engage socially and politically in the community. Taking a relational approach is important because individuals continuously interact with their social environment, which has a profound influence on their ability (or inability) to exert autonomy; individuals do not function in isolation but rather respond to one another and to their environments. In fact, many of the constraints identified in this research were interconnected and grounded in structural issues and discrimination rather than a lack of individual agency or motivation. Further, within the study context, as Indigenous Peoples, it was evident that the relationship the participants have with the physical environment is inseparable from their autonomy and overall well-being. Therefore, in the absence of social structural changes and access to, security for, and preservation of lands, territories, natural resources, the progress toward improved women's autonomy and gender equality more broadly will continue to lag. Simultaneously, combating patriarchy and colonization can help strengthen or restore relational identities between people, land, water, and the natural environment more broadly. The findings call for a reconceptualization of autonomy in relational terms for researchers working within the specific context of this study and encourage others to consider this approach in different contexts as well.

These conclusions, however, do not imply that there was no overlap between common discourses of autonomy and those expressed by the participating Indigenous women. To the contrary, participants highlighted many conditions for autonomy that were similar to those that are often discussed within the development community, included in commonly used measurement tools, and experienced by other women regardless of race, ethnicity and class (albeit in many instances to different extents). For instance, they emphasized the importance of

decision-making, capacity-strengthening opportunities, mobility, freedom from violence, representation, and economic and resource control for women's autonomy.

However, even when the broad thematic areas discussed aligned with mainstream discourses, external definitions, and common predetermined quantitative indicators (the preferred methodological approach employed in this space to date), discrepancies emerged between the emic and etic interpretations of autonomy. One illustration of this divergence was the variation in perceptions of decision-making and its role in shaping autonomy, in terms of the importance of certain decisions, the definition and valuation of joint decision-making, and the availability of choice. Not only was there variation across participants' narratives, but many of the emic understandings they described do not align with the assumptions underlying most external definitions of autonomy. For instance, while external interpretations tend emphasize independent decision-making, or independence in general, the women in the study did not unanimously place a high value on independent decision-making.

These discrepancies between emic and etic conceptualizations of women's autonomy highlight the need for research that explores local understandings of autonomy in different contexts and captures nuances in gender relations, thereby giving much-overdue recognition to the importance of qualitative research for providing rich contextual data on this topic (Kuokkanen, 2006; Laverack & Pratley, 2018; Mulema, 2018; Richardson, 2018). If, however, quantitative tools that are grounded in standardized definitions continue to take precedence, researchers who employ these tools to examine autonomy should interpret their results with great caution and, at a minimum, should complement their quantitative analyses with meaningful efforts to understand local perceptions and experiences of autonomy in order to avoid misrepresenting the study population.

### *Interconnections among different aspects of autonomy*

Another important pattern revealed in the results reflects a complex interconnectedness among the multiple aspects of autonomy. For instance, the results indicate that the preservation of participants' cultural autonomy promotes more equitable relationships between men and women. Thus, improving intrahousehold relations and the recognition of women's work, which in turn enhances self-perception and more equitable decision-making power. In another example, the research team witnessed how social support (or the lack thereof) can either facilitate (or impede) mobility, leisure time, access to learning opportunities, and community and economic participation, all of which have ripple effects on women's control over resources and decision-making power in both the household and the community. These types of intricacies are often overlooked in the literature and are rarely captured by the common methodological approaches in this field. While examining this interconnectedness adds a layer of complexity, the insight it provides on how to support women's autonomy has significant implications for programmatic and policy interventions and draws attention to the need for multi-pronged solutions that simultaneously address a range of injustices and barriers.

