

GENDER AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' ENVIRONMENT



Indigenous Peoples believe that there is a holistic interconnection among all things on the planet: animals, plants, natural forces, human beings and the supernatural life. The state of environment will predict the health and state of people who depend on its provisions. Environment is the provider of life for all human beings who depend on its bounty in order to survive.

Indigenous Peoples have a tendency to place more value upon their cultures, languages and spirituality over simply increasing capital gains, which differ, in comparison to the mainstream dominant culture's values. Some Indigenous Peoples also continue to live according to their traditional livelihood practices.

Indigenous peoples understand clearly the relationship between development for someone else, and their own underdevelopment. They also understand clearly the relationship between the environmental impacts of types of development on their lands, and the environmental and subsequent health impacts in their peoples. The threats to Indigenous Peoples' ecosystems, such as monoculture cash crop production, mineral extraction, environmental contamination and genetically modified seeds and technology, should be addressed and ways be found to stop that Indigenous communities continue to be expelled from their territories under the pretext of the establishment of protected areas or national parks.

Indigenous women have a fundamental role in environmental conservation and protection throughout the history of their Peoples, in fact the Malukan Declaration states that "Indigenous women have a fundamental role in environmental conservation and preservation throughout the history of our Peoples. We are the guardians of Indigenous knowledge and it is our main responsibility to protect and perpetuate this knowledge. Our weavings, music, songs, costumes, and our knowledge of agriculture, hunting or fishing are all examples of some of our contributions to the world. We are daughters of Mother Earth and to her we are obliged. Our ceremonies recognize

*her and we return to her the placentas of our children. She also safeguards the remains of our ancestors."*¹

Why is gender important?

Gender mainstreaming is particularly relevant as it promotes positive values and skills to contribute to human dignity, identity and intercultural dialogue.

Indigenous women and men both offer unique perspectives which takes into account traditional knowledge and awareness of environment. Indigenous Peoples societies generally view gender as complimentary and egalitarian, where each role is defined but complimentary to each other. For instance, indigenous men may focus on cultivation and indigenous women may plant and gather the foods, so both roles are necessary and complimentary in the holistic relationship of the family/community.

Traditionally, both Indigenous women and men had equal access to lands, animals and resource use, which was more beneficial to the collective. However, since the integration and assimilation influences of dominant cultures, capitalistic systems and the ideal of individual ownership, Indigenous Peoples, in particular women, experience fewer opportunities to access their natural resource and lands. So, nowadays the balance and harmony within Indigenous societies have been influenced by the dominant patriarchal and capitalistic culture.

Gender relations within Indigenous communities have been changing alongside the transformation that their own environment has undergone, especially in the face of colonization. Contemporary pressures such as global economies, political and resource wars, competing national interests, capitalistic dominations and others, all contribute to the changes within Indigenous Peoples' environment and thus gender roles. For example, in North America, the traditional lifestyle that existed prior to colonization necessitated Indigenous Peoples to be

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more dependent upon the land; however, due to the introduction of the reserve system their lifestyle became more sedentary.

How does the application of a gender perspective make a difference?

Considerable attention has been devoted to the relationship between indigenous women and the environment, and extensive efforts have been made to identify the effects of the international environmental crisis on women. Momentum was gathered at the third session (2004) of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), where it was not only recognized that the themes of "indigenous women" and the "environment" are interlinked but also that these must be incorporated into policy planning.

The application of a gender angle concerning Indigenous Peoples' perspectives in terms of environmental issues is critical because the experiences both of Indigenous women and men differ according to gender; thus, both roles are necessary to appreciate. When considering the environment, the application of an Indigenous perspective of gender would take into consideration the biosphere in its entirety as well as a holistic manner of viewing human interaction with the environment. For example, in East Africa, indigenous women are interested in natural resources, such as, tree branches for firewood, shrub leaves and roots for medicine. They ensure that the water sources are not polluted. The women seek for food, medicine, fuel and building materials. At the same time, indigenous men mainly rely upon the natural resources for watering their animals and when needing to clear the forest for settlement. They have a great responsibility to ensure that the cleared trees for charcoal burning are replaced, and building near water sources to prevent animal polluting water sources.²

As Indigenous Peoples increasingly interface with dominant economies, often, it is indigenous men rather than women, who are involved in the decision-making and planning of projects related to the environment and natural resources. In these processes the gender differences are often neglected in the design and in terms of practical implications. Furthermore, as women rarely own land they cultivate there is little incentive for them to make environmentally sound decisions, while their lack of access to credit hampers them from buying technologies and inputs that would be less damaging to natural resources. These negative factors set up a cycle of declining productivity, increasing environ-

mental degradation and food insecurity for the future.

Men and women need to be alerted to the threats that environmental degradation pose to food security. Indigenous women in particular, need to be informed about alternative methods of farming, cooking, heating and waste disposal. Gender-sensitive planning in training and technology development would not only improve production today, but it would also ensure the protection of the environment for tomorrow.

Within this context, the UNPFII in its fifth session (2006) emphasized "*the unique contributions made by indigenous women within their families, communities and nations and at the international level in terms of possessing and transmitting intergenerationally a wealth of traditional knowledge on the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable environment management*".³

What are the key issues to be considered?

