

Indigenous Women: A Gender Perspective

Summary

Indigenous peoples struggle with institutionalized discrimination and marginalization. Faced with laws and policies that facilitate land dispossession through forestry, conservation, mining, tourism and population pressure, indigenous peoples are today among the most impoverished and marginalized in the world. Yet even more critical is the situation of indigenous women.

Indigenous women are often described as the custodians of traditions and cultures. They bear the prime responsibility of ensuring the culture and traditions of their peoples are passed on to future generations, and are the most noticeable expressions of their peoples' distinct culture.

Yet, as in any society, indigenous women too share the same burden of institutionalized gender bias as their non-indigenous sisters, yet, they have a heavier load. Indigenous women are the most vulnerable among indigenous peoples, and face double discrimination - on the basis of their gender for being women and for their ethnicity for being indigenous. In some parts of the world, there is triple burden to bear as indigenous women are also poor.

Indigenous women do not see themselves as victims. Faced with discrimination and prejudice, indigenous women have been forced to develop skills and strategies for survival – for themselves, their peoples and their cultures. They have learnt to survive oppression and marginalization, discrimination and violence, without losing the wisdom and patience to build on and to share these experiences. Yet often their contribution to the struggle of indigenous peoples is not recognized or acknowledged.

This paper explores this issue, and draws on the experiences of Saami women and their sisters in different parts of the world in keeping their cultures alive and dynamic, and in transmitting this message to future generations as an integral element in the process of gaining greater recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples.

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