

IWGIA
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GENDER AND INDIGENOUS WOMEN



THE BACKGROUND

For the past decade or two, gender issues have become a new concern. Most importantly within the field of human rights, where there has been a gradual process towards including women's rights. Whereas the 1948 UN Declaration on Human Rights did not specify women's rights, the adoption in 1979 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) marked the first important step towards the recognition of women's rights. These were finally confirmed in 1993 by the Vienna Conference on Human Rights, which declared that:

The human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civic, economic, social and cultural life at national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of sexual discrimination are priority objectives of the international community... Women's human rights should form an integral part of the United Nations human rights activities, including the promotion of all human rights instruments relating to women.... (Section one of the Vienna Declaration and Program of Action)

At the same time there has been a growing acknowledgement that modern developments have not necessarily had the same effects on men and women: What was positive for one sex, may well have been negative for the other one. Thus, looking back at their history, many indigenous women feel that their position within the family and the community has been undermined by colonisation and with the introduction of attitudes and values explicitly or implicitly in favour of men (cf. various articles in IWGIA Document 88 *Indigenous Women: The Right to a Voice*). It is also well documented that the shift from a subsistence crop production to a major cash crop production in many indigenous societies has given the males a more dominant role in production as well as in marketing.

Within development work, too, it is today recognised that the (often unequal) relationship between men and women within the spheres of reproduction, production and public life has wide ranging implications for how women and men participate in and benefit from development projects.

However, this general trend towards more gender sensitivity has not pervaded the study of and work with indigenous societies and communities (see e.g. Sjørsløv in IWGIA Document 88; Bell 1993). On the contrary, there has been a tendency to consider the relationships between men and women, and women's situation in general within these societies and communities as part of their customary way of living, as something pertaining to their culture and hence not up for discussion. This has even included certain practices that were clearly discriminatory and even oppressive to women.

The result has been a certain mysophobia and apart from some efforts at organising indigenous women around income generating activities, very little has been done to document their situation, to empower them and support their self-organisation and networks so they could assert their

rights as indigenous and as women.

A NEW SITUATION

Today, indigenous women are themselves pressing to be heard and their demands can no longer be disregarded. Indigenous women from all over the world are organising themselves in grass roots groups. At national and international level too an increasing number of women networks have been established so that their claims for the respect of their human rights and for a share in decision-making can be made known to the world. At this point of time indigenous women's international networks include the Asian Indigenous Women's Network (set up in 1993), the Abya Ayala Network in Latin America (1994), the Network of Indigenous Women in the Arctic (1997), and the African Indigenous Women's Organisation (1998).

All this represents a great endeavour as for most indigenous women organising means overcoming many difficulties and privations. They are even sometimes accused of being divisive, of harming the indigenous movement. Yet, if the women persist, they do it for mainly four reasons:

- 1. Support the struggle of their people against discrimination, abuses and violations of all kinds, and even sometimes ethnocide and genocide.*

Racism and racist discrimination, and not their own subordination, is still seen as the main issue by most indigenous women:

Sexist attitudes did not wipe out whole tribes of our people, sexist attitudes are not slowly killing our people - racism did, and continues to do so (Pat O'Shane, Australia, quoted in dé Ishtar 1994).

For us indigenous peoples who have to sustain our unity in order to advance our struggles for the recognition of our rights, we cannot afford to pit our men against our women and vice-versa (Bernice See, Philippines, EU Meeting 1998).

And from the talks IWGIA had in Geneva in 1998 with indigenous women representatives, it was a clear message that it is important to relate to the fact that they are both indigenous and women – and in that order.

2. *Claim and protect the right to cultural difference.*

Indigenous women's conferences and the declarations that emanate from them, all speak about the role of traditions and cultures as a part of their identity. One of the demands of the 1995 Beijing declaration of Indigenous Women is:

To recognise and respect our rights to our intellectual and cultural heritage and our rights to control the biological diversity in our territories.

The indigenous women of Chiapas stress that

We do not want to lose our mother tongue; we believe that we are indigenous and that we think differently from those who only speak Spanish (The Explosion of Communities in Chiapas, IWGIA Document 77).

