

The hope of justice for Bolivia's women and children

by Casimira Rodríguez Romero, Minister of Justice, Bolivia

Learning to survive

I remember that when I was six, my family was regularly hungry because of a drought. We didn't have enough to eat even twice a day, so my siblings and I were sent to another community where my grandparents grew some crops and had some goats and cows. All the same, my mom always wanted her kids, both boys and girls, to learn to read and write, so that's why she sent us to the mining town of Quioma in Mizque. There they rented a room for us.

When I got ready for school, I didn't have anyone to comb out my long braids. My brothers tried to brush them every day, but it was a disaster. The miners' kids at the school weren't used to being around indigenous girls like me. I'd never fought with anybody before, but they pulled my braids, treated me badly, and that's when I started to live with violence and discrimination. I could only speak Quechua, and it was really hard to study in Spanish. After school every day, my siblings and I went out and gathered firewood and

swapped things with the local women. They gave us sugar, noodles and bread. We missed our folks terribly, but we learned to fight, earn money and survive.

From exploitation to discrimination

At age 13, I went to live in the city of Cochabamba. With promises of earning some money, I took a job working for a merchant family for two years. The exploitation was terrible: I worked 18 hours a day looking after 15 people. I was under a lot of psychological pressure, out of touch with my family and working without pay. Eventually, even my new clothes wore out. And since I was always helping the boss's kids with their homework, I started to really want to go to school again, but it was impossible.

Luckily, my mom turned up again and I went back to my hometown. From there, I went back to Cochabamba and worked for another family. I got paid there. They were always good about paying on time

and giving me an extra month's pay at Christmas and other bonuses. But there was still a lot of discrimination: They gave me day-old bread to eat and food that had gone bad. My boss was a bit more humane, but when he died, I stayed on with his wife and she was like an evil stepmother: To her, I wasn't even a person. I worked for them as a housemaid for nine years, but it was so hard.

Consciousness and organization

A fighting spirit awoke in me when some other friends and I founded the Cochabamba Home Worker's Union in 1987. When we saw all the inequalities in the law, we realized that we only had half of our rights. We held meetings with domestic workers in La Paz, with women who were real fighters and with mining union leaders. We held national meetings and started to consolidate our group. For the next six years, we worked on the draft law, although lots of details were taken out. The first draft was pretty protectionist, but the process took on more of a

rights focus. We were able to turn our fears into courage and make the authorities listen to us. At first, our friends and even our own brothers and sisters didn't want to have anything to do with us, saying we were city folk now. But we took heart and started to hold demonstrations in order to open doors. Convinced that what we were doing was right, we started to break down the walls of discrimination – and, by insisting so much, we managed to gather support and seats on the councils of rural women's organizations. We made alliances with our peasant brothers, workers, miners, coca-leaf growers, indigenous groups and other sectors. It was a very interesting process that truly bore fruit.

The male world of politics

Along the way, we started to get support from Evo Morales's movement; as leaders, we started meeting here and there, coordinating national activities and international events. When they offered me the post of Minister of Justice, I didn't know what to do – I had to make a quick

decision! You have your (personal) plans, your family...but I put it all aside. We're going through a historic process that I just couldn't say no to. There was no way to talk it over with my colleagues. If I said no, they would have never let me live it down. So I accepted, knowing it would be hard, but it was all about recognizing that this was the next step in everything we'd been doing so far.

At first I was very worried – soon I'd be entering a very different world. In our organizations, we always just worked around other women. The world of politics is a man's world and full of professionals with different types of education and experiences; I entered into this realm very carefully. When you are a leader, you have the freedom to say what you like, but now I have to be careful about what I say, and at the same time I have to leave something behind for other women and our *compañeros* (comrades).

There's still a long way to go. In this post, I want to meet the expectations

of my brothers and sisters who have different kinds of problems. I want to fulfil the people's hopes for justice.

The boys and girls of Bolivia are living in difficult circumstances. There are huge inequalities. There are still lots of children who are going through what I did as a girl – not being able to go to school, not having safe food to eat. Our *wawas* (children) are the first ones to suffer from abuse, violence and rape. I would like to see a day when Bolivia's *wawas* can grow up enjoying the love of their parents without going hungry. It is a huge challenge. We have to make an effort to make everyone's dream of having a good life come true.

Casimira Rodríguez Romero, the current Minister of Justice in Bolivia, was born in a Quechua community in the valley of Mizque, Cochabamba. She is the fourth of 10 brothers and sisters. Her life was marked by poverty and discrimination, and her presence in Bolivia's cabinet represents the historically marginalized indigenous woman.