

GENDER AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES



Indigenous women face double discrimination in many areas of the world - discriminated against for their ethnicity and for their gender. In developing countries, economic marginalization can add an even greater burden, as recognized by the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in its Third session (2004).¹

There is often a reluctance to address the gender dimensions of Indigenous Peoples, as this is seen as “interfering with culture” or “imposing western values”. However, seen from socioeconomic and poverty reduction perspectives, gender analysis is simply a tool to identify and address gender-differentiated needs in a more accurate and targeted way.²

Within this context, a resolution on Indigenous Women was adopted at the 49th Session of the Commission of the Status of the Women (CSW) in March 2005, which is the first ever on indigenous women by this body. It is now clear that indigenous women are claiming gender equality and the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.³

Why are gender issues important to Indigenous Peoples?

“Indigenous Peoples carry a fragile but essential part of our common humanity. As individuals and societies, they represent an irreplaceable diversity. Participation in development should not mean absorption into the mainstream – on the contrary, our task is to ensure that the human rights and human potential of Indigenous Peoples receive the needed attention; that development policies recognize the unique contribution and capacity of Indigenous Peoples; that policymakers understand the Millennium Development Goals and the concept of development in ways which support and engage with indigenous culture, and that we become partners in a common enterprise.”⁴

In different societies and cultures, different values and norms attached to men and women assign them

into different statuses; however norms and values generally attached to men and women of colonial and dominant cultures such as purity and pollution, liability and asset, dependent and breadwinner have segregated women and men.

In indigenous communities men and women have different gender roles and responsibilities and for that reason they also often have different needs, wants and interests. In traditional times, Indigenous men would generally respect women. Yet, in modern times, Indigenous women, who in the past had equal access to and control over land and natural resources, which used to be collective property have now lost access to and control over such subsistence resources. With the gradual loss of collective or communal ownership or possession of lands and other natural resources and the introduction and development of institutions of private property by dominant outsiders, indigenous women progressively forfeited their traditional rights to lands and natural resources. The following has been a familiar pattern in many indigenous communities: As the indigenous economy guided by the values of generalized reciprocity⁵ and symbolic complementarity⁶ and customary laws that cherish gender equity and equality weakened, male members of indigenous communities, with exception of some indigenous matriarchal or other isolated societies, became sole inheritors of lands and other property depriving female members of their rights of traditional access to lands and other resources.

For example in some indigenous communities of South and South-East Asia, such as indigenous nationalities of Nepal, some tribes of India, Thailand and Cambodia women enjoy a high social position and their status is not low by comparison to their male counterparts. The property is owned by both men and women in the communities of patriarchal Tharus of India and the women spend their income freely without any advice from their men relatives. In several matrilineal tribes like Khasi, Garo and Jaintia of North-Eastern hills of India, women are

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entitled to hold exclusive land rights and inherit ancestral properties. However, their elevated status within the family is not reflected in the realm of bigger politico-rural canvas of the society. Indeed, for quite a long time, tribal (indigenous) women were free from oppressive patriarchal values and gender biases and were spared from discriminatory treatment in different social institutions. Certain influences of colonial and dominant cultures and traditions on Indigenous Peoples have placed indigenous women in a difficult situation in terms of playing effective roles as custodians of their cultures.

The Human Development index of many countries shows that the socio-economic gap between Indigenous Peoples and non-indigenous peoples is increasing.⁷ A similar trend is seen in human development and empowerment between indigenous women and men. The gap between indigenous women and dominant group women is even more alarmingly wide. Gender or the social, cultural and psychological patterning of differences between males and females did not use to be a prominent aspect of the lives of Indigenous Peoples. But, with the increasing inter-cultural contacts, accelerating pace of marketization of indigenous economies, rapid expansion of communications and other technologies, spread of state institutions and development actions, inescapable mainstream socialization and urbanization, gender became an important factor and destabilized indigenous women's status, disintegrated their identity and worsened their life conditions.

How does the application of a gender perspective make a difference to Indigenous Peoples?

Gender mainstreaming is a gender perspective applied in all types of activities and it is a strategy to reduce disparity between men and women. Gender equality is not only the concern of women, but of men and boys too. Ole Henrik Magga, former Chairperson of the UNPFII, when speaking at the high level panel at the third session of the Permanent Forum, highlighted the following regarding the role of boys and men in achieving gender equality: *"So often it seems to me that an important role of Indigenous Peoples in the global debates of our times is to remind us all of what we may have forgotten, (that) Indigenous cultures rely on gender complementarity – a symbiosis, which values both women's business and men's business - a complementarity that ensures both mutual respect and balance"*.