3. *Cry out against what modern development is doing to their people and to them as women.*

The New World order, the Human Genome Diversity Project, Globalisation, etc. affect indigenous women just as much as it does their men, but in different ways. Often women will bear the brunt of the most dislocating and alienating aspect of it (see Jeanette Armstrong and Victoria Tauli-Corpuz in IWGIA Document 88). A number of recent women's conferences have taken up these issues like for instance the Asian Rural and Indigenous Women's Conference against Globalisation, Chiangmai May 1998, and the Indigenous Women's Workshop on APEC and Globalisation, Kuala Lumpur November 1998. The latter denounced the fact that

The Asian indigenous and tribal territories, knowledge, and bodies are now the object of interest of global capital for exploitation. Many of us are still reeling from the effects of colonization and now with the opening of national boundaries for trade, we are again subjected to the same forces of colonization... Indigenous women in the villages are forced to give up their subsistence production in favour of cash crop production. They are forced to sell their bodies for tourism... Traditional seed varieties, plants and indigenous knowledge are being patented as properties of corporations.

4. *Put forward specific gender demands.*

This can be seen as the result of the process leading up to the World Conference on Women in Beijing, and the Conference itself, where some 100 indigenous women formulated and signed their own Beijing Declaration. This Declaration puts forward demands not only to the society at large but also to the indigenous communities themselves. Thus articles 36 and 44 state:

That indigenous customary laws and justice systems which are supportive of women victims of violence be recognised and reinforced. That indigenous laws, customs and traditions which are discriminatory to women be eradicated (article 36).

We demand equal political participation in the indigenous and modern socio-political structures and systems at all levels (article 44).

In the aftermath of Beijing, a number of international conferences of indigenous women have been held, and similar demands have been made. As stated by Blanca Chancoso, indigenous of Ecuador, at the Second Continental Meeting of Indigenous Women from the Americas (Mexico 4-7 December 1997):

We, indigenous women wish to be recognised as people with rights, not only duties. We need to be seen, within our families and communities, not only as cooks and child-bearers, but also as female human beings. This is what we want, not to be seen as second-class people...

INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND GENDER

Neither indigenous women nor indigenous men are homogeneous categories to be generalised about.

Religion, cultural traditions, way of life, mode of production, etc. vary from one people or community to another and differently affect the situation of women and men of these peoples or communities. This entails that gender relations will differ from one indigenous society to another. In some societies, these relations will be more or less equal, men and women having similar rights and obligations. In others, men will be the dominating group.

Within their own communities as well, men and women experience different situations according to their social position and economic means, to their station (married, widowed, etc) and their age. These factors will impact on the gender roles of the two sexes and their mutual relations. It also means that gender relations may differ or change within the same community. A woman with a special social status (e.g. daughter or wife of a high-ranking person) or with specific skills (traditional midwife, female witch doctor, literate, etc.) may enjoy different relations with the men in her community than other women. And a woman may during her lifetime experience changes in her gender relations, e.g. gaining more rights, more respect - and hence more equal relations with the men - as she goes through her different stations and grows older.

The pattern of gender relations has also undergone changes, and will continue to do so, under the impact of external factors. In many non-industrialised societies, the different roles held by men and women were seen as complementary and gender relations were not hierarchically defined. With the introduction of European male-centred ideologies and values as well as a new economic order, the indigenous women's traditional roles and power base were eroded and women became increasingly subordinated to their men:

You've got a hunting and gathering society, the women had their business and the men

had their business, and you've got a White culture coming over and imposing White values on to that sort of society. Men have to be breadwinners. Men have to look after the family, play that nuclear family role that is completely different to the extended family system. (Helen Corbett, Aboriginal and General Secretary of the Un-represented Peoples' Organisation (UNPO) quoted in de Ishtar 1994).

But also other dominant ideologies and values can have a detrimental effect on the situation of the indigenous women. This is the case in India where some tribes under strong Hindu influence are adopting customs which are detrimental to women, e.g. the dowry and all what that implicates including girl infanticide (Indian NGO Report on CEDAW 1995).

Writing about mining towns and their impact on gender relations, Robinson (1995) notes that

While many New Guinea societies incorporated long periods of sexual abstinence (for example through post-partum sex taboos) into customary definitions of masculinity, there is evidence that this is being eroded in the context of mining towns, particularly in association with alcohol abuse. (There is) growing incidence of alcohol abuse, violence against women, rape and teenage pregnancy. These changes towards patterns of western hegemonic masculinity are associated with the industrial organisation of the capitalist frontiers.

Gender relations are thus grounded in the specifics of time and place, in history, culture, religion, etc. Yet, they are not static, but dynamic, in a constant state of flux.

