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Political Empowerment in Community-Based Tourism: Leadership and Power Strategies of Women in Yunguilla, Ecuador

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Abstract: Women's political empowerment in community-based tourism (CBT) is particularly challenging. This research explores women's political empowerment, focusing on the dynamics of women's influence, leadership, and the subtle forms of resistance within a CBT project in Ecuador. Based on ethnographic research (2021–2025) that combines participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews, the study analyses how women's participation in community organisations fosters political empowerment processes, their outcomes, and the resistance strategies employed to challenge male-dominated power structures. Findings reveal that women's political empowerment in CBT is not limited to holding official positions but depends on their participation in both public and private spheres. Women employ subtle strategies to challenge existing norms, thereby leading their own political empowerment processes through self-organisation, collaboration, and support networks.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Resistance, Collaborative leadership, Feminism, Agency.

Empoderamiento político en el turismo comunitario: estrategias de liderazgo y poder de las mujeres en Yunguilla, Ecuador

Resumen: El empoderamiento político de las mujeres en el turismo de base comunitaria (TBC) es particularmente desafiante. Esta investigación explora dicho empoderamiento, centrándose en las dinámicas de influencia, el liderazgo y las formas sutiles de resistencia dentro de un proyecto de TBC en Ecuador. Basada en una investigación etnográfica (2021-2025) que combina observación participante, conversaciones informales y entrevistas en profundidad, el estudio analiza cómo la participación femenina en organizaciones comunitarias fomenta procesos de empoderamiento político, sus resultados y las estrategias de resistencia empleadas para desafiar las estructuras de poder dominadas por hombres. Los hallazgos revelan que el empoderamiento político de las mujeres en el TBC no se limita a ocupar cargos oficiales, sino que depende de su participación tanto en la esfera pública como en la privada. Las mujeres emplean estrategias sutiles para desafiar las normas existentes y liderar sus propios procesos de empoderamiento a través de la autoorganización, la colaboración y las redes de apoyo.

Palabras Clave: Turismo rural, Resistencia, Liderazgo colaborativo, Feminismo, Autonomía.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

In Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC), 54.1% of rural women live under extreme conditions (CEPALSTAT, 2023). Often, they lack the necessary resources to acquire property, particularly land, and sometimes even to exercise basic rights such as access to water (Mora et al., 2019). All of this occurs within a system of violence that affects women daily. According to an independent organization, Ecuador recorded 411 femicides in 2025 (ALDEA, 2026). High insecurity limits women's mobility and access to education, healthcare, and basic services, while their employment remains concentrated in less productive sectors. Their limited involvement in politics or organizational structures (UNDP et al., 2023) restricts their access to well-being. The situation is especially complex in rural contexts, where customary practices and traditional norms limit women's access to decision making processes, and, where the 'power over', based on relations of control and dominance, can be subtly exercised. The 'internalised oppression', adopted by women as a survival strategy, "becomes so well ingrained that the effects are mistaken for reality" suppressing women's will and making control unnecessary (Rowlands, 1995, p. 102). These forms of domination, whether subtle or obvious, contribute to the endemic rural crisis of Latin America.

In recent years, Community-based Tourism (CBT), defined as a form of tourism "in which indigenous and *mestizo* communities control the organization, management and running of tourism operations" (Ruiz-Ballesteros & Hernández-Ramírez, 2010, p. 202) has been considered an alternative to the rural crisis (Cáceres-Feria et al., 2021). Its ability to reduce poverty through the generation of business ideas, the establishment of locally based enterprises and its capacity to strength resilient responses (Ruiz-Ballesteros, 2021) serves as a catalyst for the empowerment of local communities (Dodds et al., 2018; Dolezal & Novelli, 2022), especially women (Mohan & John, 2025; Movono & Dahles, 2017). Empowerment of women seeks to break the political, economic, and institutional barriers that prevent the achievement of gender equality, full participation in political life, and leadership processes as determined in Sustainable Development Goal 5 (UN, 2023).

According to Sundström et al., (2017, p. 321) “the political empowerment of women is a societal process crucial to development and progress” and therefore, the comprehension of women power requires further attention. Political empowerment, understood as the process that enhances the capacity of women to manage assets, engage community members and influence others in pursuit of their well-being and that of the whole community (Fernández, 2016; Mandal, 2013; Novo, 2010; Su et al., 2020), has received less attention than the general concept of empowerment (Alexander et al., 2016). In the context of CBT, women’s political empowerment, although a critical dimension of community development, remains one of the most challenging goals to achieve for women in rural settings (Pastor-Alfonso & Espeso-Molinero, 2021). Furthermore, quite often, CBT political empowerment assessments limit its scope to quantitative indicators such as the number of women holding power positions without understanding the real influence they may exercise. Meanwhile “intangible forms of empowerment remain an under-researched phenomenon” (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022, p. 2354).