### **Chapter V**

In Chapter 5, we went on to examine the relationship between these women's local understanding and experience of autonomy in relation to food security. The implications of interconnections, as highlighted above, becomes even more complex in examinations of the relationship between autonomy and food security. Although previous studies have found associations between greater women's autonomy and improved development outcomes related to food security and nutrition, to date the evidence remains mixed (Carlson, Kordas, & Murray-Kolb, 2015; Cunningham, Ruel, Ferguson, & Uauy, 2015; Duflo, 2012; Hoddinott & Haddad,

1995; H. Malapit et al., 2019; O'Brien et al., 2016; Malapit, Kadiyala, Quisumbing, Cunningham, & Tyagi, 2015; Narayanan, Lentz, Fontana, De, & Kulkarni, 2019; Sraboni, Malapit, Quisumbing, & Ahmed, 2014; Quisumbing & Maluccio, 2003; Smith, Ramakrishnan, Ndiaye, Haddad, & Martorell, 2003; Sraboni & Quisumbing, 2018), especially in Latin America (Carlson et al., 2015; Heaton & Forste, 2008). Further, in the case of many marginalized populations, such as Indigenous peoples, almost nothing is known about this association because of the dearth of research (Cabnal, 2010; Forstner, 2013; Huerta, 2017; O'Connor, 2018; y Mayor, 2000).

This research identifies many overlooked trajectories between autonomy and food security. Firstly, the findings across all components of this dissertation stressed the importance of finding means to facilitate women's ability to break the deeply rooted poverty cycle, especially for participating Indigenous women, who are more vulnerable to poverty and experience it more intensely as a result of their triple marginalization as rural, Indigenous women. On the surface, this is not a particularly unique finding given that poverty is commonly considered the most influential contributor to food insecurity (FAO et al., 2020; Martin, 2010; Nord et al., 2010). Notably, however, the findings explicitly underscore the need for development programming to move beyond the promotion of survival-oriented income-generation activities. These activities trap women in a cycle of subsistence poverty, which is an unsatisfactory outcome that does not engender either women's autonomy or food security. The global community has failed to make the necessary progress in this area. Moving forward, in addition to implementing advocacy efforts to sustain structural changes, development programming must employ innovative approaches that create decent, non-exploitive employment and income-generating opportunities that allow women to truly move out of poverty long-term.



Further, within the cultural domain the results identified several pathways between women's autonomy and food security and nutrition that have received virtually no attention in the literature, namely those rooted in the enduring legacy of colonization and post-colonial culture. The inseparable linkages between Indigenous Peoples' and their territories, and the recognition of the interconnection between their cultural and personal autonomy, are critical for upholding environmental and cultural integrity, and thus the integrity of their food systems. The data showed that the erosion of cultural autonomy has resulted in a lack of traditional knowledge, a shift in the agricultural landscape, and environmental degradation, all of which undermine the focal Indigenous communities, especially the women's ability to exercise autonomy in ways that allow them to protect and preserve their traditional food systems. Thus, women's reduced ability to exercise autonomy has diminished food security. In response to this series of events, participants maintained that future program and policy efforts must focus on reviving traditional agricultural practices and redressing colonial and ancestral patriarchal inequalities, thus allowing women to execute their roles as guardians of their traditional knowledge and practices. Moreover, maintaining the integrity of the environment must be prioritized; ensuring the well-being of Indigenous Peoples' territories or lands, including the waters, resources and traditional sites within, is central to their bodily well-being. The preservation of this body-territory dyad and restoring relational identities is inextricably tied to both autonomy and food security.

Another important insight within the social domain that has not received due attention in the literature concerned the psychological ramifications of violence and discrimination against women and their impact on food security. There is a relatively strong body of evidence showing that violence against women is related to adverse nutritional outcomes for their children

(Gobernación de Nariño, 2012; Yount, DiGirolamo, & Ramakrishnan, 2011). However, there is much less evidence about the impact of violence against women on food security and women's nutritional status (Lentz, 2018). The current findings illustrate that gender-based violence affects women's autonomy in relation to food security, particularly in terms of diet quality and utilization.

Finally, the participating women faced discrimination, exclusion, and limited autonomy in the political domain, and as a result their needs were not adequately addressed. Both women's autonomy and food security are inherently political issues; the data clearly showed that enhancements in women's political autonomy will be foundational to improvements across the other domains of constraints (cultural, social) on women's autonomy both in general and in relation to food security. The research identified multiple factors that influence the linkages between women's autonomy and food security and highlighted the complexity of these relationships; understanding these factors will allow practitioners to design better programs and policies.