THE SITUATION OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

The shifting nature of gender roles and gender relations makes it therefore extremely difficult to generalise about indigenous women and men. Nevertheless, and in the same way as it is possible to categorise some of the issues that indigenous peoples have in common despite their differences, it is also possible to point at some overall similarities in the situation and the problems of indigenous women.

1. Specific indigenous issues

Indigenous women first of all belong to indigenous communities. Consequently, they share the same conditions as those affecting their men: e.g. the loss of ancestral domains, the lack of access to traditional and vital natural resources, mining activities, racial discrimination and cultural alienation, violation of their human rights, wars and conflicts, etc.

They also share the same struggle: Indigenous women have also always taken an active part in their peoples' struggles to maintain or regain the rights to their lands, resources, waters and self-determination.

But these conditions affect indigenous women and men differently.

The loss of land has many implications for indigenous women. They may lose sites that are especially sacred to them. They may also experience the destruction or loss of the family house that often has been built and taken care of by them as in the case of the Mkomasi Maasai women in Tanzania. Or the loss of land means the loss of access to natural resources which puts an extra burden on women who have to walk further in order to get water, fuel wood, non-forest produces. They may also be forced to find other sources of income or even to migrate. Some Maasai pastoralist women seek refuge in urban centres selling beads, tobacco, etc. (Nangoro 1998). Thousands of indigenous women all over Asia each year leave their communities in search of paid jobs in the big cities. In the case of the Cordillera women of the Philippines they even go abroad and each year numerous cases of inhuman work conditions, sexual abuses and violent deaths are being reported. Many of these deprived women end up as prostitutes or being trafficked with.

Mining activities with the establishment of mining communities usually characterised by gender imbalance are associated with the growth of bars and brothels, alcohol abuse and violence directed at women. Many Dayak women of Kalimantan (Indonesia) are reported having become contract wives, i.e. temporarily married to company workers, but abandoned as soon as the latter's work contract is finished. The numerous children from these marriages are called *Anak ASEAN* (ASEAN kids) (communication by Arimbi Heroepoetri at the Kanchanaburi Women's Conference March 1998).

Women and children are often the main victims of military conflicts: unarmed, they are easy targets. Rape, torture and mutilations of women are often used as revenge on their men. The experience of indigenous women from Burma, North Eastern India, and the Philippines present at the Kanchanaburi Conference (1998) was that rape was being widely used as a weapon to emasculate the indigenous nations. The Batwa women in Rwanda, indigenous women of southern Sudan and Mexico have had similar experiences. Women often end up in refugee camps, as forced labour, etc. Girl children are kidnapped and used as prostitutes by the soldiers.

When supporting their communities in their struggle for self-determination or just survival, the indigenous women's participation is often crucial. It may take on many forms: above and underground actions against military aggression and oppression as in North Eastern India, demonstrations, sit-ins and blockades against multinational and national companies. In Jharkhand, for example, women have been at the forefront of the 27 yearlong struggle against the building of a dam over the Koelkaro River. Another example is the Chico Dam action in the Philippines. Women often instigate protest movements - the group of mutual support GAM and the widow group CONAVIGUA both from Guatemala are but two examples - and they are even sometimes used as spearhead in demonstrations because officials are expected to proceed with less brutality against women. Women also sometimes employ unusual protest methods like embracing trees, as was the case in the Chipko movement.

This commitment involves great personal privations for women, who have to leave their families and children behind, risk moral condemnation and loss of reputation for their behaviour, and sexual harassment by officials.

2. *Indigenous women and culture*

Indigenous women are considered and consider themselves to be the repositories of customary and traditional knowledge and practices, and responsible for promoting belief and spirituality and securing the continuity of their people's culture.

Indigenous women are also recognised and recognise themselves as having specialised knowledge and skills in e.g. healing and traditional health care, medicinal plants, songs, dances, stories, and handicrafts. It is also indigenous women rather than indigenous men that dress traditionally and maintain indigenous languages alive.

It is therefore important for them that their role be recognised and supported; that they be taken into account and consulted when intellectual property rights, protection of bio-diversity, education and other issues related to traditional knowledge and skills are being discussed.

But traditions and customs also include values, norms of behaviour, rules and laws. As all traditions and customs, they are not nature given but man made and relate to given conditions at a certain point of time. Therefore they differ from one indigenous society to another, and within these societies from one point of time to another.

Neither traditions nor customs are static but may change (e.g. under the impact of external factors) or even disappear when a society - or the dominant forces in a society - no longer has any use for them. Or, on the contrary, they may be kept alive if these same dominant segments profit from it. Some "traditions" may even be invented or flexible customs turned into hard prescription (cf. Ranger 1983) if considered necessary.

