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Mari Luz Canaquiri, from the Kukama Indigenous village of Shapajilla, in the Peruvian Amazon, is president of Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana, an organization of Kukama women whose name means "women who work." (Goldman Environmental Prize)



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If you ask people about Mari Luz Canaquiri, they will tell you how she gave birth to her youngest daughter in a canoe on the Marañón River, the baby arriving before she and her husband could reach the nearest health center.

The story reveals a lot about her, especially about her willpower, formed living in a place where people lack basic services like safe drinking water and decent health care, and where the settlement was rebuilt time after time as the river eroded the bank where houses were located. It also shows how tightly her life is bound to the river.

People who knew Canaquiri as a young woman in the Kukama Indigenous village of Shapajilla, in the Peruvian Amazon, cheered when she won the prestigious Goldman Environmental Prize this year, as president of Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana, an organization of Kukama women whose name means "women who work." Last year, the organization triumphed in a landmark court case that recognized the Marañón River and its tributaries as having rights.

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At the Goldman Prize award ceremony in San Francisco April 21, Canaquiri told the audience that she and the other women in the organization have been "defending our river and territory for the right to water, the right to life."

She added, "I want to send a message to the whole world to protect Mother Earth, nature, rivers, the territory that gives life to everyone. For the Kukama people, rivers are very sacred, fundamental for life, for my country and the world."

What was not visible at that ceremony, however, was the journey that led Canaquiri and other members of the women's organization to fight for the Marañón River in the first rights-of-nature case ever taken to court in Peru. That journey has roots in the parish of Santa Rita de Castilla, a small town on the bank of the Marañón in Peru's northeastern Loreto region.




Mari Luz Canaquiri receives the 2025 Goldman Environmental Prize in San Francisco April 21. (Goldman Environmental Prize)

Canaquiri and the other women in the organization are from small villages along the river, where the wooden houses have palm-thatch roofs and are built on stilts to keep the living area above the annual floodwaters. The villages lack electricity, safe drinking water and sanitation systems, and the region's education and health systems are among the worst in the country.

"God has inspired me, giving me strength and life and the courage to lead other women in this beautiful work," Canaquiri said shortly before the Goldman award ceremony. "This is really a collective struggle, which is going to help all of us who live in our territory, as well as the region, the country and the entire world. Because it's a matter of rights that are fundamental to life — the protection of our rivers, the protection of our territory, which is nature."

For Canaquiri and other members of Huaynakana, that understanding of the river's importance — beyond being the place where they bathed, washed clothes and

cooking pots, and drew water for cooking and drinking — was honed in the Santa Rita Parish. There, missionary priests and sisters watched them turn from shy young women into confident leaders in their communities.

Canaquiri puts a date on the beginning of her own journey: Sept. 18, 1991, when she and other women joined a program organized by the parish and UNICEF in an effort to lower the high rate of maternal and infant mortality in villages along the Marañón. The program trained community health workers, including women known as "mobilizers," whose role was to teach other women the skills they learned in workshops.



Houses built on stilts in the Kukama Indigenous village of Shapajilla, in the Peruvian Amazon (Goldman Environmental Prize)

With the abilities and confidence she developed, Canaquiri moved into a leadership role in Shapajilla, her home community, serving as president of the Mother's Club and a child nutrition program called Glass of Milk. Other women also gradually became leaders in their communities. And with their work and that of health

promoters and midwives trained in the parish, maternal and infant mortality rates dropped.

The training covered not only health, but a broad range of topics that helped the women see beyond their communities' boundaries. Canaquiri recalls that it was the current bishop of Iquitos, the Spanish Augustinian missionary Miguel Ángel Cadenas, and his fellow Augustinian, Fr. Manolo Berjón, who at the time were the pastors in Santa Rita, who introduced her to International Labor Organization Convention 169, a key document on the rights of Indigenous peoples.

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In the 2000s, a series of oil spills brought environmental issues to the fore and led to conversations about how the women viewed the Marañón, a complex world that gave birth to the first Kukama person, the offspring of a boa, and where river spirits and family members who suffered accidents and disappeared in the murky water live in underwater cities. The women's testimony about the cultural significance of the river was crucial in the court case that led to recognition of the Marañón and its tributaries as having rights.

In a worldview in which animals and plants are considered *gente*, the Spanish word for people, "the river for us is a person," Canaquiri said while the court case was underway. "If a corporation has rights, why can't the river, which is a person, have rights, too?"



Sr. Araceli Guimera, right, listens to Mari Luz Canaquiri during a press conference about the rights of nature case in 2023 (IDL/Alan Benavides)

The range of topics covered in the parish courses opened the women's eyes "not only to their own communities, but to the situation around them," said Spanish Sr. Araceli Guimera, of the Missionary Society of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, who worked for years in Santa Rita. "And little by little, they organized."

That new role brought its own problems.

"The men in the area didn't want the women to get training, because it meant they would be out of the house, and because it also meant they'd be able to debate at the same level as men in public situations," Cadenas recalled. "As a result, some of the women received [violent] abuse from their husbands. Nevertheless, they persevered and have had an increasingly important voice, to the point of reaching this recognition" with the Goldman Prize.

In the courses, the parish team "always gave me time to talk [to the group] about issues I thought were important," says Canaquiri, who evolved from a shy young woman who almost never spoke up in public to the self-confident leader who at the

Goldman awards ceremony called out the country's president.

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"We have an authoritarian leader who opposes Indigenous peoples and those who defend nature," she told the audience. "There are policies against nature, laws that threaten it. In the Amazon, there's oil production, illegal mining, deforestation, pollution of our Marañón River."

People who stand up for territorial rights are prosecuted and sometimes killed, she said.

According to national Indigenous leaders and international watchdog groups, more than 30 people have been killed in Peru over the past decade or so for defending their territory against land grabbers, drug traffickers and illegal gold miners.

"And that is unjust," Canaquiri said.

The rights-of-nature sentence that the women won, which also designates Indigenous communities as guardians of the river, could lead to greater possibilities for protecting the Marañón watershed, and the Goldman award has given the issue greater visibility. The women are also speaking out in other venues.

Canaquiri is the protagonist of an award-winning documentary, "Karuara, People of the River," by Canadian filmmaker Stephanie Boyd. Canaquiri and other members of the group have told their story before international audiences in Europe, England, Canada and other Latin American countries.




Leaders of Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana stand in the Marañón River in Peru. Mari Luz Canaquiri is second from right. (Quisca Productions/Miguel Araoz)

But protecting the river from further industrial and urban pollution and impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects will still be an uphill battle.

"The sentence is an important milestone, because it gives Indigenous peoples a legal means that allows them, not to erase asymmetries, but to reduce them, so they can negotiate with the government and with companies on better terms," Cadenas said.

Asked about her dreams for the watershed's future, Guimera said, "I can dream, but the reality isn't easy. Nevertheless, if we have people who know how to struggle and how to defend, we can attain things that haven't been won so far. But it has to be done collectively. In union there is strength."

Berjón, who was also part of the parish team during the women's formative years, says that what he learned from the women is also the advice he would give them:

"Keep going. You have to keep going."

And in her remarks at the Goldman award ceremony, Canaquiri summed up the importance of her group's work for the entire Amazon basin, as well as the women's commitment to continuing it.

"We Kukama women exist and resist in defense of nature, the rivers, our territory," she said. "Without the river, there would be no forest."



The Marañón River in the Peruvian Amazon. Last year, the Kukama women's group Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana triumphed in a landmark court case in Peru that recognized the Marañón and its tributaries as having rights. (Goldman Environmental Prize)

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