

GENDER AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' EDUCATION



As part of the crusade that led to the recognition of the international indigenous movement, indigenous women in all parts of the world are organizing themselves and creating their own networks and groups to voice their concerns and hopes.

Generally speaking, the authoritarian approach of most educational systems imposed on Indigenous Peoples did not take into consideration the importance of the traditional and cultural values of these societies. Rather, the educational systems emphasized assimilation of Indigenous Peoples into the national mould. Most indigenous children failed to adapt to these systems and, as a result, indigenous communities have very high illiteracy rates and poor educational qualifications. Indigenous girls and women have been identified as being specially affected by gender inequality. For instance, in Ecuador's rural areas, 48% of indigenous women and 32% of indigenous men are illiterate, compared to 18% of non-indigenous women.¹

In this regard, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) at its third session (2004) underlined that *"taking into account Indigenous Peoples specific situations, Governments should formulate policies and programmes to safeguard Indigenous Peoples' equal rights to education, especially indigenous girls, and adopt positive measures to address indigenous education issues"*.²

Why are gender issues important to Indigenous peoples' education?

The UNPFII in its third session (2004) recognized that *"Education is an effective means leading to equality, freedom and quality of life. Education principles must ensure non-discrimination (on the basis of race, ethnicity, culture, sex, age, disability or religion). Education can also be an effective means to protect the cultural traditions of Indigenous Peoples. Education, when it is culturally appropriate, promotes mother tongue learning and includes indige-*

nous knowledge in the curriculum, can help defend against the negative impacts of cultural globalization. Education is a crucial right for indigenous women and girls".³

In certain communities, indigenous women have often been kept in a situation of dependency. They have been marginalized, refused access to land or subjected to other forms of discrimination. For instance, in patriarchal society, a woman has to leave her natal home after marriage and work for her husband and his family. Consequently, parents are reluctant to send their daughters to school or to pursue higher education because this is not considered beneficial or productive. Each time that these situations are reproduced gender disparity in educational attainment of indigenous men and women increases.

In indigenous communities, women have taken on the great responsibility of transmitting traditional knowledge, skills, and intangible heritage from one generation to the next, however when foreign values are introduced, this conception is severely affected or even destroyed. As a result, there is a negative impact on the relationship between men and women, as well as on women's role within their communities.

Indigenous Peoples have to struggle harder to get education because they do not have modern educational facilities in their locations so they often have to travel far from their home. "Indigenous youth are often forced to leave their traditional communities and move to urban areas to pursue employment or education opportunities. For instance, in the new urban environment, indigenous youth are often subjected to discrimination by the wider community and denied equal opportunities in employment and education".⁴ Similarly, many course books and its contents are ethnocentric, androcentric and sexist and they could be harmful for indigenous children in building their confidence and self-respect.

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There is no doubt that investing in indigenous women and men, giving priority to women's education and training, ultimately benefits all the members of the community. And for indigenous women, appropriate education is especially important, since they are often the primary guardians and transmitters of their rich, diversified culture.

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

Gender dynamics within the indigenous communities need to be first acknowledged in order to identify and address issues of inequalities. In most indigenous societies, women and men have distinct ritual, social and economic responsibilities. There is a need to be aware of such gender-specific roles, rights and opportunities and which of these might disadvantage indigenous women.

Taking into consideration this need the UNPFII in its fifth session (2006) stated 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".⁵

The application of gender perspective in Indigenous Peoples' education will bring significant differences in indigenous women life, including:

Access to education on an equal footing: When a gender perspective is applied in Indigenous Peoples' education, gender barriers to education will be removed and both indigenous girls/women and boys/men will get an opportunity to education. Adequate and sensitive educational efforts will be made to mobilize indigenous women and girls and to involve them in the educational process. Intercultural and bilingual/multilingual policy in education programs will be adopted and the right to education for indigenous girls will be geared to their needs. In sum, gender mainstreaming in educational policies and programmes of Indigenous Peoples will provide a better environment for girls' education.

Innovative educational approaches: Education based on mother tongue curriculum, which incorporates indigenous histories, traditional knowledge and spiritual values, and bi-lingual or multilingual teach-

ers, including indigenous female teachers, will help girls to join and stay in schools. The application of a gender perspective in Indigenous Peoples' education will emphasize innovative educational approaches that prompt to create and revitalize the learning environment for indigenous students, in particular girls.

Gender friendly socialization: Educational institutions will enable all students, both indigenous and non-indigenous, at all levels of education, to have an appreciation and understanding of and respect for traditional and contemporary indigenous histories, cultures and identities. Therefore, when girls and boys are educated in a gender sensitive way, they will grow up in a gender equality environment.

Special measures to overcome socio-economic and cultural constraints: The empowerment of indigenous women is the key to better standards of living. Gendered forms of socio-economic and cultural limitations to attain formal education will be identified and special measures will be taken, such as indigenous women's empowerment programs, community infrastructure development programs, income generation activities, effective participation of indigenous women in education management, among others will be adopted to remove such constraints.

Better opportunity: When indigenous girls and boys get education they will get more options in their life. They will be able to select alternatives among several options. Education will increase opportunity to employment, entrepreneurial activities, social work, academic pursuits and adoption of appropriate professions.

