Implementing UN Recommendations on Indigenous Women

Understanding barriers and enablers

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Credit: Espen Wæhle / IWGIA
Globally, Indigenous Women are confronted with numerous forms of discrimination and marginalisation. The intersectionality of discrimination involves reproductive rights and health, prohibition and destruction of traditional livelihoods, discriminatory educational systems, prevailing colonialism, racism, structural and systemic violence, exclusion from public life and decision making as well as discrimination based on their gender and indigeneity. Furthermore, the ancestral lands, means of subsistence, knowledge, and cultures of Indigenous Women are repeatedly jeopardised by aggressive natural resource exploitation, development projects, conflicts, land encroachment and dispossession. Though women are often the main food providers and caregivers, they are rarely consulted on decisions that affect their very survival as Indigenous Peoples, and they possess the least access to land, education, services, and credit assistance. Numerous local conflicts are entrenched in indiscriminate policies that allow appropriation, land grabbing, and displacement of Indigenous Peoples and exclude them from the use of their own resources. These circumstances have exacerbated poverty and violence against Indigenous Women and disproportionately impacted their capacities to access and effectively engage in decision making and governance.

Across the globe Indigenous Women's organizations request sustainable development that respects and promotes their human rights, as well as their distinct identities, aspirations, spiritual life, cultures and needs. Particularly, Indigenous Women advocate for the full equal, and effective participation in political and public spheres, community affairs, and in decision-making processes at all levels that affect their rights as Indigenous Peoples and as women. To strengthen individual and collective rights of Indigenous Women, the United Nation entities are urged to develop specific measures and programs to address Indigenous Women for their effective participation, representation and partnership. For this to occur, financial, technical and security support is needed to enable the independence and full participation of Indigenous Women. The Global Indigenous Women's Caucus urge for the promotion and preservation of holistic educational programs that consider Indigenous Women's traditional knowledge, Indigenous languages, pedagogical practices, and worldviews. To ensure that Indigenous Women have equal opportunities in access to education and health services, including sexual and reproductive health, the specific barriers faced by Indigenous Women must be identified. Moreover, the design and implementation measures to overcome barriers must be conducted in collaboration with Indigenous Women themselves. The recognition of women's ownership and access to land and resources, self-determination; social and economic rights, including the right to decent work and the rights to water and food, cultural rights; civil and political rights, the right to live free from any form of violence, and the right to access the justice system without fear of reprisal for those Indigenous Women who report violations of their rights are equally fundamental elements in giving women more dignified conditions in life and empowering them to make their own decisions freely, along with sustaining their roles and livelihoods.

UN Treaty Bodies and other relevant mechanisms

In the past two decades, the United Nations has increasingly focused attention on the human rights of Indigenous Peoples. A growing set of UN treaty bodies (TB's) and mechanisms continually recommend Member States to improve the rights of Indigenous Women. The TB's include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and the International Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR). Besides the UN treaty bodies, other mechanisms, UN organisations, and mandate holders that have provided recommendations to states related to the improvement of the situation of Indigenous Women include the UN Human Rights Council, Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the Human Rights Council Special Procedures such as the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, In addition UN International labour Organization (ILO), Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and UNWOMEN. Dedicated UN mechanisms have been established, including the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) in 2000, the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (SRIP) in 2001, the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (EMRIP) in 2007 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) adopted by the General Assembly in 2007.

Various Indigenous Peoples and IPO’s have begun to submit alternative or shadow reports to the TB's, notably to the CERD, CEDAW and CESCR, however, the overall majority of Indigenous Peoples deliver statements to the annual sessions of UNPFII and EMRIP the two mechanisms specifically dedicated to Indigenous Peoples, whose mandates do not include addressing specific human rights violations.

While numerous recommendations are formulated in every session of the TB's and mechanisms, it is difficult to establish conclusive and direct causal links between
recommendations and the legislative or policy changes at the domestic level. This report aims to contribute toward a better understanding of the UN recommendations directed explicitly at the situation of Indigenous Women, and to identify and discuss the obstacles to their implementation.