Indigenous women are to a much greater extent than indigenous men affected by so-called traditional values, norms, etc., and there is a marked tendency to be very concerned about not destroying these traditions - while men's traditional values, norms are much less spoken of.

Yet, indigenous women have their own views about the traditions and customs that rule their lives. They respect them but not in an acritical way. Indigenous women are aware that certain old traditions, now fallen into desuetude, could be beneficial while others have been kept alive although they no longer correspond to the present prevailing conditions. They may also disapprove of certain customary laws but still abide by them if they find it otherwise beneficial to do so.

Again, this may differ from one group of indigenous women to another. One example is the

customary laws that rule on the cases of rape, wife battering and where, in many indigenous societies, the fines imposed on violators go to the community and not to the victimised woman. Speaking for the women of the Cordillera, Victoria Corpuz-Tauli (1995) finds

“that we do have very pro-women customary laws. Some of our tribes feel violated if their women are violated...” and the Council of Elders will hold lengthy discussions on what the sanction should be. “For the survivor it is more meaningful for her that the community took up the issue as a community issue. This is not looked upon as an injustice to the woman...”

Kanak women in New Caledonia/Kanaky, on the contrary, are increasingly dissatisfied with a similar customary law (personal communication by leader of SOS Violences Sexuelles, 1998), and the same applies for women in Nunavut (Høgh in IWGIA Document 88).

Customary laws regarding the obligation of a widow to marry her husband’s brother may be seen by some indigenous women as a way of securing their children and themselves. Other women, nevertheless, will not abide by it even if it means being ostracised and leaving their children without relations to their paternal kins, and what that otherwise may imply.

But indigenous women are also aware that tradition and culture are often used to justify their subordination and to rob them of human rights protections. Or as quoted by Diana Bell (1993): "When men are oppressed it's a tragedy. When women are oppressed it's tradition".

The indigenous women of Chiapas, for instance, noted in 1994

...there should be documents in which we indigenous women note that there are customs which do not respect us and which we want to have changed. We are against violence, attacks, raping. It is not right that we are sold for money. These were our customs before but we have also got to change. It is also unfair that because of custom we cannot be represented or have rights to land (quoted in IWGIA Document No.77).

Likewise, one of the recommendations made at the Conference of Indian Tribal Women in India 1998 reads:

Whereas codification of customary laws and practices is generally a good step for the tribes it is fraught with grave danger for women. There are various tribal practices, which adversely affect women like polygyny, exclusion of women from property rights (...), non-participation of women in collective decision-making, etc. Codifying these negative aspects would permanently harm the tribal women. There is, therefore, a need to re-look into the whole matter to advance the interest of women in tribal society.

Similar recommendations were made at the Second Asian Indigenous Women's Conference in Thailand in March 1998. Jyotsana Tirkey from India, for instance, noted that Jharkhand women

feel that customary laws now being practiced need to be somewhat and to some extent changed. Pratima, another delegate from India, who as a Jaunsari lives in a society that practises both polygyny and polyandry, reported similar concerns.

The customs of polygyny and polyandry are usually explained by economic considerations: the former secures more labour, the latter keeps the men of a family together and avoids the fragmentation of land holdings (Dube 1997). However, many women object to these customs as being oppressive and degrading, and which given the economic realities of today tend to become more and more obsolete. Yet other women will see it as an advantage and be quite content to have co-wives.

Another traditional practice, which African indigenous women are beginning to question, is female circumcision, a widespread custom in many African countries. Female circumcision or Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as it is called today because of the radical forms this operation involves, can be grouped into two broad categories: clitoridectomy and infibulation,¹ both of which are practiced by indigenous communities in Africa. The manner in which FGM is done on small and young girls, and the serious complications it causes on short and long term makes it a harmful practice and both a health and a human rights issue. Therefore one of the recommendations given by the First African Indigenous Women's Conference in Morocco in April 1998 was to appeal to pressure groups to sensitise people regarding the effects of negative traditions, like e.g. FGM. Other groups like the Setat Women Organisation in Pokot, Kenya, organise seminars to inform and to fight against the practice.

However, indigenous women are fully aware that the eradication of FGM or any other negative tradition for that matter, is a complex issue, and that the work done in this connection should be done in a sensitive and respectful way.

