



IWGIA

INTERNATIONAL WORK GROUP FOR INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

Written submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its causes & consequences

**IWGIA inputs to the Report on violence against women
and girls in the context of the climate crisis, including
environmental degradation and related disaster risk
mitigation and response**

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Introduction

This written contribution is respectfully submitted by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women in response to the call for inputs on the impacts of violence against women in the context of the climate crisis and environmental degradation to inform the Special Rapporteur's report, to be presented at the 77th session of the General Assembly.

The submission outlines the impacts of climate change, main challenges and opportunities in relation to the climate crisis, facing Indigenous women and girls, who make up roughly 2.5% of the global population, and who are among those contributing the least to climate change but suffering the most from the effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

The consequences of climate change are often felt most acutely by Indigenous Peoples and have gendered impacts. Forced migration as a result of climate change and water scarcity are susceptible of making Indigenous women and girls more vulnerable to human rights abuses.¹ Indigenous communities in Asia denounced how women and girls were forced to walk further and further out onto the land, and spend more time collecting water and firewood than they used to.² In the Arctic, weather changes, thin ice and severe weather conditions are impeding traditional harvesting and hunting activities, depleting animals on which they base their sustenance, and affecting women's traditional roles.³ State conservation efforts and programmes to adapt to and mitigate climate change, when they are designed without consulting Indigenous Peoples and implemented without their participation, can have adverse gendered impacts.⁴ Indigenous women hold essential knowledge regarding climate mitigation and adaptation, passed on from one generation to the next, yet they continue to be excluded or underrepresented in environmental policymaking.⁵ When they speak up, Indigenous women often face criminalization and intimidation.⁶

Main Challenges

There are numerous challenges for Indigenous women in relation to climate change. Indigenous women are more severely affected by the challenges to produce or collect sufficient food, or challenges of water scarcity because of climate change (flooding, drought, unpredictable weather, decrease in food varieties etc.). In accordance with culturally defined gender roles, Indigenous women are often the ones responsible for collecting firewood, fetching water, tending the fields and feeding the family.

When women must spend more time and walk longer distances to produce or collect food and water, they are increasingly exposed and vulnerable to violence. There are numerous examples of this, for instance in Nepal and Thailand, where Indigenous women living in buffer zones of national parks face brutal human rights violations when entering the park to collect food, herbs, medicinal plants, or water. Or in Kenya, where the Indigenous women lost their traditional occupation as pastoralists due to the construction of a windmill farm and had to sustain their families through prostitution. Many traditional occupations of Indigenous

¹ UN HRC, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples on Climate Change*, A/HRC/36/46, November 1, 2017, para.11.

² UN HRC, *Regional consultation on the rights of indigenous peoples in Asia, Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples*, A/HRC/45/34/Add.3, September 2020, para.35.

³ Inclusion y Equidad, *Regional Study: The situation of Indigenous Women in the Arctic Region in the Framework of the Beijing Declaration*, 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action, April 8, 2020, p.25.

⁴ UN HRC, *Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Climate change and Climate Finance*, A/HRC/36/46, November 1, 2017, para.12; IWGIA, *The impact of renewable energy projects on Indigenous communities in Kenya*, December 2019.

⁵ Inclusion y Equidad, *Regional Study: The situation of Indigenous Women in the Arctic Region in the Framework of the Beijing Declaration – 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action*, April 8, 2020, p.26; Agatha Ma and Nilar Tun, "Voices and Choices: Myanmar Indigenous Women in Climate Justice", in IWGIA, *Strong Roots: Understanding the Importance of Myanmar's Indigenous Women as Leaders in Developing Climate Change Solutions*, August 2020.

⁶ Abigail Bengwayan-Anongos, *Philippines: False Accusations, Persecution and Imprisonment of Indigenous Women*, Debates Indigenas Blog, April 1, 2021.

Women are under threat because of climate change putting the economic independence of Indigenous women at serious risk. For example, a woman from Taymyr, Russia had to quickly sell all the deerskin she had at a lower cost, because she had no place to keep them in cool, when the spring came early.

Indigenous Women are also seriously affected when their communities are displaced due to dire effects of climate change in their territories.