### **Further reflections**

Further reflections on this overall research process also drew attention to the importance of understanding the lived experience of the study population and the role Participatory Action Research.

#### ***Need for understanding lived experiences***

First, the findings emphasize that the participating women are not passive victims of their often-precarious situations, but rather critical actors who have a nuanced understanding of their situation, including the inequalities they face, and can identify pathways to improvement. As prior research has clearly shown, researchers and policymakers need a better understanding of

the lived experiences of populations facing intersecting economic, cultural, social, political, and gender-based inequalities (Napier et al., 2014; World Health Organization, 2013). Having such information is critical to the goal of improving women's autonomy and food security. Yet researchers, policymakers, and program designers rarely adequately consider local experiences, resources, strengths, and knowledge, an oversight that has likely contributed to the lack of progress to date.

### *Participatory Action Research*

Second, this project was the first time the Participatory Action Research methodology photovoice was used in the participating communities. Even before the research team asked for process feedback on the method, participants often described their participation in the project as a facilitator of autonomy. For instance, women noted that participating improved their confidence, allowed them to overcome their fears of public speaking, provided them with space to be heard by community members and decision-makers, and taught them photography skills; ultimately, participation was seen as a much-needed and often denied form of leisure time during which they could leave their worries behind and build relationships with one another. These narratives reflect the achievement of many of the goals of Participatory Action Research, including building trust, strengthening local and individual capacities, drawing on local knowledge and experience, facilitating community engagement, and empowering participants (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008; Tobias, Richmond, & Luginaah, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). There is an important role for Participatory Action Research in projects that involve Indigenous communities in Colombia. The use of participatory approaches such as photovoice will help establish more equitable partnerships with local communities. Such partnerships are particularly important within Indigenous communities, which have historically been marginalized. In

addition, participatory approaches facilitate the integration of local perspectives into research, academia, and policy and program development, ultimately fostering inclusion and sustainability.

## **Future Directions and Conclusions**

This dissertation starts with a recent overview of the food security situation in Colombia. Next, the analytic lens shifts to more granular level, and based on the perceptions and knowledge of Indigenous women from *Los Pastos* ethnic group in Nariño, Colombia, examines local meanings of autonomy and how these understandings, perspectives, and experiences are linked to food security. Several novel findings emerged from this research, providing important contributions to the literature, as outlined above. At the same time, the analysis revealed a number of areas that would benefit from further research:

- Due to resource and logistical constraints, this study focused solely on the perspective of women in the community, as they have had fewer opportunities to share their voice. This prioritization aligns with photovoice methodological recommendations (Wang & Burris, 1994). Future research initiatives should, however, seek to capture men's perceptions to provide a more comprehensive understanding. Such research would allow for gender comparisons and would provide insights as to how to best engage men as agents of change in the community moving forward.
- Using an informed understanding of women's perspectives, experiences, and valuations of autonomy as a baseline against which to compare progress, or lack thereof, future research should examine which policies and development interventions in these communities effectively enhance women's autonomy, both in relation to food security and more broadly. Exploring the contributions of potential strategies to improve food

security through women's autonomy will help policymakers and practitioners as they design, refine, and/or develop better policies and programs.

- As the global community continues to strive toward the development of a tool that can be used to measure women's autonomy across cultures, contexts, and time, it is critical that future research ensures that cultural barriers to autonomy are better reflected. Additionally, more research is needed to determine the causal linkages between women's autonomy and food security.
- The research findings are largely drawn from the experiences of one group of Indigenous women from *Los Pastos* ethnic group in Nariño, Colombia. It would be valuable to use Participatory Action Research methods to investigate similar research questions among other groups of women living in different contexts and from different backgrounds, particularly those constrained to society's margins.
- Although some process evaluation data were collected during the course of the fieldwork (these data will inform a future publication) additional process-based research is needed on the use of Participatory Action Research methods such as photovoice among Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups.

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