3. *Aspects related to the subordination of indigenous women*

Indigenous women perform an array of duties: ranging from household chores, water and fuel wood collection, tilling of the land, looking after small domestic animals. They are also burdened with a number of vital responsibilities. They take care of their family's health, they contribute to the economy of their household by undertaking productive and income generating activities, and they perform reproductive community work (e.g. maintenance and other daily tasks in the village, cooking for communal celebrations, carrying out health care services, etc.).

Indigenous women have performed all these duties and tasks for time immemorial as a normal part

¹ Clitoridectomy involves the removal of a part of the clitoris or the whole organ, and in some cases of part of the labia minora. Infibulation involves the removal of the clitoris and the labia minora, plus incision of either a part of the labia majora or the whole labia majora to create raw surfaces that are stitched together to cover the urethra and the entrance to the vagina with a hood of skin, leaving only a more or less small posterior opening for the passage of urine and menstrual blood (N.Toubia1994).

of their responsibilities. Societal changes brought about by the depletion of natural resources, wage labour and migration, modernisation and development have however altered the nature and scope of these duties and tasks. Collecting water and fuel wood today often implies several hours walk, cultivating cash crops demands new know-how and is more time consuming, the introduction of western health care services and school systems even when beneficial (e.g. vaccination campaigns) means new responsibilities, etc. An increasing number of women are also heads of household and sole providers for their family, either as a consequence of their husband having migrated in search of work or because their men have divorced or deserted them.

While women's work load and responsibilities thus have changed and increased, their situation in general and their status within their communities have deteriorated often as a result of the impact of western male ideology and ways of living on their societies. Life for them has become more difficult, more insecure.

Indigenous women are therefore increasingly questioning their own situation and becoming aware of their fundamental and vital rights for a more decent life. It is in order to struggle for more respect, more equity and more recognition of their crucial role, that many indigenous women are organising themselves in self-help groups, local and national organisations and networks.

Violence: Besides wars and conflicts, indigenous women also experience violence within their own communities. Indigenous women from all parts of the world report that wife battering, sexual abuses like rape, gang rape, and incestuous abuses are on the rise. In India, among certain Adivasi tribes the killing of women accused of witchcraft² (Jharkhand) and girl infanticide are also increasing phenomena. All this is the result of societal upheaval, cultural alienation, growing frustration among men who have lost their source of income or no longer can exercise their traditional role as hunters, warriors, or pastoralists, have easy access to alcohol, etc.

In some cases, indigenous women have taken up the fight and organised campaigns like e.g. the Cordillera women against liquor (See in IWGIA Document 88), and the Jharkhand women anti-wife-beating campaigns (Kelkar and Nathan 1990).

Health: Indigenous women often suffer from poor health. This can be the result of malnutrition (anaemia) or insufficient food intake (in many societies girl children and women get less food than their male counterparts), early and frequent pregnancies, early marriage, inaccessible or poor health services, heavy work load, etc. The latter can be due to the nature of women's chores, to the introduction and promotion of monocultures which means more work throughout the whole year, or just because anything is heavy given her poor physical condition in general.

Education is a general problem for indigenous women as the education of girls is seldom given priority. There are many reasons for this: the economic costs (school fees, uniform, books which

² Witch hunting is mainly directed at women, and is used to get rid of unwanted females - often widows - in order to grab their land (Kelkar and Nathan 1990).

often have to be paid by their mothers), time constraints, workload, lack of mobility or access to the education system and the perceived lack of need. In the case of Maasai girls, many school dropouts are due to early marriage, teenage pregnancies, and circumcision (Priscilla Nangurai, Kanchanaburi 1998). A notable exception is the case of some Arctic societies. In Greenland, for instance, Inuit girls now get a better education than the boys. A result has been that young women have gained access to many positions in the Greenland society.

Indigenous women's illiteracy can have far reaching consequences, for themselves and for their communities. The case of the Hill Tribe women in Northern Thailand is illustrative: Because they lack education and knowledge of mainstream Thai language they cannot apply for a Thai citizenship and obtain an identification card (ID card). Without an ID card their movements are severely restricted, they cannot legally go to work outside their communities, they cannot purchase land and they are ineligible for any government supplied services as health, education, etc. (Mor Tummarchartudom, Kanchanaburi 1998).

Economic rights: In most indigenous societies, women's economic rights are limited. Men, for instance, may control the access to and the use of collective land, and where private ownership has been introduced, women will often neither own nor inherit land. They often do not even control their own earnings. This can be explained by traditions but also as the consequence of changing economic systems and values.