Methodology

The data for this report was collected through a review of various recommendations by the UN which include Indigenous Women’s rights between 2011 and 2021, in eight focus countries, respectively Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Myanmar, Kenya, Tanzania, Colombia and Peru. Furthermore, a review of the recommendations on Indigenous Women in general on a global scale, was carried out. An assessment of UN documents and websites with analysis of documents from various sources included the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum, UN agencies, Special Rapporteurs, UN Member States, Indigenous Women’s organizations and multilateral organizations. The specific TBs, mandate holders and UN bodies, mechanisms and agencies with recommendations on Indigenous Women include the CEDAW, CERD, CSW, the UPR, Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion, Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, Special Rapporteur on minority issues, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, EMRIP, UNPFII, ILO, UNWOMEN, ICCPR, and the CESCR.

GLOBAL UN RECOMMENDATIONS ON INDIGENOUS WOMEN

UN Recommendations on Indigenous Women

Globally, a total of 271 recommendations that explicitly mention Indigenous Women between 2011 and 2021 were reviewed. Out of these recommendations the majority originated from UNPFII (154), SRIP James Anaya (3) and Victoria Tauli Corpuz (40), EMRIP (24), ILO (22), CSW (15), and CEDAW (11). Globally, the majority of the recommendations relate to the categories of Participation (27%), Laws, policies and legislations (10%), education and capacity building (10%), and End violence (10%), (Fig. 1).

The recommendations from the eight targeted countries are distributed between the following categories; Reproductive Rights and health (13%) Discrimination (11%) Media outlet and awareness raising programs (11%), Participation (10%), End violence (9%) Education and Capacity building (8%) and Land rights or land disputes (6%) laws, policies and legislations (6%), Income and microfinance (5%), Rights (5%), Access to justice (4%), Allocate resources (3%), Disaggregated data (3%), Monitor and reporting (2%), End impunity and prosecute perpetrators of violations against Indigenous Women (2%), and Protection of human rights defenders (2%). Figures 2 and 3 illustrate where the country-specific UN recommendation originate from.

In the eight countries the most frequently stated recommendation is concerning reproductive rights and health. Many recommendations advocate for the full incorporation of cultural perspectives into health policies.
and programs and reproductive health services aimed at providing Indigenous Women with quality health care. Recommendations include measures to facilitate that Indigenous health personnel can act as cultural brokers between health systems and Indigenous Women. Numerous recommendations stress the need for laws that protect Indigenous Women from discrimination and the enactment and effective implementation of specific legislation to eradicate violations experienced by Indigenous Women. To ensure their equal rights and access to social and economic services, and resources, including land ownership a revision of States’ national legal frameworks is required.

States are urged to increase opportunities to enable Indigenous Women to participate actively in the political life of the country in which they live. Moreover, States are urged to adopt policies to support Indigenous Women’s participation, and strengthen their participation in positions of political leadership as well as in governance and public administration in all initiatives that promote their cultural identities. Participation in decision making with free prior and informed consent is urged to be included in all local, national and international decision-making processes. States are also recommended to ensure the safety of Indigenous Women who are defending the rights of their peoples and territories and to prosecute those involved in violence against them.

To improve efforts to combat multiple forms of discrimination against women, as racism and stereotypes that are deeply rooted in the different societies, and often disseminated in the media, in particular against Indigenous Women, as seen e.g., in Peru, Colombia, against caste-affected women in Nepal and Bangladesh, various TB recommend increasing inclusive media outlet and awareness of the rights of Indigenous Women. These types of recommendations are also put forward to increase the public awareness of the UN recommendations. Suggestions include the design and launch of targeted awareness-raising campaigns to educate and change the mindsets and attitudes through available means including schools, the media, politicians, community and religious leaders. It is furthermore suggested that public printed materials such as schoolbooks, tourism brochures etc. should be screened and purged of stereotypical portrayal of Indigenous Women as well as racist and sexist content.

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promoting participation in relevant decision-making processes at all levels and in all areas, while respecting and protecting their traditional and ancestral knowledge47.

Recommendations in the eight reviewed countries

Although Tanzania is home to more than 125-130 ethnic groups, and four groups, which organize themselves around the concept and movement of Indigenous Peoples48, Tanzania is the only country of the eight reviewed countries, without any specific recommendations on Indigenous Women. Numerous recommendations are aimed at women, but Indigenous Women are not explicitly mentioned. Indigenous Women of Tanzania are mentioned in an IPO report prepared for the UPR in 2016, advocating an expansion on education and greater participation for Indigenous Women in decision-making processes. However, the recommendation did not result in a specific recommendation in the annual UPR.