Considering the importance of women’s political empowerment in CBT as a catalyst against the endemic problems of rural areas in Latin America, the lack of studies that analyze the political dimension of empowerment and the need for research on intangible forms of power, this research investigates the nuances of women’s political empowerment by examining women’s power strategies and the characteristics of female leadership in the context of CBT projects. To capture rich primary data, an ethnographic approach, informed by decolonial feminist lenses (Mohanty, 1984), was employed. This involved long-term fieldwork in Yunguilla (Ecuador), a 30-year-old CBT project renowned for its community organization model (Chontasi et al., 2024). The analysis focuses on the subtle resistance strategies used to challenge established power dynamics, revealing women's influence and leadership.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Women’s political empowerment

Inspired by the works of Paulo Freire (1974) and (Solomon, 1976), authors such as Rappaport (1984), Kabeer (1999), and (Sofield, 2003) have progressively contributed to the development of the concept of empowerment, a concept widely used in gender studies (González-Domínguez et al., 2021). For Scheyvens, p. (2009, p. 464) “empowerment means activation of the confidence and capabilities of previously disadvantaged or disenfranchised individuals or groups so that they can exert greater control over their lives, mobilize resources to meet their needs, and work to achieve social justice”. For most authors the general dimensions of empowerment (economic, psychological, social and political) incorporate elements of freedom as opportunity (Sen, 1999), the ability to make choices (Kabeer, 1999), and a large chain of rights that have been traditionally denied to women such as freedom to move, to assemble, to associate or to own property (Sundström et al., 2017). Richardson (2018) based on Kabeer (1999) proposes a conceptual model of the empowerment process distinguishing three steps: resources (favourable pre-conditions for empowerment), agency (ability to identify goals and act upon them) and achievements (realizations of goals). Many models incorporates analytical elements such as agency, autonomy and authority (Cole, 2018) to understand individual, collective, or organizational capacity at different scales (Movono & Dahles, 2017) in managing power (Knight & Cottrell, 2016) and resource access (Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2016) in pursuit of development (Mayaka et al., 2020).

More specifically, the political dimension of women's empowerment lacks a unified theoretical framework and a consistent definition. Alexander et al. (2016, p. 433) define it “as the enhancement of assets, capabilities, and achievements of women to gain equality to men in influencing and exercising political authority worldwide.” Women's political empowerment encompasses several key aspects. It involves the power exercised by women to protect their rights and promote the implementation of public policies (Fernández, 2016); the increased ability to influence decision-making that affect both their well-being and that of society (Dahlum et al., 2022; Sundström et al., 2017); the attainment of positions where women develop management and asset control (Alexander et al., 2016); and the advancement of gender equality through the elimination of violence and the creation of equitable laws (Ongo Nkoa et al., 2023).

The gap to achieve true political empowerment of women is wide. They must face structural barriers that arise from the traditional relationship of the public as a male dimension, discriminatory laws that prevent the occupation of positions of power, the restriction to vote and political representation (UN Women, 2014), but also “the negative influence that stereotypes have on women, moderating the process of self-perception, self-esteem and competence in the performance of the political role” (Novo, 2010, p. 681). Added to this are the high costs of political training, which women cannot access due to the limited resources they have and the lack of support from their families (Novo, 2010; Ongo Nkoa et al., 2023). Furthermore, far from exercising true political participation, the supposed gender parity in national or local governments, particularly in LAC, is insufficient. Women are mostly placed as alternate representatives and in the case of indigenous, Afro-descendant or disabled women, the inequity is even greater (UN Women, 2014).

2.2. Political empowerment in CBT

In rural areas where CBT practices exist, women's political participation is even more complex making political power one of the most challenging to reach (Pastor-Alfonso & Espeso-Molinero, 2021). Effective CBT requires political structures that genuinely represent collective needs, ensuring equitable participation of women in decision-making and equal distribution of tourism-related benefits (Scheyvens, 1998). However, critical voices argue that women's involvement in CBT does not necessarily change gender inequalities (Cole, 2018; Díaz-Carrión, 2018; Hernández-González & Espeso-Molinero, 2025). In some CBT examples, the low social status of women, their lack of voice and education cause them to bear the excessive work of tourism without gaining empowerment, accentuating their vulnerability (Díaz-Carrión, 2024). Women are often excluded due to land ownership requirements and other traditional norms enforced by community leaders, most commonly men (UNWTO, 2021). Confined to feminized tasks (Vizcaino-Suárez & Serrano-Barquín, 2018) they remain within the private sphere, excluding them from tourism related discussion and decision-making forums (Lama, 2000).

Special attention deserves “the power dynamics entrenched within the family sphere [as] are often the last to fade away, given that they involve negotiations with a strong emotional charge” (Díaz-Carrión & Ceyca Lugo, 2022, p. 842). Men also tend to displace women and make their work invisible (Montequín, 2018; Phommavong & Sörensson, 2013; Thomé-Ortíz et al., 2018) or impose restrictions on women’s training and activities outside the community (Pleno, 2006). When women undertake and lead projects that might initially seem unattractive, men tend to avoid participation. However, when these projects start showing signs of success, men assert their leadership and exclude women's participation as happened in Manduriaco Valley, Ecuador (Gascón, 2023).

