

GENDER AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Why are gender issues important to Indigenous peoples' economic and social development?

Indigenous women throughout the world are among the most marginalized groups, suffering discrimination not only on the basis of sex but on the basis of race, culture and class as well. The complex interaction of the combined factors of colonization, globalization, nationalism, and top-down and paternalistic approaches to development have provided a social and economic environment whereby indigenous women have suffered from the effects of poverty, the breakdown of traditional social mechanisms and institutions, violence and militarization, dislocation and migration, and the depletion of their natural environment and resources.¹

In most indigenous communities, women's reproductive roles are highly valued and their productive roles, ranging from performing domestic chores and managing resources for household provisioning to working as wage earners or discharging duties and exercising authority of assigned jobs in the public sphere.

Gender inequality among indigenous communities is discernible in a number of areas, such as inheritance of land and other property, access to credit, capital market and other economic resources, educational and employment opportunities and health care services, access to information, freedom of choice, freedom of association and lack of access to decision-making processes and institutions. The adverse life conditions of Indigenous Peoples have left the vast majority of indigenous women politically further disenfranchised, economically more insecure, physically more vulnerable and emotionally more strained, which poses further enormous challenges to their economic and social development. Thus gender considerations are vital for the overall development and advancement of both indigenous women and indigenous men.

How does applying a gender perspective make a difference?

The application of a gender perspective in the economic and social development of Indigenous Peoples makes a difference in conventional approaches and strategies for the realization of empowerment and advancement of prosperity.

- Values, norms, traditions, customary laws and cultural practices may be strengthened, redefined, and even reinterpreted to ensure gender equality and equity and an indigenous perspective to development.
- The precedence of developing and periodically updating databases disaggregated by gender, ethnicity/race, religion, language and territory/geographical area will be established and utilized to develop better policies, strategies and plans for Indigenous Peoples' economic and social development and to monitor, assess, analyze and map the processes, outcomes and impacts of such development interventions paying due attention to gender equity and equality.
- The productive input of non-market domestic and caring work of indigenous women including girls, who form the large part of the workforce, will be duly recognized and their productivity will be enhanced by expanding their accessibility to resources and market outlets. Attention will be paid to the 'double burden' of indigenous women labourers performing unpaid nurturing activities of long hours at home and doing paid works in the labour market.
- The life chances and choices of indigenous women and girls will be expanded and mechanisms of equitable distribution of benefits and opportunities will be in place, which will prompt Indigenous Peoples to overcome the barriers of their advancement.
- Discrimination and exclusionary policies and practices against indigenous men and women will be eliminated to a considerable extent and indigenous women will feel more secure to enter into the

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workplace. The workplace environment for indigenous women workers will also be improved and they will be more motivated to become involved in more gainful activities and thus contribute to economic growth and efficiency.

- Problems specific to indigenous women and the sources of their powerlessness will be identified and appropriate measures will be adopted to redress the issues associated with gender inequality, injustice and oppression.
- Understanding of the constraints that restrict indigenous women's access to education will be improved and effective measures will be adopted to respect the right of indigenous women and children to have access to all levels and forms of education. The educational status of indigenous women will be improved by the expansion of suitable educational opportunities for them, which in turn, may lead to gainful employment.
- Indigenous women's access to information will be increased which will eventually be a motivation for the adoption of appropriate technologies for the improvement of quality of their life and the life of their families and communities.
- Health and nutritional status of indigenous women will be improved as will their roles in resource management and environment conservation.

What are the key issues to be considered?

Inequity, inequality and subordination rooted in gender and gender relations are highly debated issues in relation to Indigenous Peoples as they, by their economies and social features, range from foragers, horticulturalists or pastoralists to peasants or farmers and even small entrepreneurs. Enormous variety exists in the understandings of gender and gender relations from one indigenous society to another, from one country or region to another.

In this context, some of the key issues can be summarized as follows:

Under-representation in the public domain:

Indigenous Peoples have no effective representation in decision-making bodies and indigenous women are even more marginalized in this regard. They are neither represented in decision-making structures of the government nor in community councils or in civil society organizations. As a result, their perspectives are invisible and their priorities, needs, interests and expectations are not taken into considerations. Such situation virtually leads to inaccessibility to resources and opportunities for them. In such condition of socio-political exclusion of indigenous women, the

socio-economic development of their communities remains a distant dream.