Tanzania is followed by Myanmar. Despite the fact that Myanmar is home to more than 135 ethnic groups and Indigenous Peoples and is considered one of the most diverse countries in Southeast Asia49, only one recommendation has been located. The single recommendation advocate for the participation of Kachin and Shan Women in Northern Myanmar50.

In Kenya, a total of four recommendations were located. CEDAW made recommendations on Indigenous Women, by urging the State to ensure consultation with the Endorois women about land rights and to take measures to protect them from violence51. EMRIP supplements with recommendations on the right of Endorois women to obtain equal basis with Indigenous Men to ownership and use of and control over their lands, territories and resources, including by revoking discriminatory laws, policies and regulations52.

In India, nine recommendations were encountered, the majority concerned reproductive rights, discrimination, and to end violence. CEDAW recommended to increase the awareness of women from scheduled tribes of all legal remedies available to them, and to monitor the results of such efforts53. All caste-affected States are urged to take robust action to address the entrenched situation of inter alia the effective implementation of legislation, policies and programs to address the deep-rooted situation of marginalization and exclusion experienced by caste-affected women, and ensure that legislation covers all spheres of discrimination, including protection from discrimination for Indigenous Women54,55.

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Table 1: Country specific recommendations (numeral) distributed by 5 most mentioned topics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations on Indigenous Women</th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>Nepal</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Myanmar</th>
<th>Kenya</th>
<th>Tanzania</th>
<th>Columbia</th>
<th>Peru</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End Violence</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>28</td>
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<td>Discrimination</td>
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<td>Land disputes</td>
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<td>Rights</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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<td>Media Outlet / awareness raising campaigns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reproductive rights and health</td>
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<td>25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laws and legal framework</td>
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<td>19%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Incoce generating opportunities</td>
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<td>13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allocate resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disaggregated data collection</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>18%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Topics are distributed by percentage as many recommendations cover multiple topics e.g. “end violence, and improve access to justice and to reproductive health care”
In Bangladesh, eleven recommendations reviewed were aimed at Indigenous Women. Most frequent recommendations were on the topic of violence, land disputes and discrimination. CEDAW was concerned with the fact that women of ethnic minorities face multiple intersecting forms of discrimination due to their gender, health, Indigenous identity, caste and socio-economic status and recommended to effectively investigate and prosecute cases of gender-based violence against Indigenous Women relating to land grabbing and take measures to bring those responsible to justice. The UPR review recommended to develop and implement appropriate, efficient measures to protect Indigenous Women from all kinds of violence and discrimination, however, the Government of Bangladesh only accepted the recommendation in part. Although Bangladesh endorsed almost all major international human rights instruments, and at the national level formulated several legislations pertinent to women, implementation and enforcement remain limited, and Indigenous Women are not mentioned in any of the national legislations. Indigenous Peoples are neither recognized as Indigenous by the State.

In Nepal, twenty-one recommendations were reviewed, with the majority concentrated on Discrimination, Awareness raising programs and Participation. The CESC and the CCPR expressed concern about the extremely low representation of particularly Indigenous Women, in high-level decision-making positions, the CESC recommended a full and equal participation of Indigenous Women in decision-making. CEDAW recommended the Government to amend the Constitution to explicitly recognize the rights of Indigenous Women, in particular their right to self-determination, in line with the UNDRIP.

In Peru, 28 recommendations were identified, most centred around Participation, Reproductive rights and Income. CEDAW recommended the State to allocate sufficient human and financial resources for the implementation and monitoring of laws and public policies designed to combat discrimination in access to education and to include the use of temporary special measures in promoting the education of girls and women, in particular in Indigenous communities. Furthermore, CEDAW urged special attention to the needs of Indigenous Women and to ensure that they participate in decision-making processes and have full access to justice, basic services, land tenure and credit facilities. CERD recommended efforts to ensure that Indigenous Women have access to public health schemes with a gender-sensitive and intercultural approach to the provision of health services. Moreover, CERD emphasised the need for justice and adequate mechanisms for their protection from gender-based violence.