In their analysis of empowerment in the Hui embroidery heritage's tourism, Su et al. (2020) found modest political advancements. Although, they observed a rise in women leadership, and improved capacities to connect rural women and coordinate cooperatives, they concluded that political empowerment was the least developed dimension of all studied. Cultural factors, which often have patriarchal undertones, inform the context (Gil et al., 2019; Pastor-Alfonso & Espeso-Molinero, 2021). (Pastor-Alfonso & Espeso-Molinero (2021) analyzing the context of indigenous women, found that customary patriarchal practices continued to restrict the exercise of women's power. Despite having achieved economic, psychological, and social power (Scheyvens, 1998) with significant transformations in personal, relational, and environmental spheres (Cole, 2018), political power remained beyond the reach of women.

2.3. Strategies of resistance and new forms of leadership

Political empowerment theory needs to recognize that women create their own mechanisms of resistance in the ongoing battle against patriarchy, gender stereotypes and the dominance of imposed authority and hence subtle forms of empowerment need to be considered. Juliano (1992) highlights that contrary to what hegemonic narratives dictate, women through history have not passively accepted oppression. The persistent utilization of both physical and symbolic violence against women clearly demonstrates the historical necessity to suppress their defiant agency. Juliano (1998a) asserts that oppression has driven women to create expressions of resistance and establish their autonomy, even in the face of structural violence.

[T]hey develop strategies to balance their social position, confront discriminatory stereotypes, and improve their image and their specific living conditions. These strategies sometimes rely on their invisibility: starting from a formal acceptance of the established order, they subtly reshape it through informal actions and partial questioning (Juliano, 1998a, pp. 31–32).

Women utilize highly subtle forms of resistance, such as singing a song, making a joke, sharing a folk tale, creating a rumor, speaking in whispers, or even embracing silence. These serve as means for women to openly display their disapproval of those who abuse power. These “implicit demands”, more acted than declared, are typical of traditional societies. When this behavior takes root in everyday social fabric, it gives rise to a politics of resistance that calls upon women to come together in spaces where they express their anger and thirst for justice (Bonfil, 1990; Scott, 2000). Juliano refers to these tactics as “invisible questionings”, as they often occur behind the public scene. Women initially adhere to specific social norms, which they subsequently challenge in pursuit of goals that they consider fair and essential. These strategies represent a way to respond to subordination and establish a series of actions that enable them to build their autonomy and display demonstrations of power (Juliano, 1992, 1998b) through new forms of leadership.

Traditional theories have historically associated leadership with masculine traits. However, these assumptions have been increasingly challenged (Buss et al., 2025). Contrary to Moswete & Lacey provocative title (2015) “Women cannot lead”, the tourism literature proves the ample capacities of women to drive in leadership positions in academia (Pritchard & Morgan, 2017), corporate organizations (Segovia-Pérez et al., 2019) or rural communities (Castro et al., 2023). As Lagarde (2000, p. 4) points out “if we examine the history of women's leadership, we will see that it is characterized by a profound intention to persuade a skeptical world, which often discredits women's voices, especially when we propose radical changes in gender relations”.

The new leadership roles assumed by women result from their presence and political participation in various social and cultural spaces. These forms of leadership are different styles of handling power and performing roles in alignment with a women's identity. They arise from the struggles to be recognized as proponents of viable alternatives for social development, and they seek to act and persuade in the face of imposition and opposition (Castro et al., 2023; Lagarde, 2000). Eagly & Carli (2007) argue that women adopt transformational leadership styles that are more oriented toward collaboration and group development. Lagarde calls for women leadership's styles to be "*entrañables*" playing with the double meaning of the Spanish term as endearing and intrinsic. In the words of the Mexican anthropologist and activist, it means "with one's very being, with the heart, with what we are and what we want to be" (Lagarde, 2000, p. 4).

3. METHODOLOGY

This study takes an ethnographic perspective to explore the nuances of women's political empowerment in the context of CBT, focusing on the dynamics of women's influence, leadership and the subtle forms of resistance. According to Richardson (2018), capturing the nuances of empowerment requires direct interaction with local informants as it "can greatly improve study measures". Furthermore, "if resources allow, an even better approach is to identify indicators of empowerment through extensive observation and ethnographic interviews with women" (p. 550), taking "into account what women prioritise in an environment with context-specific barriers and opportunities" (Völker & Doneys, 2021, p. 135). This approach not only amplifies women's voices but also provides an equitable understanding of the subjectivity on a small scale (Risman, 1993; Vizcaino-Suárez & Serrano-Barquín, 2018). The community-based tourism project developed by the Yunguilla Microenterprise Corporation (YMC), served as the chosen case study.

3.1. Case study - Yunguilla

Yunguilla is a rural community in the Metropolitan District of Quito. Located in the Andes mountain range, the area is ecologically characterized by its predominant cloud forest. This distinctive feature led to the designation of its 3000-hectare territory as the "Yunguilla Sustainable Use Conservation Area" in 2013 (YMC, 2018). The community comprises 66 mestizo families, 54 women, 45 men and a total population of 133 inhabitants (YMC, 2024), with the majority maintaining familial ties (Ortega-Vásquez et al., 2025).