There are, of course exceptions or variations in women's economic rights in relation to land rights, for instance. Thus, in the matrilineal societies of Micronesia and part of Melanesia land is passed down from mothers, and women have a certain control although in many places the main rights are exercised by the men of their clans (Land Rights of Pacific Women 1986, de Ishtar 1994). In India, the Khasis of the North East are matrilineal and women have some land rights. As for the Jharkhand Adivasis, they have a fine gradation of the various rights in land that women in different stations can enjoy, and a widow with minor sons inherits all the land and movables exactly as if she were their father (Kelkar and Nathan 1990). Santhal women may keep and spend the money from the sale of forest produce. In Juchitán, Mexico, the main activity undertaken by the men is the cultivation of maize, but the women who process the maize will also take the final products to the market and be in control of the generated income (de Gyves in IWGIA Documento 28, 1999).

Many more examples could be given. However, in many places these rights are fast being degraded through the gradual dissolution of communal property and the introduction of individual property, through the commodisation of land and the cultivation of cash crops, or through the growing influence of patriarchal values.

The advent of market relations, for instance, has impacted on property rights, overruling women's traditional rights. Among the Maasai of Tanzania, for instance, custom required that

At marriage, the man allocated a given number of animals to his wife, and these remained

hers to use and to pass on to her children as inheritance when they came of age. With dwindling livestock numbers and increased articulation with market relations, men's roles as managers have been transformed to that of owners and controllers of family property.... In this process, the numbers of livestock that were guaranteed women at marriage have also decreased and often disappeared altogether. Women have therefore found themselves as producers but non-owners of the product of their labour and indeed dependent on their male counterparts for subsistence (Nangoro 1998).

In Kenya, the introduction of cash has destroyed the barter system that previously allowed Maasai women to have control and access to resources. This change in their economy has resulted in the control of resources and cash being allotted to the men (communication by Irene Katete, Kanchanaburi 1998)

Decision making power: Indigenous women often have little or no decision making power. At the private level, an indigenous woman may not choose her own husband or decide the number and the spacing of her children. She is restricted in her movement and may not be allowed to attend workshops (personal communication by Maria Grave Canil, Guatemala). At the household level, she may not participate in decisions concerning the household finances or the education of her children.

Again there are great variations and many exceptions. In Ratanakiri (Cambodia) women generally have a big say in the household finances, but it varies from tribe to tribe. In some tribes, women also usually have a considerable control over agricultural matters, although their decision making power is less when it comes to agricultural tools. The more advanced the tool is (e.g. ploughs, mechanised rice mills) the less say women have about it. The matrilineal Khasis women have great freedom of movement, and are not stigmatised by getting a child out of wedlock. However, again, the impact of the outside world - whether in the form of technology or in the form of culture - is a threat to these traditions that give women certain latitude. In other cases, on the other hand, the influence of the outside world may be beneficial to women

At community level, indigenous women are usually little involved in decision-making. In many indigenous societies, the traditional leadership is constituted by elders and consists merely of men. Women do not participate in the meetings for lack of time, or dare not speak up because they are less educated than men. Among the Larusha Maasai, women are not allowed to attend public meetings headed by men and if they are required to do so, they may not address the meeting while standing (personal communication by Agnes Saibull, Larusha Maasai, Tanzania).

Again there are exceptions where women fully participate in the political system, and even, albeit rarely, as leaders. This is for instance the case among some Amerindians communities in French Guyana. Among the Yaqui in Mexico elderly women with a high rank play a prominent role in the local ruling hierarchy and in the decision making process. In Greenland, the number of women in influential political positions has grown substantially over the past few years (Rasmussen in

IWGIA Document 88). There is an increasing number of indigenous women in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico and Ecuador, that have become members of parliament, senators, and ministers.

However, as pointed out by Kelkar and Nathan in the case of the various Jharkhand movements (1990), even when women participate in campaigns, are members of committees and movements, they may not always be able to influence their courses or have any say in decision-making. And in order to make a difference, more indigenous women in public office are needed.

Indigenous women, conscious of the contributions they make to their families and to their communities are starting to realise the incongruity of the situation, and it is one of their most recurrent demands that their role be recognised and that they may fully participate in the decision-making processes. They want to be trained, they want to know their rights, so that they can participate in assemblies with the same rights as men and their voice heard and listened to in all aspects of community life (Chiapas women quoted in IWGIA Document 77).

