

Casa de la Mujer Mapuche: Weaving, Identity & Development in Chile



A member of the Comité of the community Llamaico, which is associated with the Casa de la Mujer Mapuche, Eugenia Antipán dyes sheep's wool in her yard. Eugenia shares her knowledge of preparing dyes from local roots, barks, and leaves with other weavers of La Casa. She is also one of the few members who knows the technique of resist dyeing used for the style of poncho worn by a cacique (leader).

Photo by Annette Martens

The Mapuche, who live in south and central Chile on the border with Argentina, are one of several indigenous groups in the region. The Mapuche maintained their independence from Spain through years of sustained warfare until 1883. Exchanges between the Mapuche and the Spaniards were generally adversarial, and the Mapuche have rejected much of Spanish culture. They did, however, adopt the use of sheep's wool, which has completely replaced that of llamas for textile manufacturing.

In contemporary Mapuche culture, textiles play an important role in female socialization in rural areas. From an early age, women learn the art and labor that are central to the identity of the Mapuche in general and of Mapuche women specifically. Each day, women weave the collective memory and the history of a people that has persevered in maintaining its cultural identity.

Since the turn of the 20th century, the Mapuche's experience has been similar to that of many other indigenous peoples. Their lands have been continuously encroached upon, and their forests have been destroyed by lumber companies. Their children, once the work force on locally owned family farms, now frequently migrate to urban areas. In the Mapuche's struggle for a sustainable way of life, La Casa de la Mujer Mapuche (Mapuche Women's House) has helped support and empower Mapuche women by revitalizing and marketing their textile production, which previously had been only for household use, and by conducting training programs. Members trained in marketing skills sell textiles from nine member committees at regional and national craft fairs. Through economic development and social transformation, many of the women hope to provide alternatives to their children's migration to the city.

La Casa began in 1987 as a collaboration between the Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo de la Mujer (a research center for the development of women) in Santiago and women from Mapuche communities around the town of Temuco. The Centro provided leadership training and assistance in production and marketing to young Mapuche women, who, in turn, conveyed the skills to others in their own communities. Now independent, the Casa continues to promote textile production and marketing, and pursues ways to open other cultural and economic opportunities for Mapuche women.

Rosa Rapimán, a member of the team first trained by the Centro and now director of La Casa, relates her experience: "In 1987 when I was 18 years old, I enrolled as a technical student in Mapuche crafts at the Casa. My training included working with the Mapuche communities and marketing textiles. I took great pride in being Mapuche and wanted to know my culture and my people better, to protect and to disseminate our culture. I also became concerned with the autonomy of La Casa and the need to form a team of Mapuche women to direct it. It is up to us to create our own development." — Olivia Cadaval