Non-recognition of the right of inheritance of land and other parental properties/wealth:

With the exception of some indigenous communities, indigenous women have no right to inherit land and other ancestral property or wealth. With the erosion of collective/community ownership of land and other natural resources and the evolution of institutions of private property, indigenous women forfeited their rights to land and natural resources. *Indigenous women in many countries play crucial roles in small scale trade and business and have control over financial transactions. But still, the custodians of their properties, even liquid assets, are the male members of their families and women have to seek permission and guidance to invest their earnings in business ventures or in education or to buy goods. In many indigenous societies, girls and women are treated as assets and their social prestige derives from the fact that they are industrious workers and child bearers.*^{1,2}

Access to education: There is a need to improve indigenous women's access to education and the development of their skills, and reform education systems so as to allow women to take advantage of training and employment opportunities.³

Poor health, poor earning: Indigenous women are confronting discrimination in health care services. Modern health care services are beyond their reach due to unaccessibility (distance), unaffordability, communication barrier and negative attitudes and humiliating behaviors of the service providers. They are under-nourished, vulnerable to physical violence, sexual abuse and do not get proper pre-natal and post-natal care. Poor health naturally leads to high absenteeism and low output which will result in low pay and low earnings.

Indigenous women are not aware of their rights and privileges:

They are not informed about the opportunities available to them. They prefer to work near their home or in their villages even with low wages.

Feminists throughout the world are mostly from dominant groups and women's empowerment/development programs in most countries are focused on women belonging to dominant groups, thus indigenous women have mostly remained untouched by these programs. While human capabilities of dominant groups' women have improved, indigenous

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women often experience domination from female members of dominant groups as well as from male members of dominant groups.

What are the practical implications?

The application of gender perspective in Indigenous Peoples' economic and social development will have implications in several areas. Some of them are summarized below:

Revision or changes in policies, strategies and options: Governments in addressing economic and social development issues should make efforts to adopt general strategies that include considerations for the needs and rights of Indigenous Peoples and they should include participation and consultations with Indigenous Peoples in these processes. Governments should also consider implementing special policies directed to employment creation for Indigenous Peoples, facilitating access to credit and the creation of small and medium-sized businesses, including a gender perspective in this effort.⁴

Enhanced participation in the development process: Several measures should be adopted in different fields to enhance indigenous women's participation in their development processes. Within the context of a human rights-based approach to development, indigenous women will have unique experiences of mobilization and empowerment. They will be able to decide their priorities and become capable to manage their development initiatives. Their involvement in development activities will provide opportunities to them to enhance their capabilities further and to gain control over valued resources that will in turn help them to gain integrity, prestige and power and move towards equality.

Increased employment for indigenous women: The new policies of the state should prompt special measures for the improvement of indigenous women's economic and social conditions through the expansion of employment opportunities. Increased employment for indigenous women will empower them in many ways and thus will enhance their social status. Professionalization of their traditional skills, arts and crafts will further expand their employment opportunities. Increased access to resources including micro credit, new technologies, agricultural inputs and other outputs will also expand self-employment opportunities for them. Favorable market access of their products will also substantially contribute to the expansion of their employment opportunities. With better incomes, indigenous fami-

lies will be freed from debt bondage and other forms of exploitation and the nutritional status of the family members will be improved.

Increased access to education: Education systems should be improved to increase access of indigenous women and girls to education and skills training. Their right to education should be fully respected so that indigenous women have better access to both formal as well as non-formal education. Special educational needs of indigenous women will be taken care of through appropriate measures. Intercultural and bilingual or multilingual educational programs will be essential components of the education system which will lead to equitable educational outcomes. Improved educational status of indigenous women will expand their employment opportunities also leading to their political empowerment.

Natural resource management and protection of environment: The traditional knowledge of indigenous women should be utilized in the management of natural resources and protection of environment. Their roles should be strengthened in the effective control and prevention of the destruction and pollution of land, air, water, sea, ice, wildlife, forests, pastures and other natural resources. Indigenous women's participation should be mandatory in the course of consultation and decision-making related to natural resources.

Access to health care services: Health care systems should be improved to foster rights-based approaches to health and indigenous women should benefit more through the adoption of culturally acceptable and appropriate strategies of health care services. Reproductive rights of indigenous women should be respected and pre and post natal care services should be accessible to them. Traditional healing practices should also be improved. Communication strategies will be designed so that health and disease related information should be made comprehensible to targeted indigenous women. Indigenous women should have better access to health education and training. **Measures should be adopted to stop trafficking of indigenous women and girls for prostitution and sex slavery. HIV/AIDS programs should be tailored to address the special needs and problems of indigenous women. Health care agencies should be more responsive to indigenous women.**

Values, norms and cultural practices: Values, norms and cultural practices should be refined, re-

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defined, re-interpreted and even modified by indigenous women and their communities in order not to have a negative impact on the human development of indigenous women and improved cultural practices and norms should be used as source of their empowerment and advancement.