THE ROLE OF IWGIA AND THE NEED FOR A GENDER STRATEGY

Indigenous women constitute half of IWGIA's target group, the indigenous peoples. They also play a very important role in the reproduction of these peoples whether as providers and nurturers, family labour force and salaried workers, or as active members of their communities and at the forefront of their peoples' struggles. Gender considerations must therefore be included in all IWGIA activities.

In order to address gender issues, IWGIA's role is primarily to ask questions, listen, understand and dialogue with indigenous women and men, document their situation and support their own initiatives to protect their human rights.

However, in order to strike a gender balance, multiple experiences show that it is usually necessary to make special efforts towards including women in such a dialogue. Indigenous women are often not represented in indigenous organisations or are not included in their leadership; they may not attend meetings or may hesitate to address strangers/foreigners, etc. Therefore, a proactive approach may be needed in order to meet and talk with indigenous women. Such an approach, nevertheless, does not mean coming with our views, imposing them our agenda but give the women the possibility to be heard directly and not through their men or others.

We should also be careful not to adopt a simplistic perspective and consider all indigenous women as victims and being totally subordinated within their own societies, thereby overlooking or ignoring the positive aspects, which are also found in indigenous cultures.

This, however, does not mean that we should leave our opinion in the cloakroom, but that our dialogue with indigenous women and men should be based on mutual respect. Talking about her

anthropological fieldwork among Aboriginal women, Diana Bell writes:

The intersection of gender, race and class are complex indeed, but gang rapes of young girls, being beaten to a pulp, and a death toll for women that exceeds the deaths in custody are human rights abuses. Uncomfortable as it may be, if one has a voice, one should speak. The issue for me is to find ways of doing this that are grounded in actual relationships with the people whose reality is being represented by an "outsider". Thus far this strategy has not been altogether successful, but I'm not sure there is any acceptable way of saying women are being abused, and for many reasons - conflicts of interest, powerlessness, racial cringe - we're not paying attention and we're not acting on what we know. (Bell 1993).

It is therefore important that IWGIA's gender policy is grounded in a strategy that is flexible and responsive to the varieties of situations, in which indigenous women and men live.

IWGIA'S GENDER STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

IWGIA's strategy should

- Take its point of departure in listening to indigenous women and understanding their situation within the society or community in which they live;
- Be based on needs and interests as defined by the women themselves and their organisations; this includes also taking into account their "moral economy", i.e. the considerations they make when choosing their strategies for action;
- Be inclusive and not exclusive. Instead of alienating indigenous men and their organisations, it should include them in discussions and call for their cooperation. If men are not sensitized, then little can be achieved;

Indigenous women met by IWGIA in Geneva stressed the importance of involving men and collaborating with male indigenous organisations. A male participant at the Pan African International Alliance Conference (Ghana, September 1998) voiced similar concerns: "Men should be gender-sensitized first because if they are not - but their women are - they will just beat them!"

This strategy presupposes

- A gender oriented attitude among IWGIA staff. This is probably the most important, and should exist at all levels of the organisation.
- A sustained dialogue with our indigenous partners. IWGIA as an organisation should clearly state its attitude regarding the inclusion of gender aspects and support initiatives taken in that relation.

At the same time IWGIA must be prepared to meet a great deal of constraints and barriers. Entry

strategies could be:

- To demystify the concept of gender (it is not synonym of militant feminism!)
- To inform about positive aspects for both sexes and the family/community of involving women in development work (economic gains, shared responsibility, etc.)
- To suggest gender training in order to create more gender awareness
- A gender methodology, which is adapted to each one of our activities.

GENDERISING IWGIAS ACTIVITIES

Gender aspects should be taken into account in each and every one of IWGIA's activities.

When networking, for instance, special efforts must be made to take contact with women's organisations or individual women in order to discuss and learn about their situation and their viewpoints. It is important that we also collaborate with partner organisations that have gender concerns and a gender dimension in their work.

The same applies to our project activities. IWGIA's projects should address gender needs and interests of both sexes, by, for instance, promoting the inclusion of women in training and capacity building activities, and supporting women's efforts to get organised. It is also important to support indigenous women's conferences as we did in India and in Thailand (1998), and in East Africa (1999), so they may have their own platform and fora where they can express themselves, exchange ideas and address their specific gender needs and interests.