Mainstreaming a gender perspective in development initiatives may make a real difference. For instance, indigenous men's and women's situations can be better understood through the analysis of gender disaggregated data (qualitative and quantitative). Based on their needs assessment and their development priorities, various programs such as awareness raising, social mobilization, organization building, training, saving and credit schemes, income generation, functional literacy, cultural revitalization, will be prepared and implemented with their full participation.

When indigenous women exercise control over institutions, processes and resources, and assume responsibility to manage development initiatives, they will enhance and improve their social and economic conditions. Gender-blind approaches of development will fail to address the issues and problems of indigenous women.

After the Beijing conference, some governments have taken initiatives in changing discriminatory legal provisions towards women in order to improve the position of women. Indigenous women have also benefited from the amendments in legislation; however, many legal provisions are still discriminatory towards indigenous women and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action itself had not properly addressed their issues. Changes in discriminatory and exclusionary provisions will bring positive changes for the position of indigenous women.

The application of a gender perspective makes a difference to Indigenous Peoples as it focuses on improving the distressing situation of indigenous women caused by the continual sufferings from multiple oppressions: as indigenous persons, as women, and as members of the poorer classes of society. It is necessary to adopt appropriate strategies for their empowerment and social inclusion, with due respect to their cultures, ways of life, traditions and customary laws, emphasizing the protection and full enjoyment of their human rights and fundamental freedoms as women and members of an indigenous community.

What are the key issues to be considered when discussing gender and Indigenous Peoples?

The status of indigenous women and gender differs from one community to another and from one region to another. Yet, their concerns often coincide because of their status as indigenous. The experiences of indigenous women throughout the world are similar in the areas of poverty, human rights vio-

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lations, lack of access to education, health care and socio-economic development.

Multiple discrimination: Indigenous women are facing multiple discrimination on the basis of sex, race/ethnicity, language, culture, religion and class. For instance, indigenous women in one country are called “third class citizens” because of their inferior status in relation to men and in relation to non-indigenous people. Concern of racial discrimination faced by indigenous women was raised by indigenous women at the World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995). In 2004, the UNPFII took note of the fact that the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) does not make reference to indigenous women and the specific nature of the gender dimension of racial discrimination and hence recommended that “special attention should be paid to the issues related to maintaining the integrity of indigenous women and the gender dimension of racial discrimination against Indigenous Peoples”.⁸

Violence: Indigenous Peoples are suffering from violence and conflict in many parts of the world. Indigenous women are particularly vulnerable to such violence by their own community or the broader society whether in time of peace or in time of war, suffering female genital mutilation, forced marriages, early marriages, polygamy, beating, forced labour, lack of property and property ownership rights, and all kinds of discrimination on gender and ethnic basis. Indigenous women are trafficked for prostitution and forced labour. They are often treated as exotic, decorative, sexual objects and study-objects by media and communication system. Such concerns have been highlighted at the United Nations Working Group on Indigenous Populations and the UNPFII.

Globalization and development: Globalization and economic liberalization have negatively impacted on Indigenous Peoples often destroying indigenous subsistence economies and displacing Indigenous Peoples from their land. Many indigenous women, whose life traditionally depended on natural resources, lost their livelihood, and traditional goods which women used to produce at home were displaced by manufactured goods. Poverty among Indigenous Peoples has led male members of the family to move away in search of work, leaving women and children at home. Many indigenous women have become household heads, looking after children and elders in the family. The increasing migration of indigenous women to cities in

search of wage work as labourers in formal and informal sectors has added further problems as they are mostly exploited and treated inhumanly.

Indigenous women have been caught into the vicious circle of feminization of poverty. In many countries Indigenous Peoples are displaced from their lands due to the building of highways, dams, exploitation of mines and protection of national parks. Forced migration has led to destruction of indigenous lifestyles and compounded the problems faced by indigenous women.

