



# Exercising rights from below: Housing, gender, migration and the right to the city from Antofagasta, Chile

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Macro-campamento Los Arenales, Antofagasta, Chile

*in conversation with*

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## **Abstract**

Elizabeth Andrade Huaranga is a woman, migrant, activist, and housing leader of the informal settlement of Los Arenales in Antofagasta, on the coastal edge of the Atacama Desert, Chile. In 2022, she was awarded the National Human Rights Award precisely because of her work on social rights, women's rights, migrants' rights, and above all, her work on the right to housing and to the city. In this Conversation with Camila and Ana, Eli reflects on her personal and collective history, on the construction of the right to housing and the city from precarious, popular or informal settlements, on the organisation of women in the context of crisis and violence, and on the progress and expansion of human rights from their everyday exercise.

## **Keywords**

Informal settlements, human rights, Chile, right to the city, gender

## **Introduction**

“From its frenetic preaching that changes nothing, (...) the ruling class despises what it sees, or thinks it sees: masses ungovernable because they are irredeemable; unruly and submissive masses; masses governed by the complicated marriage of obedience and lenience. **At the other extreme, those who exercise democracy from below and without asking for permission, expand their rights by exercising them**”  
(Monsiváis, 1987:11, *translated*)

With these words, Carlos Monsiváis opens his book about the social organisation that followed the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City. More than 35 years later, on a hot Saturday at the end of 2022, Elizabeth and Camila went to Ana’s house to share Peruvian food and spend the afternoon with friends. Between one pisco sour and another, we found a quiet corner to record this conversation and discuss with Elizabeth her collective work in the city of Antofagasta, Chile, and to hear how—together with her *compañeras*<sup>1</sup>—they *have exercised democracy from below, expanding their rights by exercising them without asking permission*. Just a few months ago, Elizabeth, a woman, migrant, activist, and housing leader of the informal settlement of Los Arenales (known as a *macro-campamento*), was awarded the National Human Rights Award precisely because of her work on social rights, women’s rights, migrants’ rights, and above all, for her work on the right to housing and to the city.

The Los Arenales *macro-campamento* is located in the city of Antofagasta, on the coastal edge of the Atacama Desert. More than 2,000 families live there, 85% of which are migrants. Its leaders, mostly women, are organised into 16 committees and two community corporations (*Los Arenales Rompiendo Barreras* and *América Unida*). Their organisations have managed to push the authorities—the regional government and Ministry of Housing and Urbanism—to declare the in-situ regeneration of Los Arenales a national priority. Today, they are fighting for the construction of the urban sub-centre of the Bonilla Sector, with 50,000 inhabitants.

In this *Conversation*, we reproduce part of what we exchanged that afternoon: reflections on Eli’s personal and collective history, on the construction of the right to housing and the city from precarious, popular or informal settlements, on the organisation of women in the context of crisis, and on the progress of human rights from their exercise in the specificity of each territory.

## **The collective pathway: Reconstructed women**

**Camila:** Tell us about how you came to be a social and housing leader, a *dirigenta*, both in relation to your personal history and your collective trajectory, which we know is a central part of your identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Because of the gendered nature of some terms and the lack of gender connotation in their English translation, we have left certain words untranslated, such as “compañera” (female comrades), “dirigenta” (female leader), or “vecina” and “pobladora” (female resident).

**Elizabeth:** My name is Elizabeth Andrade Huaranga, a Peruvian national, and I have lived here in Chile for 30 years. I have carried out social work that I now look back on as a catharsis of my own life. I am the eldest sister of six siblings, and I was responsible for taking care of and protecting them. I grew up in a very patriarchal environment, very Christian, and I spent ten years training to be a religious nun in the jungle. But I got out of that process, and I met the man who became the father of my daughter, a man whom I later married in Chile. At that time, those of us who got married had that mentality of ‘with you, in good and bad; with you, through thick and thin [*contigo, pan y cebolla*]’, in which the woman had to endure, with love and sacrifice, all the suffering that married life brings. When I was 45 or 46 years old, I asked myself, ‘What am I doing with my life? What is my North?’ And I got sick: hypertension, diabetes, asthma. Then I realised that this was not my path. In the beginning, nobody believed in me, because it was not the first time that I thought that way. But then I heard an almost subliminal message from an 85-year-old aunt, who told me, ‘I’m waiting for this unhappy man (my husband) to die to be happy.’ 85 years old and still waiting. I looked at myself and said, ‘No, I don’t want to wait until I’m 85 to be happy; I have to be happy now.’ That was when I made a change, and in that process, I also began a new leadership stage. I have always been a leader: leader at my daughter’s school, president of the School for Parents, president of neighbourhood associations there in my country...

