

Securing Indigenous Women's Rights and Participation

Indigenous peoples, an estimated 370 million living in more than 70 countries, maintain social, cultural, economic and political characteristics distinct from those of the dominant societies they live in. Although among the most resilient of peoples worldwide, systematic marginalization throughout history has made them arguably one of the poorest and most vulnerable groups of people today. Many are victims of racial discrimination, social exclusion and rapid economic development without their consent. They have been denied their land rights, and deprived of access to basic needs like education and healthcare.¹



Tarahumaras women, Northern Mexico

When combined with other forms of discrimination, such as those based on race or ethnicity, the effects of gender discrimination can multiply, posing serious challenges to women's enjoyment of their basic human rights. In this context, indigenous women are often targets of gender-specific and racially-motivated violence and discrimination. Forced pregnancy, sexual assault, forced sterilization, domestic abuse, and denial of legal rights and protection are violations experienced by indigenous women both in peacetime and during conflict. Poverty, and limited access to economic resources, education and health services have further contributed to the erosion of their economic and social rights, while patriarchal traditions and cultural mores have created obstacles to their participation in leadership roles and decision-making processes.

The escalating militarization and conflict played out in many indigenous territories have severely affected indigenous communities, women in particular, causing significant internal displacement and devastation of natural resources and ancestral homelands. In Colombia, indigenous women are the primary victims of forced displacement by paramilitaries, often also subject to widespread sexual abuse. In Guatemala, more than 50,000 women were widowed, mostly young women with children. Indigenous Maya women were also specifically targeted for sexual crimes and forced into slavery.²

The Indigenous Women's Movement

In the last decades, indigenous women have mobilized to address the needs of their communities and to ensure that indigenous issues, and indigenous women's involvement in addressing key challenges, are visible on the international agenda. At the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), they collectively issued a Declaration of Indigenous Women to demand world attention to their particular realities, as the world embarked on the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples (1995-2004). In Ecuador and Colombia for example, indigenous women's movements have been credited with significantly moving the indigenous cause forward.

Key issues raised by indigenous women at various regional and international forums have included the need for protection of their cultural and intellectual property and recognition of the fundamental role that indigenous knowledge can play in achieving sustainable human development. Indigenous

¹ Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii, and UNDP, www.undp.org

² UNIFEM Web portal on Women, Peace and Security — www.womenwarpeace.org



women have a particular knowledge of the management of natural resources, using their expertise in medicinal and agricultural biodiversity to sustain their communities and promote environmental sustainability.

UNIFEM's Work

In working to support the realization of indigenous women's rights, UNIFEM uses a human-rights based approach which recognizes the need to build the capacity and awareness of the state to uphold these rights, while simultaneously increasing knowledge and capacity among indigenous women themselves.

UNIFEM's most significant work in this area has been in the Andean Region,³ Mexico and Central America. Since 1995, UNIFEM has worked with its partners to utilize local knowledge and systems within indigenous communities, build synergies with decision-makers, human rights activists and women's groups, and foster leadership among indigenous women. A key focus in current programming priorities is to support increased inter-agency cooperation among UN Country Teams in addressing issues facing indigenous women.

In preparation for the Third Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in May 2004, UNIFEM collaborated with UNFPA and the National Women's Machinery of Ecuador to organize and facilitate various meetings for indigenous women leaders, to create a common agenda for promoting their human rights that consolidated different viewpoints contained in their respective national agendas. One such meeting was the recent Fourth Intercontinental Conference on Indigenous Issues held in April in Peru.

Increasing economic security — UNIFEM works in partnership with fair trade organizations, government and UN agencies to promote greater recognition of women's contribution to their families' livelihoods. In *Peru*, in cooperation with the Manuela Ramos Movement, indigenous women received training and skills-building in the areas of business management, marketing and crafts production. More than 600 workshops took place, benefiting more than 2000 women, and a series of craft trade shows were also organized. In *Mexico*, a project with indigenous communities in Oaxaca focused on building women's networks to enable them to better control local economic resources and support environmental protection. Oaxaca women expanded their skills, actively sharing knowledge learned with neighbouring communities.

Raising social awareness — Essential to ensuring the realization of their rights is the fostering of public awareness and understanding of the specific challenges and realities faced by indigenous women. Recognising the paucity of data that exists on indigenous women, UNIFEM supported the development and dissemination of statistical publications in *Ecuador* and *Colombia*, which provide social indicators on the status of rural women, both indigenous and non-indigenous. UNIFEM also supported publication of *Voces de Los Andes*, a book which provides insight into the lifestyles and working conditions of indigenous women, in their own voices.

Knowledge-sharing and capacity building — UNIFEM's emphasis has been on making indigenous women aware of their rights as contained in the legal frameworks of their countries. Training on human rights, leadership and participation was successfully replicated throughout the Andean region, resulting in thousands of women being exposed to such issues, and the roles they could play in affecting decision-making. In *Ecuador*, workshops on human rights held for women from the Shuar Federation, an indigenous organization in the Amazon region, facilitated the establishment of the first autonomous indigenous women's organization, CONMIE (the National Council of Indigenous Women of Ecuador). UNIFEM has also focused on raising awareness about the rights of indigenous women among government, judicial and law enforcement officials, female labour union members and the media. Between 1996 and 2000, UNIFEM played a central role in advocating with state agencies to increase allocation of resources in support of issues affecting indigenous women. In *Bolivia*, legislative norms were amended regarding the granting of title to facilitate indigenous and rural women's land ownership.

³ The UNIFEM Andean Region Programme Office covers Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela.