Socio-economic development and autonomy:

Socio-economic development of indigenous women should ultimately lead to the realization and enjoyment of Indigenous Peoples' rights. The right to self-determination of indigenous women will create a favourable environment for the empowerment of Indigenous Peoples.

Addressing multiple discrimination and disadvantages: Methodologies and strategies should be developed to research the underlying causes of the "feminization" and "indigenization" of poverty and to develop programmes, which effectively address these underlying causes of marginalization.⁵

What are some of the challenges to be addressed?

There are tremendous challenges in the application of a gender perspective in Indigenous Peoples' economic and social development. Consequently, the UNPFII in its fifth session (2006) recognized that "Redefining the Millennium Development Goals provides an opportunity to incorporate into the Goals the concerns of Indigenous Peoples, particularly indigenous women. The Goals offer a strategic framework within which to fully integrate the goals of the [Beijing] Platform for Action, which provides an important human rights-based approach to the development agenda for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women, including indigenous women. Owing to the cross-cutting nature of gender equality, it is also critical that gender perspectives be fully integrated into the implementation and monitoring of all the other objectives associated with the United Nations Millennium Declarationⁱⁱ and the Millennium Development Goals."⁶

Some of the key challenges are summarized as follows:

Overcoming structural barriers: On the one hand, indigenous women often have no participation in policy/decision-making bodies, and on the other, policy/decision-makers are insensitive and irresponsive to the problems and issues of indigenous women, including indigenous communities as a whole. Thus, it is crucial to mainstream indigenous gender issues

and to integrate the special needs and concerns of indigenous women into policies, programmes and budgets.

Eliminating or reversing multiple discrimination:

Indigenous women are experiencing multiple discrimination – gender discrimination, racial/ethnic discrimination, cultural discrimination, linguistic discrimination and religious and class discrimination. Data reveal that gender inequality is highly correlated with ascribed identities. Gender perspectives in Indigenous Peoples' economic and social development have to address such multiple discrimination and disadvantage. One way to do it is compiling and integrating disaggregated data (both qualitative and quantitative in nature and taking into account local and regional cultural/social/ economic differences) on indigenous women's issues.

Improving/Enhancing self-management of development activities:

Paternalistic approaches in development are strongly opposed by Indigenous Peoples as undermining of their dignity and capacity, their traditional autonomy, their way of decision-making their self-determination. Bringing changes in development approaches and practices, and improving or enhancing capacities of Indigenous Peoples, including indigenous women, to manage their development initiatives is a major challenge.

Developing transmission mechanisms to translate economic growth into poverty reduction:

Economic globalization, manifested in the forms of trade liberalization, privatization and deregulation has adversely affected traditional economies, weakening the subsistence base of Indigenous Peoples further. For Indigenous Peoples, these new forms of economic globalization are a continuation of the colonization which has been perpetrated on them since the beginnings of capitalist expansion. Nevertheless, the experience of globalization is not the same for all people within groups. **Economic globalization has enormously increased the hardship and despair of many groups of women. Indigenous women's experience of globalization is one of multiple layers of oppression. Mechanisms should be implemented to address these negative effects, for instance increase indigenous women's capacity for decision-making and political participation and ensure that adequate numbers of indigenous women are placed in positions of political leadership as well as in governance and public administration; improve indigenous women's access to education and the development of their skills, and reform education systems so that they allow women to take advantage of training and**

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employment opportunities and to strengthen programmes in indigenous communities that ensure benefits for indigenous women.

References

- i See Hans (1999) for discussion of Indian tribal women's rights to property and equality. She argues that gender equality and equity in Indian tribal societies is just a 'romanticized version' inferred on the basis of a few indicators, but in fact they are disadvantaged in many fields: social prestige, land and other property ownership, education, protection against violence, healthcare, food security, resource management, etc.
- ii See General Assembly resolution 55/2.
- 1 United Nations, Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, E/2004/43, paragraph 56.
- 2 United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 56.
- 3 Hans, Asha. *Tribal Women and Gender Utopia?*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1999.
- 4 United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 57, d.
- 5 United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 58.
- 6 United Nations, *Fifth Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2006/43, paragraph 45.

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