Gender and women issues should also be incorporated in our publications, either as an integral part of the text or as a special feature. *The Indigenous World*, for instance, has now introduced a permanent section dedicated to indigenous women. One of our latest publications was entitled *Indigenous Women: The Right to a Voice* (1998). The IWGIA Documento 28 (in Spanish) *Mexico: Experiencias de Autonomía Indígena* (1999) includes an important chapter on "Autonomy in a woman's perspective" about the development of the indigenous women's movement and its role within the Zapatista movement, and a number of the other articles also look at the role of women. This kind of undertakings should be continued and developed.

From a human rights perspective and considering the recent developments and the many incipient organisations and networks among indigenous women world wide, IWGIA has an important role to play in documenting the situation of indigenous women and in supporting them in their demands whenever they call for it.

Further, it is recommended that:

1. Networking should include

- Gender related information on the indigenous community. This includes disaggregated data

and statistics, customs, customary and modern laws, gender relations in general, etc., number of female headed households (widows, divorcees, wife of migrant worker, single mother, etc.), access to land/control over land and access to loans; support mechanism available for women (exchange labour, help, etc.), etc.

- Contacts to women's organisations or women's sections in order to assess needs and interests
- Interviews with representative indigenous women or non-indigenous women working with indigenous gender issues.

2. Publication and Documentation work should include

- Pro-active call for papers on women and girl-children issues (education, health, violence, trafficking, etc.)
- Pro-active call for research papers focusing on indigenous societies where women have certain traditional prerogatives and privileges
- Pro-active call for papers written by indigenous women or for interviews of indigenous women who have been empowered and can describe the positive and negative aspects of this empowerment process.
- Suggestions to contributors to include gender aspects in articles, i.e. how the described issues or factors in the article are impacting on women
- Follow-up on specific women events like women conferences, meetings, etc.

3. Human Rights work should ensure

- Indigenous women's access to Conferences and meetings
- Indigenous women's active participation in these conferences/meetings (e.g. by briefing and training them before hand)
- That women issues be put on agendas
- That declarations/resolutions/recommendations also address women's needs and interests

4. Project work should be based

- On dialogue (see above)
- Disaggregated base-line information/analysis
- Analysis of gender needs and interests so that both sexes may profit from the project.
- Adapted activities and methods to ensure participation by both sexes in whole project cycle.

More specifically, in

- Land titling projects: how can women - especially female household heads - benefit and for instance gain access to land on par with men.
- Organisation building: support women's organisations or women's section of mixed organisations.
- Training and capacity building: training activities should be planned in order to meet women's

specific premises in terms of mobility, work schedule, etc.. They should include topics which generate greater gender awareness in both sexes (this implies that not only women should learn about their rights, men should also learn about women's rights, etc.).

- Conferences co-organised by IWGIA: secure female participation; involve women in tasks like chairing, reporting, etc.; include women's issues on the agenda; and if the women wish to make resolutions that address their needs, secure that they are presented.

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1994 Female Circumcision as a Public Health Issue in *The New England Journal of Medicine* 331:712-716. USA.

Furthermore references are made to:

Talks with the following indigenous women participating in

The Working Group on Indigenous Populations, Geneva 1998

Svetlana TIOUKHTENEVA, from the Enetil people's Torgoo Zaisanov (the Council of Elders) Altai, Republic of Altai, Russia;

Tarcila RIVERA from CHIRAPAQ, Centro de Culturas Indias, Peru;

Malika AHMED ZAID (Berber) from the AGRAW ADELSAN AMAZIGH, Algeria;

Lilian J.C. PLAPAN (Pokot) from the Setat Women's Organisation, Kenya;

Saoudata ABOU-BACRINE (Tuareg) from the Association Tin Hinane, Burkina Faso; Maria GRAVE CANIL from the Rigoberta Menchú Foundation, Guatemala;

Jorunn EIKJOK - head of Gáisá, the Sámi Resource Centre and Network, Norway and contact person for the Network among Indigenous Women in the Arctic,

Vicky Corpus Tauli. from Tebtebba Foundation, The Philippines.

The Asian Indigenous Women's Conference held in Kanchanaburi, Thailand in March 1998 (referred to as Kanchanaburi, 1998)

Reports from The First African Indigenous Women's Conference and talks with some of the participants.

Comments and suggestions received after consultations with indigenous women and organisations

Lucy Mulenkei, Indigenous Information Network and AIWO (African Indigenous Women's Organisation), Kenya

Yakshi, Andhra Pradesh, India

FIPI-MAYA IK, RAP, ANIPA, Mexico

AIDSESEP, Peru