STAND UP FOR YOUR RIGHTS

A Quechua coca farmer and union leader describes her struggle against Bolivia's forced eradication policies

ROXANA ARGANDOÑA, AS TOLD TO THE ANDEAN INFORMATION NETWORK

The Chapare is one of Bolivia's main coca-growing regions, and it is home to the Quechua and Aymara Indigenous peoples, many of whom work as coca farmers. Although coca can be used to make cocaine, for centuries Bolivians and other Andean peoples have used it in medicine, as a mild appetite suppressant, and as a central element in religious ceremonies. Between the late 1980s and 2004, when Evo Morales was elected president, the U.S. war on drugs had a devastating effect on Chapare coca growers. During that period, U.S.-funded forced eradication policies led to violent conflicts between Indigenous farmers and government troops. The ascension of Morales, who took power in 2005 as the first Indigenous Bolivian president, brought that policy to an end. Since then, the administration has implemented a regulatory model for coca cultivation known as social control, which is based on cooperative coca reduction efforts and shared responsibility between the state and growers. Roxana Argandoña is a Quechua coca farmer whose family has lived in the region for generations.

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My name is Roxana Argandoña. I come from the Chapare province in the Cochabamba department of central Bolivia. I have lived in the Chapare most of my life. In the past, its hills and vegetation generated a tropical climate, but logging and deforestation have made it much drier. There also used to be fewer people here, and they were all locals. Over time, people from other parts of Bolivia started colonizing the area. Even the coca has changed: The plants we grew used to be healthier, and there were bigger yields. We would wrap them in blackberry and banana leaves and carry the harvest to local markets on foot. Traders bought coca from us for next to nothing. The market was smaller then, and the money we earned was only enough for us to feed our families. Now, prices are much higher, and we supplement our income with other crops.

Over the past several decades, different governments have come to power and, under intense U.S. pressure, criminalized coca growing. The crackdowns were worst under Victor Paz Estenssoro (1985-89), Hugo Banzer (1997-2001), and Jorge "Tuto" Quiroga (2001-02). The confrontations started in the early 90s, when the Chapare was completely militarized and U.S.-backed security forces began to wipe out our coca crops. Without coca, we had no means of subsistence. We were forced to react, to fight. We had to. During those years, U.S. and Bolivian soldiers had no shame; they would kill people like animals. Women were often sexually assaulted—it didn't matter whether you were single or married, it happened either way. The military would barge into our homes whenever they wanted. We would run away, only to come back later and realize they had eaten all our food. Those were difficult times.

While our sons and husbands were being beaten and imprisoned, women decided to go to the front lines. We left our homes and became union members. Evo Morales arrived in the Chapare around this time; he wasn't president yet, but he opened our eyes through union meetings, which we would hold at different locations. These gatherings were forbidden at the time, but we didn't back down.

Today, women have more experience with union matters, but at that time we used to encounter a lot of *machismo*. Men hardly paid attention to us at meetings. They would say that we should stay at home with the children or go back to the kitchen. I was about 21 years old when I first got involved, and I remember thinking: "Why aren't women allowed to participate in unions? We, too, have the right to do so." My husband wasn't too keen on going, so I would go in his place. "I'll go anyway, even if they end up throwing me out," I'd say. I would sit in the back of the room and listen. Now there are women-only coca unions, and we are respected for our work.

My first job was with the "12 de Octubre" union. I was the ladies' auxiliary secretary, a position that required cleaning, cooking, and entertaining visitors whenever they came to union headquarters. After the conflicts broke out, we started meeting constantly. We spent more time at roadblocks and in marches than at home, yet no one listened to us. Several union members were disabled in the fighting, and even more people—men and women—were killed in the marches. The military would shoot at us, and we were constantly getting tear-gassed. They would come into our homes at any time of night or day. We had tear gas for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I never want to go back to that.

Thankfully, these atrocities stopped in 2005, when Morales was elected. We now live and sleep in peace. We can walk around freely and hold union meetings without fear of violence or repercussions.

Our fight for the coca leaf isn't a new struggle; it dates back many, many years. Various administrations have condemned coca

and said it has no place in Bolivia. But I want people to understand the difference between the coca leaf and cocaine. Coca isn't a drug—it only becomes one when people add chemicals. This misconception is what started all the violence. The coca leaf has many uses: When you're stressed, you can chew on the leaves to feel better. If you're hungry or thirsty, chewing coca will fill you up and quench your thirst. It is also used in treating arthritis and as a painkiller during dental work. Coca tea is used to treat stomach pains and illnesses. Plus, coca helps with fatigue. It's a food and a medicine combined. We want coca to be decriminalized, and to export it all over the world in its true, medicinal form.