Environment and sustainable development for Indigenous Peoples has been closely linked with the rights to land, territories and resources and self-determination, and at the same time the erosion of Indigenous Peoples' institutions and technologies/knowledge systems. Many of these systems traditionally and customarily reflect a more equitable gender paradigm than those of the mainstream cultures and societies.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in its Preamble recognizes "*the vital role that women play in the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and affirming the need for the full participation of women at all levels of policy-making and implementation for biological diversity conservation*".

Indigenous Peoples and more specifically women, who have managed these resources sustainably for generations, could lose from a liberalization process. Natural resources are threatened to be plundered at unsustainable rates at the expense of future generations. It is an imperative for global justice, leaving sufficient resources for current and future generations in the North and the South to meet the needs of their population, whilst at the same time preserving biodiversity.

Land, territory, natural resources and conflict:

These issues are closely linked due to the fact that Indigenous Peoples lands have valuable natural resources. Often these lands host the rest of the

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earth's and still unexplored resources.

Globalization: Resistance has been a sustained strategy of Indigenous Peoples over the centuries, and has often taken the form of armed insurrection. Indigenous Peoples' capacity to adapt new cultural elements to their socio-cultural structures has been another of their resistance strategies. Globalization presents new challenges both for indigenous men and for indigenous women in many parts of the world. Indigenous women's roles have eroded due to the compounding factors of loss of natural resources and depletion of the ecosystems, the increasing transformation of indigenous traditional economies into cash economies, changes in local, social and decision-making structures, and their lack of political status within States. 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.

Globalization has undermined Indigenous women's roles from being an essential contributor to the family's economic and social well-being, a situation of dependency and vulnerability is imposed on them (Indigenous women) through globalization and consequential land dispossession. The real globalization repercussion that undermines indigenous women's traditional roles is the lack of access to lands, which is often caused by multinational corporations that are seeking resources upon the lands of Indigenous Peoples.⁴

What are the practical implications?

Equitable participation: In both urban and rural areas, environmental degradation results in negative effects on the health, well-being and quality of life of the population at large, especially girls and women of all ages. The deterioration of the environment displaces indigenous communities, especially women, from income-generating activities while greatly adding to unremunerated work. Particular attention and recognition should be given to the role and special situation of indigenous women to facilitate their full and effective participation in policy formulation and in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of environmental programmes or projects.

Diversity of indigenous societies: Indigenous Peoples are not a homogenous group of people; in fact, they have diverse lifestyles in different environments and biospheres.

In some cases, states ignored the rich diversity of national realities and imposed institutional structures that do not respond to the realities. Indigenous Peoples' subsistence remains essential to their survival and may of life. The enormous challenge remains trying to continue traditional livelihood practices while corporations continue to encroach upon Indigenous territories and natural resources.

What are some of the challenges to be addressed?

It was once believed that natural resources had an unlimited capacity to meet humanity's needs. It is now widely understood that the environment is under threat and in need of protection.

The UNPFII at its third session (2006) recognized that "*Indigenous women throughout the world are among the most marginalized groups, suffering discrimination not only on the basis of gender, but also on the basis of race, culture and class as well [...]. 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*".⁵

Decision-making process: Indigenous women remain largely absent at all levels of policy formulation and decision-making in natural resource and environmental management, conservation, protection and rehabilitation, and their experience and skills in advocacy for and monitoring of proper natural resource management too often remain marginalized in policy-making and decision-making bodies, as well as in educational institutions and environment-related agencies at the managerial level. In fact a few governments consult with Indigenous Peoples regarding environment and many States still have not developed laws or policies in conjunction with Indigenous Peoples.

Implementation of recommendations: Despite various declarations that recognize Indigenous Peoples, especially Indigenous Peoples' critical role to play in sustainable development of the environment within their families, communities and nations and at the international level, there is much to be implemented, especially at national level. Measures that ensure the full and effective participation of indigenous women in implementation, follow-up work

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and monitoring concerning gender and environment must be adopted. The challenge is to impact on the political will of States on environmental issues so that Indigenous Peoples issues and in particular indigenous women's issues are fully taken into account.

Access to resources: The very real issues of stratification and the socially structured forms of access to power and resources are dynamics at play within a community and must be examined more closely. Indigenous women and men often relate to their environment very differently according to their cultural and social norms and roles. Natural resource development policies must reflect these realities.

Capacity-building: it is important to recognize indigenous women's roles, their particular knowledge of ecological linkages and fragile ecosystem management, and that they also often provide the main labour force for subsistence production, including production of seafood. Their role is crucial to the provision of food and nutrition, the enhancement of the subsistence and informal sectors and the preservation of the environment. It is crucial to establish funds for indigenous women's capacity-building and their participation in meetings at the international, regional and national levels. Capacity-building training of indigenous women will help them gain leadership skills and become community advocates and defenders for indigenous women's rights to achieve gender equity, including in the area of sustainable development.

References

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- ⁴ Roy, Chandra. 2004. *Gender and Indigenous Women's Perspective*. The Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: N-9520. Guovdageaidnu-Kautokeino Norway, May 2004.
- ⁵ United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 56.

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