**Ana:** In the jungle...

**Eli:** Also in the jungle, where I directed groups of young people, children, adults... I had the role of the priest and, it must be said, the only thing missing was to hold a mass, because the church did not allow it.

I decided to leave my marriage one day at 2:00 am so no one would see me, for fear of stigmatisation. At first, in the *macro-campamento*, I became a leader just so that people wouldn’t do anything to me. I said, ‘I am going to get the most out of my leadership so

**Figure 1**

Macro-campamento  
Los Arenales,  
Antofagasta. Picture:  
Ana Sugranyes.



that they take care of me', without thinking about the whole process that was going to take place over the years. In that process, I was empowering myself, I was rebuilding myself. We speak of 'reconstructed women', 'reconstructed *pobladoras*', rebuilding ourselves in 'our *cuerpa*',<sup>2</sup> our body, in order to get out of the vicious circle of violence. We know that some *compañeras* are still there, but that they are not alone, that they have us. We are helping each other, trying to see that we are capable of doing great things.

The process of saying, 'I don't want this life anymore; it's a shit life', led me to wonder about broader life challenges. On a personal level, at the age of 48, I decided to study social work. I studied for two years, and when I saw that the debt was already piling up, I had to leave. But I returned, with a bit of rebellion, I paid and continued studying. All these processes have been personal, but they have also happened from a more critical and sympathetic perspective on issues affecting women. I also decided to check how my *cuerpa* was. I had, for example, a disease for 30 years in this toe, and now after a year and a half of treatment, it is beautiful. A fellow Colombian podiatrist told me, "Eli, I can help you, but if you do your part." Because that is the issue: to do your part in everything, to face yourself, to look pretty, to feel desire and desired again, too, because that is important; it is about feeling again, trusting again. On a personal level, as a woman, I was discovering myself: knowing how to feel which parts of my body were erogenous and I did not know it. In that process of personal hormonal revolution, everyone said that what I had was the menopausal process, to which I said: Bless the menopause! 100 more years of menopause for everyone! But what helped me the most in that process, to be able to see how I am looking at myself today, was the leadership process, which is the focus of what you are asking me.

Because, if I hadn't had a group of *compañeras* who were also going through the same shit as me, and then learning and getting to know other spaces, it wouldn't have been possible.

All this did not happen only in the *macro-campamento* but also in other spaces. For example, within a few years of organising, we embarked on an international project to map the *macro-campamento* with Slum Dwellers International (SDI). There I met Ana and other *compañeras*. Then, I met the Latin American Popular Housing and Habitat Secretariat (SELVIHP), and this is the third consecutive year that I have participated in this international network.

### **Expanding ambitions: Building the Right to the City**

**Eli:** In 2017, the same year that I met Ana, we did some workshops on the Right to the City. Thus, we began to broaden our horizons, as we were no longer talking only about the construction of our house or neighbourhood. In 2018, we were already claiming that the *macro-campamento* had to expand its sports infrastructure, to open avenues that provide good connectivity, etc. And by now, we are dreaming of something bigger, which is to turn the Los Arenales *macro-campamento* into the urban sub-centre of La Bonilla: not only

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<sup>2</sup> "Cuerpa" is a term use to subvert the word "cuerpo" (body) into a female word.

to be the city of Latin Americans but the centre of an entire area of the city. That is what we told the regional housing authority when they visited. They brought us the news about Los Arenales *macro-campamento* being declared a national priority for the state, which made many residents very happy. But I say that more than words, we need concrete facts: words are nice, but let's wait for actions.

We want Los Arenales to have equipment for the whole of Bonilla, with public offices for the housing department (SERVIU), health (Fonasa), *Chile Atiende*, *Chile Migra*, the Civil Registry and a bank. This will allow people to no longer look down on us as 'look what these migrants are doing' but rather as a place of innovation. A large service centre is going to be built, with multiple facilities. We want this to be a kind of *people's mall* for the residents of the *macro-campamento*: those who sell Bolivian, Colombian, Peruvian, and Chilean food, those who fix nails, that cut hair; why not make them part of that development? Having all the businesses that the *macro-campamento* has there so that people come from outside can taste our delicious food: *a community sales mall*.