In Colombia, 31 recommendations were reviewed, most refer to Discrimination, Reproductive rights and Violence. CERD recommended States to step up efforts to combat the multiple forms of discrimination faced by Indigenous Women and women of African descent by ensuring that they have effective and adequate access to justice, work, education and health services, including reproductive health services. CEDAW recommended that the State strengthens the judicial system, including through additional financial, technical and specialized human resources, by handling cases in a timely, gender-sensitive, non-discriminatory and competent manner in all its territory, especially in rural areas. On several occasions, CEDAW recalled previous recommendations, e.g., on women in conflict and post-conflict situations, and on gender-based violence against women, and recommends increasing the presence of State institutions and access to basic services in previous conflict zones, considering the specific needs of Colombian women of African descent and Indigenous Women, to ensure the protection of the affected population in former conflict zones. Moreover, CEDAW recommend that the State strengthen its efforts, as a matter of priority and within a specific time frame, to implement the national plan for preventing gender-based violence against Indigenous and Colombian women of African descent, including violence in institutions.

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The level of implementation – and the barriers

Generally, the level of implementation of the recommendations by States is limited and there is an obvious gap between the words on paper and their application. Frequently the various UN-entities reiterate their previous recommendations - which indicate a clear lack of action by States. The gap in implementation is complex and it has proved difficult to determine whether recommendations are being implemented or not, as well as whether implementations are ongoing. The lack of timely and in-depth information by States on status and development, limits the ability to measure progress. In this context, it is important to ask who, at the national level, should be responding regarding implementation. Additionally, the degree of implementation varies significantly between States. Particularly, the level depends upon the capacity to address Indigenous Peoples’ and gender issues, such as legal, political and institutional frameworks, budgetary aspects, gender-disaggregated data, and the capacity to apply human rights approaches. Moreover, not all States recognize Indigenous Peoples’ rights in their Constitution, and rights are rarely implemented as legislation that clarifies the scope of these rights.

One of the main reasons identified - for the deficiency of implementation, is lack of political will and pressure from powerful economic actors and companies, such as resource extraction, land and water rights approaches. Moreover, not all States recognize Indigenous Peoples’ rights in their Constitution, and rights are rarely implemented as legislation that clarifies the scope of these rights.
expropriation, mega hydropower dams, conservation and tourism intersect with Indigenous land and resources\textsuperscript{65}. A clear tension surface between the rights established through international negotiation and priorities of national development to exploit resources on Indigenous Peoples’ lands\textsuperscript{76}. This current also emerges when State’s fear deterring of foreign investment if they enable the rights of Indigenous Peoples\textsuperscript{77}. The implementation gap also manifests with bureaucratic inertia, corruption on the part of public officials, inadequate monitoring procedures and insufficient Indigenous consultation and participation in public decision-making processes\textsuperscript{78}. Moreover, the lack of knowledge of governments’ authorities and agencies in how to implement recommendations cause difficulties\textsuperscript{79}. Lack of implementation is also related to the technical legal status of the recommendations as non-binding\textsuperscript{80}. Thus, effectiveness of TB’s due to their inability to obligate States to adhere to the treaties as well as the absence of consequences or repercussions in case of State noncompliance with recommendations, present another barrier. Lack of implementation is also attributed to the absence of formal tracking tools and clear national mechanisms to follow-up on implementation\textsuperscript{81}. Another factor impeding a state’s ability to undertake meaningful action is the limited statistical data analysis, reporting and monitoring of data on violence by sex, age and ethnicity of Indigenous Peoples, especially women, in addition to the absence of information systems capable of monitoring violence inhibits an adequate analysis of the causes of such violence and the identification of possible prevention, protection and response measures\textsuperscript{82,83}. An additional challenge is the shortage of resources allocated to the implementation of the recommendations, as many States have limited financial capacity\textsuperscript{84} or do not prioritize the implementations.