Historically, in Yunguilla, families relied on timber extraction, charcoal production, and the illicit trade of distilled spirits for their livelihoods. However, environmental degradation and persistent poverty became prominent issues in 1995, drawing the attention of the Maquipucuna Foundation. This NGO invited the community to engage in a transformative process to address these challenges, with CBT emerging as the primary strategy for community development and enhancing residents' well-being (Chontasi et al., 2024). Although gender equality was not one of the NGO's objectives, its influence and activities became a fundamental pillar in reducing gender gaps. By the year 2000, the community gained independence from the NGO and formalized its involvement in tourism through the establishment of the Yunguilla Microenterprise Corporation (YMC, 2000). Over time, the community's self-organization has grown stronger, enabling them to implement strategies that overcome longstanding rural challenges. After 30 years of dedicated work, they achieved a consolidated position within the tourism market, establishing themselves as one of the flagship CBT models in Ecuador with a comprehensive offer of tourism services and infrastructures including different accommodation options (homestay, camping and a small lodge), a restaurant, a community store,

the local production of complementary products such as jam, dairy and snacks, and other support services including a community bank (Ortega-Vásconez et al., 2025).

3.2. Research Design

The principal researcher conducted an immersive study from November 2021 to June 2025, actively engaging in both communal activities (comprising collective work, meetings, communal meals, and community events) and individual actions (daily work routines, leisure activities, and private interactions). As a mestiza Ecuadorian woman deeply familiar with rural life and its contexts, her hands-on involvement within households facilitated the establishment of rapport with the women, allowing for the acquisition of more comprehensive research insights.

In addition to the ethnographic data collected through participant observation and informal discussions with men and women, in-depth interviews were conducted with fifteen influential women selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement in tourism development in Yunguilla. Four hierarchical levels were identified among the interviewees: those who (1) experienced the shift from extractivismo to sustainability (trailblazers); (2) currently hold leadership positions (incumbents); (3) work in administrative and operational roles within the community's productive units (managers); and a group of young women (4) who are currently involved in generational succession processes (collaborators). The participants' ages span from 18 to 80 years (see table 1). Questions focused on the allocation of duties and responsibilities within the CBT, voices and representation both within and outside public grounds, and family dynamics around work and leisure. Prioritizing women's comfort, interviews were conducted in Spanish, in spaces of their choosing, and recorded with unobtrusive devices. As a way of enhancing reflexivity and identifying power strategies embedded in discourse (Scott, 2000), special attention was paid during the interviews to nonverbal language, attitudes, relationships, humor, and shifts in participants' discourse depending on the context. The interviews averaged 90 minutes.

Table 1. Interviews

Nº	Level of participation	Children	Education	Completed studies	Work in CBT	Engages in multiple productive activities
1	Trailblazer 1	Yes	Elementary	No	Hourly	Yes
2	Trailblazer 2	Yes	Secondary	Yes	Hourly	Yes
3	Trailblazer 3	Yes	Elementary	No	Hourly	Yes
4	Trailblazer 4	Yes	Tertiary*	Yes	Hourly	Yes
5	Incumbent 1	Yes	Elementary	Yes	Full time	Yes
6	Incumbent 2	Yes	Elementary	No	Hourly	Yes
7	Incumbent 3	Yes	Tertiary	Yes	Hourly	Yes
8	Incumbent 4	Yes	Elementary	No	Hourly	Yes
9	Manager 1	Yes	Tertiary	In progress	Full time	No
10	Manager 2	No	Tertiary	In progress	Hourly	No
11	Manager 3	Yes	Tertiary	Yes	Part time	Yes
12	Manager 4	No	Tertiary	Yes	Full time	No
13	Collaborator 1	Yes	Tertiary	In progress	Part time	No
14	Collaborator 2	Yes	Secondary	Yes	Hourly	Yes
15	Collaborator 3	No	Tertiary	Yes	Hourly	No

Note: * *Tertiary education includes formal vocational/tech education and college/university.*

Interview transcripts, along with dense descriptions, field notes, and ethnographic vignettes, underwent thorough content analysis. The data was coded and associated with qualitative indicators with the support of Atlas.ti. Indicators included themes such as power roles in organizational structures, active involvement in constructing governance, participating in decision-making, and influencing public policy. Additional indicators captured women's contributions to the community, the endorsement they received from community members (both men and women) for projects they proposed, their authority to choose whether to work inside or outside the community, their control and management of assets, and the exercise of their liberties. The results were validated through participant feedback.

Based on ethical principles, permission for the research was secured from YMC. Individual presentations were made to YMC's directors, coordinators, and the community's families, detailing the research project, its objectives, and the purpose of the lead researcher's presence in the community. To maintain transparency, informed consent was obtained, assuring the safeguarding, appropriate management, and confidential treatment of the research data. In a community of such small size, informants are easily identifiable, so *verbatim* quotes will only include group codes. Ethical protocols were approved by the University Pablo de Olavide (File 21/7-2).