**Ana:** The aspiration to become the urban sub-centre of the Bonilla sector and for Los Arenales, marginalised and stigmatised, to become the centre of a sector of the city is very clear to me. But at the same time, what each of you is looking for is to have your own home, a good quality house and security. How is it possible to combine the individual with the collective? For me, this is always, in daily practice, the most difficult.

**Eli:** For us women, since we have organised ourselves, we are already a collective. And when we talk about adequate housing (because we are not talking about our house, but about adequate housing), the standards of what that means are not only national but international. Although in 2015 and 2016, we wanted to be in a housing committee to 'queue' to have our own house, when we began to empower ourselves in the housing

## Figure 2

View of Antofagasta from Los Arenales.  
Picture: Ana Sugranyes.





process and the right to the city, having a collective perspective and opening to the cooperative processes, we were able to begin thinking not only about my house but about our houses.

Although the state has already understood that this space is going to settle and regenerate in situ and that no one is going to move from here, the residents know that those who do not fight will not benefit from the process. We have a well-organised list of the commitment signatures, the community members who attend meetings, and the residents who, because of their working circumstances, have exceptional treatment (because some people just have to work, cannot attend, and we respect that work is work); we have contemplated all these criteria. And that's how we learn to look that way: you, me, us.

I was looking at the results of a workshop that we did in 2017 with 255 residents, in which each one put together in a fragment how they wanted the neighbourhood of our former *macro-campamento*: that it should be safe, have a school, a health centre... And inadvertently, we built the city centre as well, already in 2017, when we were not even thinking about the Right to the City as such.

**Ana:** I have always believed that the concept of the Right to the City formulated by the leaders of Los Arenales in 2017 is the best document we have in Chile on the Right to the City because it manages to define it not as access to services or the more or less equitable distribution of different components of the city, rather, it defines how to assume your role to make this possible. And I think this is what we have learned since Lefebvre, of course, but above all from the perspective of the Right to the City from Latin America, which is a different story. That it is not about the theory of socialist society and its ability to redistribute wealth, but about how it is possible to make another city possible, from the practice of daily coexistence, everyday life, from the discrimination and the ability to overcome it. This is what I have learned the most from the women of Los Arenales.

### **Interculturality and cooperative work**

**Eli:** The organisation process is leading us to think even more daringly: perhaps we will have our own bank; we are thinking about it, we don't know how, but we are thinking about it.

**Camila:** To promote the circular economy in the *macro-campamento*...

**Eli:** Exactly. It helped me a lot to have participated in the creation of a labour cooperative in the *macro-campamento* and to have trained with people who have that vision. The state gave us ten million Chilean pesos<sup>3</sup> to build a cooperative, but we knew we could fail because many times the seed projects fail; but, up to now, we are alive. The ruling class supports embryonic projects destined to fail so that they remain precarious, so we remain poor. We knew this had to be sustained somehow. It has not been easy to have

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<sup>3</sup> Around US\$12,000.

**Figure 3**

Intercultural activities at Los Arenales, Antofagasta.

Picture: Ana Sugranyes.



institutional recognition, we know without a doubt that the resolutions requested from the *campamentos* take longer than normal because they come from a poor community. Often the state does not understand when the movements of *pobladores* and *pobladoras* are organised, they always assume that poor people are waiting for the government to give them something, but we do not expect them to give us anything; we seek to manage things ourselves, to be able to carry them out.

Our cooperative work occurs in the context of the interculturality of the *macro-campamento*. Interculturality occurs when we get to know different realities through other cultures. When I came to live in the *macro-campamento*, we used to hear screams and I always thought my neighbours were fighting. But later, when I went for a walk through the passage, I saw that it was a Colombian neighbour who was talking on the phone. My Bolivian neighbour listens to her music until 4:00 or 5:00 am, and I ask them to at least invite me, but they don't! (laughs). All this is reflected in how we organise ourselves; when we start holding activities together, each country brings about its own heritage: dance, music and drinks. And, of course, it is from this diversity that the Los Arenales Intercultural Work Cooperative, CINTRA, arose; where each member of the community makes bread from her country.<sup>4</sup> I am very observant, and I saw that each resident, a Bolivian, a Colombian, and a Peruvian, used the same basic ingredients for bread: flour, salt, water, a little butter, and yeast. But for example, you add more butter, sugar, and eggs to Bolivian bread; for Colombian bread, perhaps yellow cheese, egg, and vanilla essence to make it yellow; for the Peruvian one, you add essence of anise, anise water, and sesame. And different types of bread come out, but with the same essence. I always talk about this because we have a