Other common issues: Indigenous women all over the world are suffering from poor health, poor sanitary facilities, lack of clean drinking water and other basic needs for sustaining life. Even indigenous women from affluent countries have reported increasing poverty and health problems among them. Indigenous Peoples of developed countries often live in hazardous conditions due to nuclear testing and nuclear waste storage in their territories. Indigenous women from Africa, Asia and Latin America are suffering from HIV/AIDS and water born diseases. Their access to health care services and facilities is restricted because health care policies and programmes treat all women as a homogenous group. Not only indigenous women, but also indigenous men are deprived of educational opportunities because of lack of mother tongue education, geographical difficulty to attain schools and the economic crisis affecting them. Such barriers are more stringent for indigenous women. Similarly, indigenous men and women have very low participation in decision-making bodies, politics and employment. Even in the indigenous communities, decision-making is gradually becoming a man's domain.

What are the practical implications of a gender perspective concerning Indigenous Peoples?

Application of a gender perspective concerning Indigenous Peoples will have several practical implications. They can be summarized as follows:

- The role of indigenous women as custodians of culture, language and beliefs will be strengthened and their status will be respected by society. They will be able to consolidate their roles in conservation and protection of biodiversity.
- With the raising of multiple consciousnesses among indigenous women, differences in experiencing gender between indigenous women and women of dominant groups in many respects will be eventually narrowed. Oppressions and discriminations based on sex, race, caste or ethnicity, class and

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sexual orientation will be reduced. This will also enhance the image of Indigenous Peoples.

- The capacity of indigenous women will be enhanced and they will be able to influence decision makers for policy changes
- The economic, political, cultural, educational and health status of indigenous women will be improved. The elevated status of indigenous women will also immensely contribute to the improvement of overall life conditions of Indigenous Peoples.
- The claims of Indigenous Peoples for land rights, the right to natural resources and right to self-determination, consultation, participation and special representation will be more forceful and compelling. Their access to power, prestige and resources will be increased.
- Violence against indigenous women will decrease and they will effectively exercise their agency to get rid of sexist, racist and other forms of oppressions.
- Development programs will be more equitable, rational, participatory and capable to address Indigenous Peoples' issues. Development planners will take into account the people targeted by development activities.

What are some of the challenges that need to be addressed concerning gender and Indigenous Peoples?

Some of the challenges that need to be addressed concerning gender and Indigenous Peoples are the following:

- The dominant gender-neutral conception of equality prevailing in countries where Indigenous Peoples live has not been adequate in addressing the multiple disadvantages of indigenous women. It has become a daunting task in each country to repeal policies and practices that perpetuate sexual objectification of indigenous women, their disempowerment and victimization.
- Demolishing structural barriers to eliminate complex oppressions experienced by indigenous women is the major challenge for Indigenous Peoples throughout the world.
- Reluctance of many states to implement conventions and adopt special measures is a major hurdle in overcoming educational, health, vocational/economic, and political disadvantages for indigenous women. Denial of Indigenous Peoples' rights has disenfranchised women severely relative to male members of Indigenous Peoples in most countries.
- The removal of structural barriers towards achieving a multi-cultural democracy is one of the foremost challenges for gender equality that will impact on indigenous women.

References

- 1 United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 3.
- 2 World Bank, *Mainstreaming gender in indigenous projects and projects affecting indigenous peoples in the World Bank portfolio: The PROGENIAL Experience*.
- 3 United Nations, *49th Session of the Commission of the Status of the Women*, E/CN.6/2005/11.
- 4 Marisela Padron-Quero, Director, Latin America and the Caribbean Division, *Speaking remarks on behalf of UNFPA to the Fifth Session of the UNPFII*.
- 5 Generalized reciprocity refers to distribution of goods and services by direct sharing without immediate expectation of return. No direct form of repayment is involved in this pattern of exchange of goods and services, but are expected that others will be equally generous. (Howard, Michael C., *Contemporary Cultural Anthropology*. New York, Harper Collins Publisher 1989, Third Edition, p. 147).
- 6 Symbiotic complementarity refers to that pattern of relationships between different systems of production that complement each other providing goods and services needed by the other without one dominating the other. (Howard, 1989: 156).
- 7 *Human Development Report 2004 Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World, Overview: Cultural liberty in today's diverse world*, page 6.
- 8 United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 6, a.

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For further information please contact:
Ms. Mirian Masaquiza
Email: masaquiza@un.org
Division for Social Policy and Development
Secretariat of the Permanent Forum of Indigenous People (SPFII)
2 United Nations Plaza, Office DC2-1772 New York, NY 10017

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