4. RESULTS

4.1. Gaining power

Until the mid-1990s, Yunguilla faced serious difficulties due to government neglect and a lack of opportunities. While there was a small school, parents often required their children to help with productive tasks and caregiving, resulting in very few students completing primary education. Many women share their experiences of having to forsake their education to care for younger siblings and manage the care of animals and crops. As they reached adolescence, they were often sent to the capital city, Quito, to work as domestic help.

We used to live with whatever we had. (...) To go to school, we had to go to the pasture to release the cows. It wasn't as easy back then. (...) We used to... go fetch water from the stream, carry water in containers, cut grass for the guinea pigs, and then head off to school. (Trailblazer)

During the charcoal production era, women have a shared history of resilience, having endured extremely harsh conditions. While men frequently emphasize the demanding nature of charcoal production, they tend to overlook the role played by women. The women themselves, however, recount having labored with equal intensity. Whether they were pregnant, caring for infants, facing inclement weather, food shortages, or lacking proper shelter, these conditions made no difference: the paramount objective was the sale of charcoal, which provided the income necessary to sustain their families.

When the Maquipucuna Foundation reached the community, they initially targeted Yunguilla's male community members. Some families, attracted by the shift from extractive to sustainable activities, eagerly joined the CBT project. However, establishing tourism activities required male attendance at meetings and workshops, which conflicted with charcoal production. To resolve this, women began attending training sessions on behalf of their husbands. Some women were not inclined to participate, but the heteronomy was palpable and the patriarchal pressure asserted itself over women's autonomy.

I didn't want to, but when he told me to go [referring to participating in CBT] and said that he would help me, I agreed. So, what else could I do? (Manager)

Over time, women become involved and discover numerous opportunities for development. Attending the initial training programs proposed by the Maquipucuna Foundation presented an invaluable opportunity to develop and enhance their skills. The workshops offered allowed the development of specific learning about CBT while giving them a chance to develop culinary and organizational skills as the foundation provided food for both participants and their families.

Inspired by the process of learning, creativity, and resilience, women soon began a process of self-organization and with the Foundation's support, they established the "Mama Pallo" group to develop new community-based initiatives that complement the tourism products offered by their male partners. They learned to produce jams and using their own resources and materials quickly achieved steady production that was sold to tourists and later distributed beyond their community. Further capacity-building programs followed, and they chose to undergo training in organic farming, which enabled them to begin cultivating organic vegetables and legumes. Using their initial capital, the group decided to set up a community store. They purchased a small business, expanded the inventory, and, to ensure transparency, conducted monthly inventories while diligently recording income, expenses, and debts. The revenue generated by the store helped strengthen their other activities. The experience and knowledge they acquired prompted the women's

board to participate in a paper recycling training program. Later, they became trainers for other members and established a new production unit, crafting cards from recycled paper.

Five years into the transformative process, the Foundation started to withdraw support, and men and women decided to join efforts by founding the Yunguilla Microenterprise Corporation (YMC). This community organization provided a legal and organizational framework that incorporated all the community's transformative activities and allowed the entry of new community partners. From the very beginning, the women of Yunguilla became key players in the community's productive transformation. The legacy of the women's group's work yielded substantial benefits and gradually, these pioneering initiatives evolved into important production units within the now-established YMC. The initial women leaders, mothers and grandmothers in the community, discovered within themselves newfound leadership capabilities, asset management skills, and the capacity to influence decision-making processes that impacted the overall community welfare.

None of us gave up or asked, 'How are we going to do this? How do we carry it?' No, all of us said, 'Okay'. (Trailblazer)

Since then, several women have held decision-making positions at the community level and at the YMC. Currently, it is evident that women play active roles in the leadership committees. Within the YMC organizational structure, there are eight committees responsible for the operation of production units, six of which are coordinated by women. Each of these women actively participate in decision-making processes and efficiently manage resources to improve and increase productivity within their designated areas. The YMC is represented by a board consisting of a female president, a male vice president. In addition, there are seven women and five men representing various working committees. Also at the community level, a woman plays an important leadership role. Together with the president, she has led the community committee for more than 10 years to improve living conditions, maintain and increase communal assets, and strengthen community participation.

Living with tourists in their homes exposed women and children to different customs and learning opportunities. Women played a key role in integrating tourists as regular individuals, ensuring equal treatment and involvement in community life. Moreover, they inspired their children to aspire to higher education and professional careers. Nowadays, young women are strongly encouraged to participate in tourism. Some are students and financially dependent on their parents. Others occupy decision-making positions in operational areas, while some work part-time shifts when needed, gaining work experience and some cash to meet their needs, something that will be impossible in other communities. Others are young mothers and for whom working for the YMC represents more than just a job opportunity; it constitutes a vital means of living. While it may not meet their full economic expectations, working within the community allows them to care for their children, eliminate expenses related to transportation and meals, and provide a convenient work-life balance.