<sup>4</sup> More information about this cooperative in: Vergara-Perucich, J.-F., & Arias-Loyola, M. (2019). Bread for advancing the right to the city: academia, grassroots groups and the first cooperative bakery in a Chilean informal settlement. *Environment and Urbanization*, 31(2), 533-551 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0956247819866156>

xenophobic, racist, discriminatory look of who we are, but if we look at ourselves face to face, we have eyes, noses, mouths, hands, arms, tall, skinny, fat, thin bodies, small, curly hair, black, white, but we are people after all. So, what is it that changes? The taste, the texture, and the coordination of thoughts. Chicken broth, chicken stew, chicken casserole or peanut soup, for example, are the same, right? Who makes the borders? Why do we have those limits? Chile, Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador all countries have their racist side for being black, *Chola*, or indigenous. Since my mom is *Chola* and my dad is black, I got something from *Indigenous and Mandingo*. I'm *Chola* and I'm Black. But not everyone understands it, there are xenophobic perspectives that persist and that have allowed us to hate each other. We have had suicides in the *macro-campamento*, of women, of children, for not having been able to bear the xenophobia, and it has been very hard.

That's what the projects we're doing are for. We have the project of having a community self-care centre. When we see a *compañera* who is in danger of experiencing violence, take her out of her house, let her sleep in a cosy, beautiful place and receive the professional help she needs: psychologist, social worker, whatever. But more than all, make sure that she receives a helping hand from a neighbour who tells her don't worry, this will be okay, and let's move on.

Different types of organisations make you look around and have a new perspective. For example, we realised that where we lived was unstable because of the sand, and we needed to mitigate that risk. Coincidentally, some guys from the Fractal NGO came (because many organisations have accompanied this process on a personal and collective level) and said, 'the sand collapses under that lady's house', and they taught us that we could put any sort of weed to support the sand foundation of the house and keep it always firm. And the whole border of my house is now a garden. And all the roots of that garden are attached to our floor, and thus we have learned to mitigate risks with a sustainable, ecological perspective. This has led us to see the value of planting vegetables to strengthen

#### **Figure 4**

A garden built in Los Arenales.

*Picture: Ana Sugranyes.*





the soil, fertilise and continue planting. And so, in these ways, the collaboration networks have led us to have other perspectives.

### **Self-management, organisation and the pandemic**

**Ana:** Some of the organisational processes that you are currently carrying out are the result of the collective kitchens (*ollas comunes*)...

**Eli:** Precisely. Now, for example, we are organising the children's Christmas, and we want to make a thousand Christmas servings for the *macro-campamento*. The *vecinas* have a spreadsheet with information on how many children there are completely organised because, during the pandemic, we had to organise ourselves. The Chilean social outbreak came [social protests starting October 2019], and we got paralyzed, and we got even more paralyzed with the pandemic (in March 2020). We had to reorganise because there was unemployment, there were deaths, there were sick people, and above all there was hunger. And it is one thing to say, 'Oh, yes, I am supportive, and I work and help in the *ollas comunes*', but another thing completely different is to feel obliged to cook because you are hungry. And it is difficult for one to continue organising and distributing help because if you do not get that help, your people will starve. We made 775 daily servings of food. There were committees that did not have gas, and they began to use firewood because they could not stop cooking. And we saw our *vecinas* with their stained apron, stained hands and pots, who allowed everyone to remain afloat. We also had huge arguments, and we always had to keep applying proportional logic. If a *vecina* told us, "We are 175", yes, *compañera*, but there are only rations for 100. So, 100 ate one day, 75 the next; and among these 75, we included ourselves because we couldn't stop feeding other residents. And one day someone ate, and one day someone else ate, and so on. Since then, times have been very hard.