Decision making: Providing community education services will enable Indigenous peoples to develop the skills to manage the development of their communities. Education is a way to empower men and women, so they will be able to decide by themselves and to actively participate at all levels of decision-making processes.

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

Discussion about gender issues in Indigenous Peoples' education is very complex. In the area of education, women (all women including indigenous) share various issues, whereas Indigenous Peoples have somewhat different issues in education. So, indigenous women, falling in both categories, share

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issues of both and it sometimes becomes hard to relate them in a single frame. However, here are some issues which are important from a gender perspective in Indigenous Peoples' education.

Education in indigenous languages: It is important to develop programmes based on the child's mother tongue (first language) as a foundation for learning and aiming at the maintenance and continued use of indigenous languages. Mother-tongue mediates bilingual education and it is indispensable for effective learning process for indigenous children and for the reduction of dropout rates. It is crucial that governments implement culturally sensitive educational programmes, curricula and actions addressing the needs of Indigenous Peoples.⁶

Plurality of Indigenous communities: Indigenous women, while sharing many of the concerns in the areas of poverty, human rights, and economic and social development with other women throughout the world, also offer a distinct and important perspective on these issues. The fact that "indigenous women" are not a homogeneous category but represent a wide variety of cultures with different needs and concerns, should be a central premise for the design of policies and programmes and for that it is indispensable to have disaggregated data.

Access and participation: Most of the indigenous communities are located in remote inaccessible areas where basic infrastructural facilities as health, education, transportation, communication and other primary services are not available or there is limited access. Therefore, it is necessary that governments implement in an appropriate way educational policies and programs with a gender perspective, which will increase the full and effective participation of indigenous women and men in these processes.⁷

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

Indigenous Peoples are lagging behind other parts of the population in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in most, if not all, the countries in which they live. Indigenous women commonly face additional gender-based disadvantages and discrimination. The application of a gender perspective in Indigenous Peoples' education will have implications in a number of areas, including:

Political and social implications: Creating a truly equitable society is a long-term process. Nevertheless, mainstreaming a gender perspective will gradually improve gender relations within indigenous societies. It will facilitate indigenous women participating fully in all areas of their lives, whether it is in their home or in the public arena.

Economic implications: Governments should increase the volume of fund allocation for education and adopt several measures to find additional resources to sustain improved, equitable education programmes for Indigenous Peoples, especially indigenous women. Consequently, indigenous women could gain leadership skills to become community advocates and defenders for indigenous women's rights to achieve gender equity.

Implications on development policies: Tremendous pressure will be generated for changes not only in education policies, but also in overall development policies. Agendas will have to be inspired by equity and equality in resource sharing by sections of society. The adoption of measures that ensure the full and effective participation of indigenous women in implementation, follow-up work and monitoring of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals will help to eliminate inequality conditions.

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

Cultural pluralism and diversity represent real challenges in public policy. Some of the challenges in the area of education that need to be addressed include:

Structural barriers: Administrative and institutional structures are the major barriers for the advancement of Indigenous Peoples' education initiatives. Often laws, regulatory measures and mechanisms do not exist or are inadequate to address the issues of systemic disadvantage concerning gender and Indigenous Peoples' education. Thus, there is a need that special measures are adopted through national legislations. For instance, education systems and school management are not sensitive to the needs of Indigenous Peoples, especially indigenous women and as a result there is limited access to education.

In this regard, the UNPFII in its fourth session (2005) recommended that governments "Ensure an

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increase in the number of indigenous persons in the educational sectors, including in policy, administration, teaching indigenous culture, history and contemporary society, indigenous languages and production of educational materials".⁸

Technical deficiencies: There is a need of revision of curriculum contents of non-formal education in order to increase enrolment of girls in school. The adoption of effective and appropriate measures to stop indigenous children from dropping out of school and improve their learning achievements will bridge the gap between indigenous girls and boys.

To tackle this issue the UNPFII in its fourth session (2005) recommend that States: *"Establish effective arrangements for the participation of indigenous parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of education services for their children, including in the designing and implementation of their own education at all levels, including developing appropriate teaching materials and methods".⁹*

Mother tongue education and bilingual inter-cultural education: Indigenous children especially girls, experience particular difficulties relating to access to education of quality and sociocultural relevance at all levels. Within this regard, the UNPFII in its fourth session (2005) recommend that States should *"Develop bilingual and culturally appropriate primary education for indigenous children to reduce dropout rates. The mother tongue must be the first learning language and the national language the second language; curricula should reflect Indigenous Peoples' holistic worldviews, knowledge systems, histories, spiritual values and physical activities, physical education and sports."¹⁰*

Economic deprivation: The recognition of Indigenous Peoples as distinct peoples and the respect for their individual and collective human rights, rights to lands and territories and sustainable use of natural resources are crucial for achieving a just and sustainable solution to the widespread poverty in their midst. Deprivation of the basic rights has hindered their participation in education as they are preoccupied with the struggle for their survival.

Financial resource constraint: Additional financial resources will be necessary to initiate affirmative action policies and programmes in the field of education in favor of Indigenous Peoples keeping gender equity and equality at the core. Many governments are incapable to launch affirmative action pro-

grams to increase the access of indigenous women and girls to education due to lack of resources. International development cooperation needs to address this problem on a priority basis.

Reference

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