Climate change mitigation actions implemented by governments or the private sector (such as green energy projects or the establishment of national parks or protected areas) severely and negatively affect Indigenous women if they are not involved in the design and implementation of such efforts. Examples include; Lake Turkana Wind Power project in Kenya, or hydro-power projects in Nepal, Philippines and many other places.

Furthermore, we have seen that extractive industries have had devastating impacts on Indigenous Peoples' territories such as pollution of rivers, deforestation and loss of biodiversity, and a series of studies have also shown that women's bodies are more vulnerable to the harmful effects of toxic pollution by extractive activities and there is increasing evidence that demonstrates the many ways in which women, as the bearers of life, are affected and can pass on serious environmental health problems to future generations⁷

Indigenous women are role-models

Even though Indigenous women and girls face all these challenges related to climate change, they must also be acknowledged as role-models for their resilience as well as their sustainable practices in resource management of forest, water, and land. Many Indigenous women across the globe express their deep-felt connection to the environment and their wish to protect it to ensure natural resources for the next generations

Among many forest-dependent Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous women play a central role in forest conservation and management, they are a repository of Indigenous knowledge on non-timber forest products and herbal medicine and they are often the keepers of seeds and thus in charge of preserving domesticated plant varieties. Their knowledge can be extremely valuable in building climate resilient communities and in the development of adaptation plans. Their inclusion and participation in the elaboration of policies and programmes related to mitigation of climate change is essential.

These invaluable roles and contributions of women for the wellbeing of their families and communities are not properly acknowledged nor recognised by community or government actors. Indeed, despite being important agents of change, Indigenous women are often excluded from participating in decision-making processes that are linked to climate change issues at regional national and international level.

An intersectional approach when addressing violence against girls and women

When discussing how to address gender-based violence, racism and discrimination, it is of utmost importance to apply an intersectional approach, which recognizes that Indigenous women face more than one layer of discrimination – they are discriminated against for being women, for being poor, but also for being Indigenous. Several pressure points need to be utilized to address the different layers. An intersectional approach takes into account the historical, social and political context and recognizes the unique experience of the individual based on the intersection of all relevant grounds. This approach allows the particular experience of discrimination, based on the confluence of grounds involved, to be acknowledged and remedied.

⁷ Silva Santisteban, Rocío et al, [Indigenous Women and Climate Change](#), IWGIA 2020.

Indigenous women across all regions of the globe hold a respected position within their communities, acknowledged as being the glue that keeps communities together, the library that holds their knowledge, the custodians of biodiversity as well as the activist that will stand up for their survival; but it is also reflected that such a position rarely comes with legal rights and formal power.

Indigenous women disproportionately face intersectional discrimination and multiple expressions of violence – in a world where one in three women experiences violence – and are often excluded from decision-making processes and leadership positions. Violence against Indigenous women triggers other negative effects pertaining to their mental and physical health and lowers their self-worth, which lessens their possibilities of earning an income and lowers their level of participation and decision-making powers.

Recommendations

In light of these challenges and opportunities facing Indigenous women in relation to achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in the context of climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction policies and programmes, we implore the Special Rapporteur to review the following recommendations, and where possible include them in the final report for the General Assembly's the 77th Session.

We recommend member states to:

1. Create safe spaces for Indigenous Women to participate on their own terms in decision-making processes that affect their lives;
2. Ensure that Indigenous women have access to reliable information in their own languages about the impact of climate change in their territories;
3. Always include the perspectives and recommendations of Indigenous Women in policies and programmes related to climate change, environmental and disaster risk reduction;
4. Ensure the performance of due diligence to adhere to the obligations of States to protect human rights, including free, prior and informed consent;
5. Ensure that the Ministries responsible for drafting the policies and programmes have access to advise and recommendations from Indigenous Women. For instance, by setting up advisory committees consisting of Indigenous Women representatives, elected through their own processes;
6. When Indigenous Peoples are displaced because of the consequences of climate change or natural disasters, it is important that Indigenous Women are included in the consultations on where and how the community should be relocated;
7. States should ensure the right to compensation in consultation with the affected communities when their livelihood is destroyed because of climate change.