I'm fine with it. I save on transportation costs; I don't spend anything. I get to spend more time with my son. When my mom is not here, I bring him to be with me. (Manager)

Tourism has brought to Yunguilla new avenues for capital generation and decision-making opportunities but also has created spaces for leisure and relaxation. In Yunguilla, women actively engage in community recreational and leisure activities. They revolve around volleyball matches, annual charity events, festivities

in neighboring communities and organized excursions to visit distant towns projects. Women in Yunguilla participate in these activities as players, cheerleaders, or spectators. They attend festivities and parades, join community outings, and actively participate in charity events, contributing not only through work but also by enjoying the socialization opportunities.

4.2. Resistance

The early days were marked by patriarchal power dynamics. In men's accounts of the coal mining period, women's work and contributions to the socioeconomic system are noticeably absent, despite their full involvement in the entire process. However, an evident shift in men's attitudes toward women's roles within the community emerged following the introduction of the new economic activities. Initially, men in Yunguilla paid little attention to women productive initiatives as they were preoccupied with charcoal production and the new tourism venture. As men began to observe the success of the women's organization, tensions began to surface between men and women (Gascón, 2023). In Yunguilla, they managed to solve these differences through collaboration and today, men express no doubt about the fundamental contributions made by women to the new productive ecosystems, especially concerning tourism. Moreover, measures have been put in place to prevent any form of double standards that might compromise individuals' integrity. To foster better coexistence, a code of ethics was devised, which has played a pivotal role in guiding the interactions between women, men, tourists, and tour operators within the community.

Despite having gained significant positions of power, managing their own assets and those of the community, the women of Yunguilla, still need to employ subtlet forms of resistance against male power. Nowadays, there is not apparent separation between production units, and men and women work together in similar terms without evidence of horizontal segregation (Abellan et al., 2021). However, the most influential unit, responsible for external funding and outside relations is led by the male founders. Women acknowledge the presence of experienced authority figures who have played a significant role in community development. For this reason, the community has placed their trust in them and granted them the right to represent their interests. This creates a leadership approach that remains largely male-dominated.

In large meetings that involve the whole community, even though male voices predominate, some women have a clear and strong voice, and they do not doubt to manifest their dissent. They raise their voices, offer opinions, and propose well-reasoned ideas and when they disagree, they display their resistance, maintain their viewpoints, and influence decision-making.

Those who participate the most are the men, always the same ones. Among the women, it's usually her [referring to a community leader] who talks the most, who raises concerns. Few women speak.
(Trailblazer)

Meanwhile, other women chose to remain silent in public forums. However, when they disagree, they initiate conversations within their homes and with their closest associates, silently challenging the leaders' stance (Juliano, 1992). They construct opposition discourses that gradually become part of the community's mainstream.

Quite often, women use humor to contest power imbalance. Throughout community tasks, both men and women partake with a competitive approach, aiming for equitable work distribution between genders. In the absence of men's intimidating scrutiny, public acts of resistance emerge when they perceive a lack of balance in the workload or responsibilities (Scott, 2000). Women employ humor and jokes to publicly express their

discontent and illustrate disparities in productivity between men and women. As an example, in a community *minga* in August 2023, women humorously pointed out variations in men's work efforts.

Yes, some are just standing there watching what the other poor folks are doing and then, they claim they're tired (Trailblazer) and they all laugh aloud.

Additional tactics of subtle resistance revolve around female solidarity and support networks (Juliano, 1992). Sisterhood has been always present in Yunguilla and was accentuated through CBT. Communal work has taught them that collective efforts yield greater benefits and thus, they actively endorse and recognize the efforts put forth by their fellow women. Hosting tourist in their own homes can be a very demanding task but women in Yunguilla have soon understood that sharing responsibilities among family members and friends helped with the task.

In the morning, I had a doctor's appointment. I asked my neighbor to give [my tourist] breakfast. This way, I can leave peacefully, run my errands, and come back late, in time to make lunch. Or by the time I get home, whoever is at home continues to cook the meals. (Incumbent)

Young women are establishing a strong female network striving for innovation and full gender equality within the corporation. They meet both in physical and virtual spaces, using them as battlegrounds to develop innovative participation strategies. They exercise caution and strive to avoid errors in their professional performance. They discuss their decisions within their group and present them to authority figures for approval. This process aims to secure the trust of both authority and community. They motivate each other to achieve optimal results. Their focus is not on individual distinction but on collaborative efforts designed to be perceived collectively.

Since Maria isn't here, we need to help her. She has so many things to do. We can't leave her alone, so we must stay until we finish. (collaborator)

To counter patriarchal practices and reduce gender gaps, Yunguilla implemented a project in 2025 that includes awareness-raising, training, response protocols, and an ongoing campaign to position Yunguilla as a place free from all forms of gender-based violence.

5. DISCUSSION

Ruiz-Ballesteros & Hernández-Ramírez (2010, p. 225) found that the CBT projects studied in Ecuador “strengthens and empowers” local communities and “accentuates their collective capacity for action and decision-making” as long as the design and management of their tourist products highlights local identity as a political subject, activates de community as political agent and encourage the participation of traditionally excluded agents, such as women creating the context for collective action and open communication. The Yunguilla case study not only confirms these findings but also shows that women became politically empowered by redefining their own power strategies developing a representative form of collaborative leadership. The strengthening of social capital through CBT, along with national modernization processes, has improved quality of life and transformed gender and power structures in Yunguilla.

