



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' 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 upon its provisions. The environment is the provider of life for all human beings who depend on its bounty to survive.

BRIEFING NOTE NO. 5

In contrast to the values of the mainstream dominant culture, indigenous peoples tend to value their cultures, languages and spirituality more than they do simply increasing capital gains. 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 impacts of certain approaches to development on the environment and on the health of their peoples. For example, practices such as monoculture cash crop production, use of genetically modified seeds and mineral extraction lead to environmental contamination and threaten indigenous peoples' ecosystems. Similarly, indigenous communities continue to be expelled from their territories under the pretext of the establishment of protected areas or national parks.

Indigenous women have played a fundamental role in environmental conservation and protection throughout the history of their peoples. As stated by the Malukan Declaration, ***"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 take into account traditional knowledge and awareness of the environment. Indigenous peoples' societies generally view gender as complimentary and egalitarian, where each role is defined but complimentary to the 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, indigenous women and men had equal access to lands, animals and resources, and this was beneficial to the collective. However, as a result of the integration and assimilation efforts of dominant cultures, capitalistic systems and the ideal of individual ownership, indigenous peoples, and in particular women, experience fewer opportunities to access their natural resource and lands. So, nowadays the balance and harmony within indigenous societies has 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 changes within indigenous peoples' environment and thus gender roles.

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 recognized that the themes of "indigenous women" and the "environment" are interlinked, and that these must be incorporated into policy planning.

The application of the perspective of indigenous women in terms of environmental issues is critical because the experiences 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 and shrub leaves and roots for medicine. The women seek and prepare food, medicine, fuel and building materials. Indigenous men also rely upon natural resources, for example to water their animals and to create settlements. Both indigenous women and men have a great responsibility to ensure that they work in such a way that resources will not be depleted or polluted².

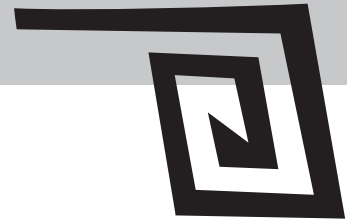
As indigenous peoples increasingly interact with dominant economies, it is often indigenous men, rather than women, who are involved in the decision-making and planning of projects related to the environment and natural resources. Because indigenous women are not adequately included in such processes, gender differences are often neglected in project design and in terms of practical implications. Furthermore, as women rarely own the land they cultivate, there is little incentive for them to make environmentally sound decisions, while their lack of access to credit hinders 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 environmental degradation and food insecurity for the future.

Men and women need to be aware of the threats that environmental degradation poses 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 have 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 sustainably managed natural resources for generations, could lose from a liberalization process. Natural resources are being plundered at unsustainable rates at the expense of future generations. It is an imperative to leave 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 often contain valuable natural resources, such as forests, minerals and hydrocarbons.

Globalization: Resistance has been a sustained strategy of indigenous peoples over the centuries. Indigenous peoples’ capacity to adapt new cultural elements to their socio-cultural structures has been among their resistance strategies. Globalization presents new challenges both for indigenous men and 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 the role of indigenous women as essential contributors to the family’s economic and social well-being, and has contributed to imposing upon indigenous women a situation of dependency and vulnerability. In particular, the traditional roles of indigenous women have been impacted by globalization-related dispossession of land, including by multinational corporations seeking to exploit resources on indigenous lands and territories.⁴

What are the practical implications?

Equitable participation: In both urban and rural areas, environmental degradation negatively impacts the health, well-being and quality of life of the general population, and especially of girls and women. Environment degradation often 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; they have diverse cultures and lifestyles in different regions and environments. In some cases, States ignore this rich diversity and impose institutional structures that are not culturally appropriate. Indigenous peoples often face additional challenges to continuing their traditional livelihoods and customs due to loss of control over their lands and territories and in cases where governments and corporations encroach upon such territories to develop or extract 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.

At its third session (2006), the UNPFII 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 processes: Indigenous women remain largely absent at all levels of policy formulation and decision-making processes related to natural resource and environmental management, conservation, protection and rehabilitation. Their experiences 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. Too few governments consult with indigenous peoples regarding environmental laws or policies.

Implementation of recommendations: Various declarations recognize the critical role of indigenous peoples in ensuring sustainable development of the environment at family, local, national and international levels. However, a great deal must be done to ensure implementation of such declarations, especially at the national level. Measures that ensure the full and effective participation of indigenous women in implementation, follow-up work and monitoring concerning gender and environment must be adopted. The challenge is to impact 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 social 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:

- ¹ The Maunkan Declaration of the Indigenous Women's Biodiversity Network (IWBN) Maunkan, Sabah, Malaysia, 4-5 February, 2004
- ² Report on the interplay between indigenous peoples, gender and natural resource management, East Africa, 10 June 2004
- ³ United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 106.
- 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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