How to enable the implementation of recommendations

At its 14\textsuperscript{th} session the Permanent Forum identified limitations in the implementation of its recommendations and initiated a process to improve its working procedure as well as the implementation capacity. The main objectives were to ensure that recommendations were implemented more efficiently and to strengthen accountability. The process involved reducing the number of recommendations issued, while making them more specific and applicable, and establishing an improved system to monitor and support the implementation of recommendations once they have been approved. Furthermore, the new approach included publicly sharing the key achievements in order to disclose best practices\textsuperscript{85}. To improve the implementation, the recommendations must be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and should include completion deadlines\textsuperscript{86}. Overall, recommendations are expected to be more successful if they are detailed, as well as have clear objectives and measures included\textsuperscript{87}. General recommendations from TB’s as “Combat discrimination against Indigenous Women” while, categorically an important objective, possibly will be too intangible, both in terms of scope and in how such a broad scale and entrenched problem should be tackled, thus unlikely to be implemented by the subsequent cycle. To identify potential barriers and allow for targeted plans to be developed, UN entities must develop an improved procedure to monitor and supervise the progress and execution of the implementations\textsuperscript{88,89}. In States with low implementation rates, the UN entities may well assist with strategies and advise to improve and accomplish implementations. Others argue to condition or restrict States parties’ access to UN Agencies’ funding in case of non-compliance or non-implementation of recommendations\textsuperscript{90}.

Due to the lack of statistical data on Indigenous Women, the ILO has been suggested to assist States in developing gender and cultural appropriate methodologies, and indicators to monitor the socio-economic and legal status of Indigenous Women workers\textsuperscript{91}. Furthermore, effective realization of Indigenous peoples’ rights requires that States, in conjunction with Indigenous Peoples, establish national plans to implement recommendations with clear timelines and priorities. States should apply tracking tools and mechanisms to monitor implementation\textsuperscript{92} and report regularly on the progress and shortcomings in implementing recommendations to their national legislatures and to the UN\textsuperscript{93,94} so that challenges of the resolutions on issues relating to Indigenous Women’s rights can be elucidated. Moreover, the allocation of sufficient human, technical, and financial resources to achieve goals, with attention given to Indigenous Women must be prioritized for the effective implementation by numerous UN recommendations\textsuperscript{95,96,97,98,99}.

At the local or regional scale, the specific strategies of implementations and programs also encompass a key role for accomplishing implementations. Existing practices and approaches may not necessarily apply effectively among Indigenous Women if their work and agricultural cycle, spiritual and other socio-cultural and community matters are not considered\textsuperscript{100}. Thus, implementation activities and programs must ensure effective sensitivity of time availability and recognition of the roles and contributions of Indigenous Women, which include inter alia their knowledge and practice on natural resource management, sustainable food systems, health care, and traditional livelihoods. The UN has suggested creating spaces for dialogue between Indigenous Women, and government authorities, under the auspices of OHCHR to facilitate effective participation of Indigenous Women\textsuperscript{101}. This potentially could be part of a power shift to end paternalistic and racist approaches to development and governance, and to replace them with equitable collaboration between
States, UN bodies, mechanisms and agencies, with Indigenous Women’s organizations, and Indigenous Peoples’ self-governance structures. In order to ensure the advancement of participation, representation, and, social, cultural and economic development of Indigenous Women - development programs and implementations of recommendations must be based on representation and alliances with Indigenous Women.²

Conclusion

In general, effective implementation of recommendations to end the intersectional challenges faced by Indigenous Women have been far too slow to materialize. Addressing the situation of Indigenous Women demands holistic approaches. Instrumental to breaking the cycle of discrimination and exclusion - political will by States is needed, moreover, financial allocation, awareness raising campaigns toward the general public, and the effective and inclusive participation of Indigenous Women in decision-making at all levels of governance, laws, legislation, and projects from the process of formation to their implementation, must be substantially prioritized.

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Cover photo: Indigenous Lahu woman from Thailand facing massive livelihood challenges after their land has been declared a national park. Credit: Signe Leth/IWGIA
According to Paragraph 1 of the Human Rights Council Resolution 6/36, the mandate of the EMRIP is to provide the Human Rights Council "with thematic expertise on the rights of Indigenous peoples in the manner and form requested by the Council". According to Paragraph 2 of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Resolution 2000/22, the mandate of the PFII is to “(a) Provide expert advice and recommendations on Indigenous issues to the Council, as well as to programmes, funds and agencies of the United Nations, through the Council; (b) Raise awareness and promote the integration and coordination of activities relating to Indigenous issues within the United Nations system; (c) Prepare and disseminate information on Indigenous issues”.


22 https://undocs.org/A/HRC/30/41