After becoming a union leader at age 27, I was eventually appointed deputy mayor of my municipality in 1994. At first, I was anxious: It was a big responsibility and I didn't feel capable. My male counterparts, however, encouraged me to take the job. They told me I should accept it in the name of all local women. It was a real honor, and I received a lot of support. At the time, municipal officials didn't even get proper wages; we worked *ad honorem*. Neoliberal administrations had privatized almost all of Bolivia's industries in the 90s, so municipalities had very little income. Today, thanks to the nationalization of the hydrocarbon industry in 2006, during Morales' first term, municipalities have larger budgets and can afford to pay their mayors and deputy mayors.

My colleagues were satisfied with my work and performance, and in 2005 they named me one of the councilwomen of Villa Tunari, a municipality in Chapare. I served in this role through 2010. Right now, I am the secretary for the "12 de Octubre" union and the leader of another union, "Copacabana Alta."

Until Morales, governments in Bolivia did not care about the people. Morales started out as the sports secretary for the San Francisco coca union in Chapare, but he was promoted because he was such an active participant in union meetings. He rose through the ranks and became head of his local union, then head of the entire federation. Eventually, he was leading the coca unions at the national level. When Morales was serving as congressman from Cochabamba in 1997, we asked him: "What if you ran for president?" He had no intention of running, saying: "How could I ever become president? No." He only sought power because of our struggles and hardship. The big gas, energy, and water companies wanted to take everything away from the people and privatize our natural reserves, land, and water. Had they succeeded, life in Chapare would be even harder.

WE HAD TEAR GAS FOR BREAKFAST, LUNCH, AND DINNER

Getting Morales elected was no easy task. It was difficult to raise awareness about the harsh realities of the coca-growing regions in Bolivia. People didn't want to listen. We campaigned all over the country with only our union organizing experience and our coca leaves to keep us going. We went from department to department, getting stepped on and beaten. One time, during a speech in the southern city of Potosí, a mob climbed onstage and tried to beat up Morales. Only a few of us from the tropics were present, and we formed a barrier in front of the stairs, but they still stepped over us.

Since 2005 the Chapare has changed, thanks to the hard work of union members. We started holding seminars at the unions to better organize and figure out what we need. Today, we ask the president for support, and we make our demands known. While in the

past women in the tropics would go to the city to give birth, the hospitals here are now much better. They are no longer like small first-aid outposts. Education has also improved tremendously. Before 2005 the countryside and the tropics didn't have proper schools. Students would sit on rocks or adobe bricks, and classroom roofs were made out of mud or straw. Now we have schools and a number of technological institutes. Universidad Mayor de San Simón, a highly ranked public university, opened a technical school in the Chapare town of Valle Sajta. There is a law school in the town of Villa 14 de Septiembre in Cochabamba, where officials recently opened a new university, Universidad Indígena Quechua Casimiro Huanca, named after a former union leader who was shot by government forces during a protest. There is also a technological institute in Eterazama that specializes in food processing and is run by an Italian priest.

In the past, our children were discriminated against and discouraged from studying. Bolivian society didn't want or expect Indigenous children to go to college. Only the children of city folk, from the middle and upper classes, were seen as having the right to education. This is now changing throughout the country. Where there were once no schools at all, there are now universities. People who didn't know how to read or write have learned how to do both. Our children are attending university. Three of my four children got their degrees in the tropics. Their father and I did everything in our power so they wouldn't end up like us.

People in the Chapare are doing well. We have new roads, processing plants, hydroelectric projects, and an ammonium and urea processing plant. Banks now offer low-interest loans to farmers and producers, so everyone can build their own house and buy a car. A new bank was established, Banco de Producción, which gives out loans with a low annual interest rate and payments tied to the farming calendar. We are exploring other industries and have launched projects to process milk and cultivate bananas, pineapples, and citrus fruits. Producers are also working with the National Fund for Integral Development to explore fish farming and coffee growing. We no longer rely solely on coca.

All this will help us achieve a better future. Previous presidents had neglected the Chapare, but that is no longer the case. ●

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