5.1. Power strategies

Through women’s participation, agency, capacity and resistance in the context of CBT, the gender dynamics in Yunguilla have been transformed and women have attained an important share of political empowerment (Fernández, 2016; Sundström et al., 2017). The women leaders' voices were not only heard but also became

instrumental in the group's decision-making process (Dahlum et al., 2022; Sundström et al., 2017). They structured an organizational work system grounded in collaboration, where decision-making became a shared responsibility (Alexander et al., 2016). Women began to both acknowledge their own capabilities and receive recognition for their work and leadership capacities equal to those of men (Novo, 2010). Employment opportunities and avenues for personal development have been equitably accessible to both genders, mitigating gender stereotypes and averting the masculinization and feminization of work roles.

To achieve this level of economic, cultural and social empowerment, they have developed political strategies occupying power positions in the political structure that represents community interests (Scheyvens, 1999), and in a second organizational structure that manages the community business and pursues the benefit of its members, playing a significant role in the control and management of resources (Gascón, 2023). However, this research shows that women's political empowerment in the CBT does not depend exclusively on occupying positions of power, but rather on women's capacity to engage and influence others within the public and the private sphere. Women also employ forms of subtle power such as private conversations, humor and sorority, tactics of "invisible questioning" (Juliano, 1998a) that allow them to attain their goals.

Throughout the community's transformation process, women in Yunguilla have finally achieved recognition, they acquired freedom, learned how to manage their resources, and gained the ability to make independent decisions. These women have the autonomy to choose where and how they work; some work outside the community, some have their own businesses, and others are employed by the YMC. Moreover, while family budgets are often managed collaboratively, women's business experience has equipped them with the expertise to effectively oversee these finances, to the extent that in many households, women hold ultimate authority over resource allocation, always prioritizing their families' best interests.

Women's empowerment is significantly shaped by the influence of external agents, ranging from the role of NGOs through training processes and support in entrepreneurship (Pleno, 2006); government support through funding programs, development plans, or gender-oriented policies and laws (Moswete & Lacey, 2015); to interactions generated with visitors. In Yunguilla, the initial support of the Maquipuna Foundation played a critical role in the transformation process. CBT training and experience has granted learning opportunities helping women to overcome the high cost of political training (Novo, 2010; Ongo Nkoa et al., 2023), The early participation in community economic initiatives granted the women of Yunguilla a solid position of control and power over the tourism development. As noted by Cañada (2019), CBT models were "women have led the process of introducing tourism or have quickly taken the lead" are those where "transformations in gender relations and women's empowerment processes are much more significant" (p. 108).

The "tourism encounter" (Dolezal, 2015) is another key element in Yunguilla's women's empowerment. Moswete & Lacey (2015) noted that while women themselves might not return to school, they send their children to universities. Yunguilla's ongoing contact with urban areas, interaction with tourists, and the benefits of CBT provided young women with opportunities for higher education and professional growth.

However, within small communities like Yunguilla, familial ties play a pivotal role (Díaz-Carrión & Ceyca Lugo, 2022, p. 842). In this context, men who hold leadership positions within the tourism initiative, also fulfill the roles of fathers and uncles. This dynamic gives rise to a dual system of power, particularly

affecting the younger generation of women. Discussions and voting are conducted orally, meaning that the process is not secret. This open voting system does not facilitate dissidence from authority figures making very difficult for women to confront male power. Hence, within CBT, male political influence extends beyond the community leader, taking on the roles of fathers, uncles, and husbands, introducing a double dimensions of power. This, coupled with customary rights that also permeate social norms, transforms the concept of patriarchy, the “authority of the father” into a tangible manifestation that inadvertently perpetuates subtle forms of dominance and control (Rowlands, 1995) hindering women from engaging fully and consistently in the political sphere.

5.2. Collaborative leadership

The stereotype of linking and assigning women the responsibility of household duties, often associated with their “supposed greater capacity for caregiving, kindness, and sensitivity” (Figuerola-Domecq & Segovia-Pérez, 2020, p. 253) endures, and therefore, time availability becomes a major barrier for women to fully assume political power (Novo, 2010). For married women and those with children, deciding to take on a role in the corporation's leadership proved to be a test, as it meant adding this responsibility to their work, household chores, and family care. The collaborative leadership style has helped to alleviate this burden. In Yunguilla, support, sisterhood and collaborative women’s networks ensure shifts are covered for those unable to work, even organizing extraordinary meetings when necessary. The aim is to keep activities running and boost everyone's income, thus reducing their vulnerability amidst the rural crisis (Martinoy, 1995).

