



INDIGENOUS PEOPLES, INDIGENOUS VOICES

BACKGROUND

Agents of Change

Women

Indigenous women are often the most disadvantaged and marginalized group in any country. Routinely in many rural communities, girls and women have the least opportunities to obtain education, land, healthcare and justice.

Young girls spend hours on household chores, far away from schools and books. They remain illiterate, lack basic healthcare and become victims of violence, both at home and at the hands of armed forces. In some communities, girls occupy a transitional position between their parents' home and their husband's house. Their opinions along with education, nutrition and well-being are not prioritized.

The exclusion and discrimination faced by indigenous girls and women have serious consequences. The lack of education and access to healthcare can lead to high rates of infant and maternal mortality and malnutrition. In a fast changing socio-economic world, there are other serious costs as well. As indigenous communities lose control of their ancestral lands and resources— an accelerating trend— girls and women become prey to rising sexual abuse, human trafficking, exploitative work conditions and sex tourism.

Faced with poverty and food insecurity many women migrate to cities or other countries to find income and feed their families. There they find jobs in factories and assembly plants, routinely working longer hours, in worse conditions and for less money than men.

Many grassroots activists perceive it difficult to address gender issues in indigenous societies because of the dual challenge of respecting indigenous communities' right to self-determination— guided by cultural and traditional norms— while at the same time insisting on the fundamental right to non-discrimination and gender equality.

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) has prioritized women's issues and made it the main theme for the 2004 annual Session. Gender dynamics within the communities, they say, 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.

The Forum has been advocating for the guiding principle to be a strong stand on equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all individuals, both men and women. It also recommends increased participation of indigenous women in all governance and decision-making structures.





Youth

Children and youth are central to the safeguarding of knowledge linked to their cultural and natural heritage. Indigenous children and young people are the bearers and transmitters of their cultures, but their own situation is perilous. They live under conditions of exclusion, marginalization, racism and discrimination that prevent them from developing as human beings and full citizens with rights of their own.

There is ample evidence that indigenous children and youth are routinely discriminated against and made to feel ashamed of their identity. They lack culturally appropriate education and health care services. It is estimated that life expectancy of indigenous children and youth is often twenty years less than others and they continue to suffer from preventable diseases.

Children often live in houses without running water, electricity or sanitation and have little or no access to mainstream education. When schools do exist, they are far away and in poor physical condition making it difficult to attend it in a sustained, regular basis.

Incarceration, sexual exploitation, unemployment and suicide are common in the lives of indigenous youth. Instead of getting protection from law and order authorities, they are regularly harassed and threatened by police officials.

The voice of indigenous children has often been a fragile one, seldom heard by governments, community leaders, or parents. One of the top priorities for UNPFII is indigenous children and youth and this was made the main theme of the Second Session in 2002.

The Forum would like to see more active participation of youth at the annual Sessions and in the ongoing work of the Forum. It also recommends the full participation of young people at local, national and international levels. Intercultural and bilingual education is needed for young people as well as access to health care and holistic health programmes.

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