During the pandemic, when some *vecinas*, including myself, were sick with Covid, our own neighbours organised themselves; we knew that they would arrive with food and that a piece of bread would come through the window. And in the midst of all that, the process of the new migrants who were on their way. In the *macro-campamento*, we received about 600 migrants in different areas at different times, and we fed them breakfast, lunch and dinner.

### **Expanding and exercising rights: Making visible the invisible**

**Camila:** Everything you are telling us about your work around housing, the territory, being a migrant, being a woman and fighting violence are inseparable parts of your work as a *dirigenta*. Regarding the National Human Rights Award that you have just received, I would find it very interesting to know how you see your struggle as a human rights struggle. For some people, human rights are conceived in a very fragmented way, such as the protection of specific individual rights (for example, to housing); but your work has much more to do with exercising and expanding human dignity in all its complexity.

**Figure 5**

Community meeting at Los Arenales. The banner reads, “Latin America fights for dignified housing”. Picture: Ana Sugranyes.



**Eli:** It is exactly that. We had the task of deconstructing the perspective of making silos with women, migrants and housing as individual struggles because we work as a whole. And this is not because I wanted to do it that way, but because reality itself led us to do that. I am a migrant and a resident; I am a woman and organised. I am a restless soul. The challenge of using the National Award to make visible the invisible is born in me. Yesterday, for example, I was at the meeting of the social movements, and everyone was saying that the state had not fulfilled its promises. Many high-ranking institutional doors have been opened for me because of the National Award, and I told them that I make this award available to anyone who wants to use it. We need strategic planning to be able to continue with my social work, but in another, more impactful way; with an impact that is not only political but that has a social perspective of integration, and of interculturality and respect. It has been difficult. For example, at the last meeting of the Immigrants Network, of which I used to be the national spokesperson, I resigned because I had to be the voice of many voices, and I could not be a specific voice. This is how I feel today.

**Camila:** Precisely, at the heart of the work you are doing, is the idea that if we don't advance all these rights together, we can't advance any of them. There is no point in advancing them separately, and you are putting the right to housing as part of this human rights struggle, as something indivisible. Your work shows that it is not just about the rights recognised by international commitments or about a new generation of emerging rights but about rights that are expanded and generated through daily practices and that are then consolidated through advocacy practices.

**Eli:** Absolutely. Party politics is not my battle, and nor will it ever be. But the politics of influence, yes: to question, to be part of a change, to work on a board for a public policy that is inclusive and intercultural, I will be there. Now, for example, I'm going to a

workers' summit, mainly rural and field workers from North America. And they invited me for a simple reason, for something that caught the attention of a *compañero* who visited us from that foundation, who told me: we fight for the workers so that they have access to health, have a contract, but we have never had a housing project, for example. And a migrant housing project, as in our case, because our project has an 85% migrant population. In general, in the *Borde Cerro*, of the 7,800 families living in informal settlements, 75% are migrants. This is because the city of Antofagasta does not offer any other alternative.

I have been changing some terms I use for public greetings. When I participate in an event, I no longer say 'Hello, *compañeros* and *compañeras*', but rather 'How are you *ciudadanas* and *ciudadanos* of the world? Here is the whole world organized to fight for social justice.' They say that because I am a National Award winner, I can say what I want, so let's take advantage of it. But I try to challenge the public, encompassing an entire system to make the invisible visible: a migrant woman, abused, without rights, without a home...

**Camila:** It is impressive how this process, which emerged from a grounded and local experience, resonates with the learning processes of other organised communities, with processes in which residents and local federations are the ones who broaden and identify the rights through their actions. Now, Eli, with Los Arenales as a national priority, how do you see your role and the learning cycles in those other informal settlements that are right now in the position you were in ten years ago?

**Eli:** We know that we will be the base for trial-and-error because we are building all of this based on many mistakes. My *vecinas* have something that I value and that I also have, which is strength, the strength of continuity. The desire to give up exists. Yes, we have had it many times, but our *compañeras* have been there, supporting us, containing us, telling us: calm down, this will pass, we will find a way. We have had many internal differences and fights. But as I told my *vecinas*, we might think differently, but what is your goal? What is mine? The in-situ regeneration of the *macro-campamento* and the Right to the City, right? So, we can't divide ourselves; even if I might hate you, we can't separate. Let's unite. And this is how we have achieved that the 16 housing committees of the *macro-campamento* are now within the in-situ regeneration process.

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