Yunguilla’s women do not need to hold designated positions of power to work for the community; however, holding these roles has enabled them to directly manage assets and larger-scale projects that require community support for their implementation. According to Rowlands (1995, p. 102) “empowerment also includes access to intangible decision-making processes”. When the benefits are collective, women of all ages come together, share workspaces, plan their own activities, self-organize and demonstrate complete autonomy, power in decision-making and freedom to manage their assets. As Berkes & Seixas (2005) argue, self-organization arises from community-based social processes requiring no specific recognition if community objectives are achieved. They work as a single entity, combining the expertise of the elder with the innovation of the youngest women. Even though the latter have more exposure to urban life, it doesn't diminish their sense of belonging.

Among women in Yunguilla we can recognize Lagarde’s different forms of “hearty” leadership (2000), namely “preceding”, “inaugural”, “contemporary” and “discontinuity”, however, these women have developed their own leading style based on self-organization, solidarity and collaborative networks.

6. CONCLUSION

According to Lagarde (2000), addressing inequalities that restrict women's social and political participation is essential to enhance the quality of women's daily lives and to do so we must examine the mechanisms of power within the realm of everyday experiences. In this context, this study has explored women's political empowerment in CBT, and the subtle forms of resistance women employ to challenge established power dynamics. It focused on how women navigate and contest existing structures of authority and control and the tactics they use to confront dominant power (Juliano, 1992; Lagarde, 2000; Rowlands, 1997).

The findings confirm that CBT has the capacity to increase the political participation opportunities for women fighting the endemic nature of the rural crisis in Latin America. In Yunguilla, women feel “able and entitle to make decisions” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14). They have actively contributed to the process of community transformation, serving as a cornerstone in addressing poverty, managing their own business initiatives, exercising autonomy on personal choices and even influencing forms of social behavior that foster gender equality.

Women have developed political strategies to occupy positions of power within community and business structures, managing resources for members' benefit. However, research shows that women's empowerment in CBT relies not just on holding power but also on their ability to engage and influence others publicly and privately. Women use tactics of “invisible questioning” (Juliano, 1998a), such as private conversations, humor, and sorority, to resist, build autonomy and demonstrate power through new forms of leadership (Juliano, 1992, 1998b). Their capacity to self-organize, weave support networks, and learn from experience, training and contact with external agents promotes a form of collaborative leadership that has enabled them to take the lead, recognizing that collective efforts result in increased benefits for the whole community. A style of “entrañable” way of handling power that align with women’s identity (Castro et al., 2023; Lagarde, 2000; LaPan et al., 2022).

The feminist lenses recognize ‘the personal as political’ and therefore the study of political power “entails understanding the dynamics of oppression and internalised oppression” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 14). Ethnographic analysis shows the subtle ways in which Yunguilla women resist the “power over”, however, it also identifies how male political influence within CBT extends beyond community leaders to familial roles, adding another layer of power. This doble dimension of power, along with customary rights embedded in social norms, turns patriarchy into a visible reality preventing women from fully participating in CBT public politics.

From a methodological point of view, understanding power is “far more complex than reducing women's experiences to a set of measurable indicators” (Cornwall, 2016, p. 343). This study shows that ethnography is a valuable tool for uncovering subtle forms of resistance, women’s power strategies and alternative leadership styles. While quantitative indicators can show the number of women in positions of authority, qualitative analyses are essential for grasping the underlying power dynamics. These analyses contribute to a deeper insight into “intangible forms of empowerment” (Dolezal & Novelli, 2022, p. 2354).

From a practical perspective, the women of Yunguilla transitioned from an economy rooted in extractivism and poverty to a thriving community business model, which they played a crucial role in creating. Consequently, insights from this case study can significantly contribute to SDG 5 (UN, 2023). Historical data highlights a significant shift in gender dynamics. Although patriarchal patterns persist in older generations, a clear trend toward gender equality is evident among the youth. This evolution points to the emergence of new social frameworks.

Political empowerment is a process and therefore “change in empowerment must be assessed over time, as a transition, as a movement away from disempowerment” (Sundström et al., 2017, p. 323) thus the study of political empowerment requires a long-term perspective. Although this research takes a historical view, it primarily focuses on the presence and role of women's leadership within a specific government set during the researching period (November 2021 – June 2025). Furthermore, anthropological research does not aim for

generalization and therefore, other ethnographic long-term case studies using the employed perspectives in this research will enhance the results.

Changes are still taking place in rural women's lives. In Yunguilla there is a young generation of women interested in the economic development of their community, the implementation of innovative CBT management models and full gender equality. Although young women aspire to contribute to the common good, they are also drawn to the opportunities offered by the outside world, so concerns about the long-term sustainability of CBT persist among adults in the community. The tensions between community values and global influences among younger generations involved in CBT deserve further attention. Also, to better understand the structural transformations experienced by the community, future research should examine women's agency prior to the arrival of tourism in the community, as well as local definitions of gender, leadership and power. From a feminist lens, this must be done deconstructing the western idea of women's emancipation to further understand the political power of women in CBT in Latin America.

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Notes

Credit Authorship contributions statement

The authors contributed directly to the preparation of this article, from the conception and design of the study to its final result. Data collection and analysis was the responsibility of the first author, while the writing and critical revision of the content was the work of both authors.