



United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues
and Advancement of Women and the Secretariat of the
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues



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 and race, but also on the basis of their cultures and class. The complex interaction of factors such as colonialism, globalization, nationalism, and top-down policies and paternalistic approaches to development have resulted in a social and economic environment that has been limiting for indigenous women. For example, 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 resources¹.

BRIEFING NOTE NO. 2

In most indigenous communities, women's reproductive roles are highly valued. At the same time, indigenous women have their own important roles, ranging from performing domestic chores and managing household resources to working as wage earners or discharging duties and exercising authority of assigned jobs in the public sphere. Despite their valuable contributions, indigenous women still face inequality in a number of areas, such as inheritance of land and other property, access to credit, capital markets 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.

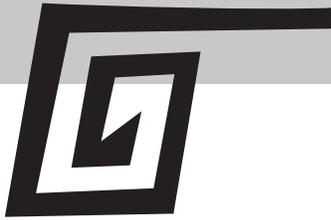
In addition, the adverse life conditions of indigenous peoples in general have left the vast majority of indigenous women politically disenfranchised, more insecure economically, physically more vulnerable and emotionally more strained, which poses further challenges to their economic and social development. Thus gender considerations are vital to the overall development and advancement of indigenous peoples and their communities.

How does applying a gender perspective make a difference?

The application of gender perspectives in indigenous peoples' economic and social development will make a difference to the approaches and strategies designed to empower and advance communities in the following ways:

- ▣ Values, norms, traditions, customary laws and cultural practices may be strengthened, redefined, and even reinterpreted to not only ensure gender equality but also include indigenous perspective in development policies and practices.
- ▣ The development and periodic updating of databases that are disaggregated by gender, ethnicity/race, religion, language and territory/geographical areas will be established and utilized to develop better informed policies, strategies and plans for improving indigenous peoples' economic and social development. Such data can also be accessed 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 care giver's work performed by indigenous women including girls, who form a large part of the workforce, will be duly recognized. Their productivity will





be enhanced by expanding their access to resources and market outlets. Attention will be paid to the double burden of indigenous women labourers performing unpaid nurturing activities for long hours at home as well as undertaking paid work in the labour market.

- ▣ The life chances and choices of indigenous women and girls will be expanded through mechanisms that support equitable distribution of benefits and opportunities which will also empower indigenous peoples to overcome the barriers that impede their advancement.
- ▣ Discrimination and exclusionary policies and practices faced by indigenous men and women will be eliminated to a considerable extent and this will result in indigenous women feeling more secure in entering the work force. The workplace environment for indigenous women workers will also improve, which will facilitate the involvement of indigenous women in gainful activities that 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 rights of indigenous women and children to have access to all levels and forms of education. The educational status of indigenous women will be improved due to the expansion of suitable and accessible educational opportunities which in turn, may lead to gainful employment.
- ▣ Indigenous women's access to information will be increased, along with the motivation to adopt appropriate technologies that improve the quality of their life and their families and communities.
- ▣ Health and nutritional status of indigenous women will be improved along with a recognition of their important roles in resource management and environment conservation.

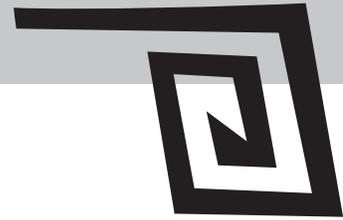
What are the key issues to be considered?

In many indigenous communities throughout the world, inequality and subordination of women is rooted in gender relations, a highly debated and sensitive issue. This is the situation of indigenous peoples in all forms of economic and social settings whether they are foragers, horticulturalists, pastoralists, farmers, small entrepreneurs or in mainstream economic positions. The understanding of gender and gender relations varies among indigenous societies, from country to country and region to region.

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

Under-representation in the public domain: Indigenous peoples have little, if any, 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. Consequently, their perspectives are invisible and their priorities, needs, interests and expectations are not taken into consideration. They are also less able to access resources and opportunities and, as a result of their socio-political exclusion, socio-economic development of their communities remains a distant dream.

Non-recognition of the right of inheritance of land and other parental properties/wealth: In many cases, indigenous women have no right to inherit land or other ancestral property or wealth. With the erosion of



collective/community ownership of land and natural resources as well as the evolution of institutions that recognize the essence of patriarchal private property, indigenous women often forfeited their rights to land and natural resources to the male members of their communities. In many countries, indigenous women play a crucial role in small scale trade and business and do 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.²

Access to education: There is a need to improve the access of indigenous girls and women to education and other skill and personal development institutions. This will also require the reform of education systems in order to allow women to take advantage of training and employment opportunities.³

Poor health, poor earning: Indigenous women often face discrimination in access to health care services. Modern health care services are beyond their reach and inaccessible due to lack of services in their communities, the costs for such services, and the negative attitudes and humiliating behaviors of some service providers. Indigenous women are under-nourished, often face disproportionately high levels of physical violence and sexual abuse, and do not get adequate pre-natal and post-natal care. Poor health impacts indigenous communities in a number of ways, including high absenteeism and low output in the work force which results in low pay and low earnings.

Indigenous women are not aware of their rights and privileges: Indigenous women are often not informed about their rights and the opportunities that might be available to them. They prefer to work near their home or in their villages even with low wages or through exploitation in the workforce.

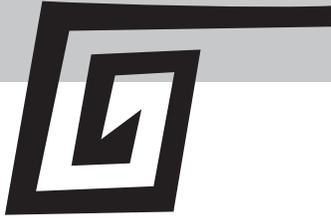
Feminists throughout the world are mostly from dominant groups and women's empowerment and development programs in most countries are focused on women belonging to a particular class and advocating for the needs of women from the dominant groups. In most instances, indigenous women's particular needs and values remained untouched by these programs. While the situation of women from dominant groups has improved, indigenous women often still 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 lead to a number of changes, including the following:

Revision or changes in policies, strategies and options: Governments addressing economic and social development issues should adopt strategies that include considerations of gender perspectives and the needs and rights of indigenous peoples. Governments should ensure the participation of, and consultations with, indigenous peoples in these processes. Governments should also consider implementing specific policies directed at employment creation for indigenous peoples, facilitating access to credit and the creation of small and medium-sized businesses.⁴

Enhanced participation in the development process: Measures should be adopted to enhance indigenous women's participation in development processes. For example, within the context of a human rights-based approach to



development, indigenous women might be able to experience various forms of mobilization and empowerment. This may include being able to decide their priorities in order to manage their development initiatives. Their involvement in development activities will provide opportunities to further enhance their capabilities and to gain control over valued resources that will help them to gain integrity, prestige and power in their efforts to obtain gender equality.

Increased employment for indigenous women: States should develop policies to promote 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 especially in 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. Favorable market access for their products will also substantially contribute to the expansion of their employment opportunities. With better incomes, indigenous families will be freed from debt bondage and other forms of exploitation and the nutritional status of the family members will be improved.

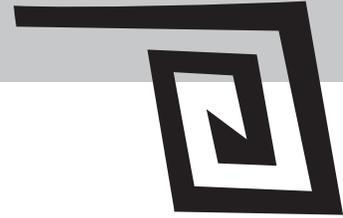
Increased access to education: Education systems should be improved to increase the access of indigenous women and girls to education and skills training. The right to education should be fully respected so that indigenous women have better access to both formal as non-formal education. Special educational needs of indigenous women should also be culturally appropriate. Intercultural and bilingual or multilingual educational programs will be essential components of the education system that lead to equitable educational outcomes. Improved educational status of indigenous women will expand their employment opportunities and also empower them in the political processes.

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 measures that seek to effectively control and prevent 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 consultation and decision-making processes in relation 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 by 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 recognized and improved. Communication strategies should be designed so that health and disease related information is made available 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 situation of indigenous women. Health care agencies, in general, should be more responsive to indigenous women.

Values, norms and cultural practices: Values, norms and cultural practices should be refined, re-defined, re-interpreted and even modified by indigenous women and their communities in order to remove any negative impact on the human development of indigenous women. Indigenous women's cultural practices and norms should be affirmed and 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 all indigenous peoples.



Addressing multiple discrimination and disadvantages: Research should be conducted on the underlying causes of the “feminization” and “indigenization” of poverty and programmes should be developed to effectively address these underlying causes of marginalization.⁵

What are some of the challenges to be addressed?

There are tremendous challenges to the application of a gender perspective in indigenous peoples’ economic and social development. At the UNPFII’s fifth session in 2006, the theme “Redefining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)” provided an opportunity to incorporate the concerns of indigenous peoples, and particularly the concerns of indigenous women, into the MDGs. The MDGs offer a strategic framework which could fully integrate the goals of the *[Beijing] Platform for Action*, an important human rights-based approach to development 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 Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals.⁶

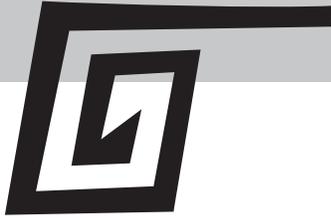
Some of the key challenges are summarized as follows:

Overcoming structural barriers: Indigenous women often do not participate in policy/decision-making bodies, and it is no coincidence that policy/decision-makers are often insensitive and irresponsive to the needs and issues of indigenous women and of indigenous communities as a whole. Thus, it is crucial to mainstream gender issues and to integrate the special needs and concerns of indigenous women in policies, programmes and budgets.

Eliminating or reversing multiple discrimination: Indigenous women experience multiple discrimination — gender discrimination, racial/ethnic discrimination, cultural discrimination, linguistic discrimination and religious and class discrimination. Hence gender inequality is highly correlated with ascribed identities. Including gender perspectives in indigenous peoples’ economic and social development has to address this multiple discrimination and disadvantage. One way to do it is by compiling and integrating disaggregated data (both qualitative and quantitative) and taking into account local and regional cultural/social/ economic differences in regards to indigenous women’s issues.

Improving/Enhancing self-management of development activities: Paternalistic approaches to development policies are strongly opposed by indigenous peoples because they undermine their dignity and capacity, their traditional autonomy, their process of decision-making and their self-determination. Changing development approaches and practices, improving or enhancing capacities of indigenous peoples, including indigenous women, as well as managing development initiatives continues to be a major challenge.

Developing transmission mechanisms to translate economic growth into poverty reduction: Economic globalization, manifested in the various forms of trade liberalization, privatization and deregulation, has adversely affected traditional economies by weakening the subsistence base of indigenous peoples. For indigenous peoples, these new forms of economic globalization are a continuation of the colonization which has been perpetrated against them since the beginnings of capitalist expansion. Nevertheless, the experience of globalization is not the same for all people and 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. Therefore, mechanisms should be implemented to address these negative effects. For instance,



increasing indigenous women's capacity in decision-making and political participation will ensure that adequate numbers of indigenous women are placed in positions of political leadership, as well as in governance and public administration. Improving the access of indigenous women to education and skills development will allow women to take advantage of training and employment opportunities and to strengthen programmes in indigenous communities that ensure benefits for indigenous women.

Endnotes and references

- ¹ United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 56.
- ² Hans, Asha. *Tribal Women and Gender Utopia?*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1999.
- ³ United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 57, d.
- ⁴ United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 58.
- ⁵ United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 59, a.
- ⁶ United Nations, *Fifth Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2006/43, paragraph 45

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