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Statement submitted by International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

Introduction

This written statement is respectfully submitted by the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) to the Commission on the Status of Women in response to the priority theme, Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls, of the 62nd Session.

This submission outlines main challenges and opportunities facing indigenous women and girls, who make up roughly 2.5 per cent of the global population and who mostly inhabit rural areas. This statement is framed around the 2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, of which Goals 1, 5, and 15 have been used to inform and structure our response. IWGIA acknowledges that the unique situation of indigenous women is not limited to these three goals, however, for the sake of brevity we have focused only on these.

SDG Goal 1: Indigenous Women and Poverty

Indigenous Peoples in Asia traditionally practice agricultural techniques, such as shifting cultivation, which underpin their economic, social and cultural integrity. These subsistence activities are continuously threatened by infrastructure, industrialization and so-called conservation projects; all of these things contributing to the levels of poverty found within indigenous communities. For indigenous women, the situation is amplified. Lack of access to land, education, credit and limited participation in decision-making processes at all levels is indicative of the feminization of poverty.

Loss of land, water and forest on indigenous territories intensifies the poverty of indigenous women, as their domestic and subsistence responsibilities increase. Due to low education levels, and lack of formal id-cards, indigenous women are often excluded from job opportunities to supplement their livelihoods. Furthermore, the introduction of cash as a form of economy has contributed to the erosion of indigenous women as independent food producers, healers, artisans and spiritualists.

Poverty as a result of loss of land and resources, has forced indigenous women to migrate in search of work. This form of migration has fostered increases in prostitution and human trafficking, which indigenous women are made particularly vulnerable to as a result of their limited education and often stateless status. Many of these women are misled by middlemen who promise them secure working conditions.

Indigenous women are vulnerable to poverty from many different angles. However, access to land and security of tenure can significantly reduce this poverty whilst providing sustainable livelihood security and preservation of indigenous traditional and cultural knowledge. By securing indigenous women's access to land, their critical role in the management of their communities would be validated, transforming their lives.

SDG Goal 5: Gender Equality and Empowerment of Indigenous Women and Girls

Gender inequality within indigenous communities, is evident through occurrences of sexual and gender based violence, including; violence in the name of culture and tradition, such as female genital mutilation, witch-hunting and forced marriage.

Traditional customary institutions, commonly the primary governing bodies within indigenous communities, are often patriarchal and further perpetuate the

political disempowerment of indigenous women. The vast majority of indigenous women in Asia have been raised according to traditions and customs, many of which are patriarchal in nature. Furthermore, men in indigenous communities in Asia are given more respect and value than women, even in matrilineal communities.

Men are still expected to be the main source of familial income, and they are granted the roles of community leaders and/or representatives. Women are expected to take care of the well-being of their families and the domestic responsibilities. As a result, indigenous women often have little or no access to financial resources or decision-making power.

Indigenous girls receive less education and thus have less employment opportunities than indigenous men, as well as insufficient access to health care. If an indigenous community does have access to a modern health care facility, indigenous women may experience discriminatory or culturally insensitive attitudes from health service providers, particularly when it comes to sexual and reproductive health care.

SDG Goal 15: Indigenous Women and Land

Agricultural production in indigenous communities was traditionally a role for indigenous women, who spent most of their time working in the fields to produce food for their family. These days, production of crops for export is often controlled by transnational corporations and private business. Indigenous women are no longer self-sufficient, but contracted to work on commercial plantations and become more dependent on others.

Massive land alienation and land concession projects are taking place in the name of development in Cambodia, whilst large expanses of indigenous land in Indonesia are being turned into destructive large-scale rubber and palm oil plantations. In Sawarak, Malaysia, Iban women are facing forced evictions and have lost their food sources and raw materials that are needed to sustain their traditional livelihoods.

Displacement has led to the deterioration of indigenous women's social status as they struggle to fulfil their traditional roles, as well as the burden of additional workloads, deteriorating health status and a rise in domestic violence inflicted upon them by their male counterparts.

Secure access to land and natural resources will ensure stability in the livelihoods of indigenous women and facilitate more opportunities for income generation. They will also improve their self-esteem, contributing to a shift in responsibilities and decision making at the household and community levels. Long term, securing land titles for indigenous women can change asset holding patterns and reverse power dynamics in patriarchal societies, in favour of the women, in turn reducing their overall poverty.

Opportunities

Despite their chronic marginalization, indigenous women play invaluable roles within their societies and have much to contribute - also to the global women's movement and the global goals of sustainable development.

In most indigenous communities, it is the women who serve as primary caregivers to children and elderly family members. It is the indigenous women who are the holders and teachers of traditional knowledge passed down through generations, who are the main food producers and managers of their surrounding natural resources, and who have the knowledge to adapt to the effects of climate change.

Even with their invaluable experiences, indigenous women are often excluded from the global development agenda due to intersecting factors, including lack of access in terms of education, employment and financial resources. Meanwhile, collectively, indigenous women's organizations are often side-lined to mainstream women's organizations. While there are many significant events that indigenous women can both gain from and contribute to; obstacles often exist to meaningful participation of indigenous women in such events, including gaps in financing, language barriers (many indigenous women do not speak their national language, let alone English) and the provision of visas.

Recommendations

In light of these challenges and opportunities facing indigenous women's advancement towards gender equality, we implore the Commission to review the following recommendations, and where possible include them in the final report of the 62nd Session. We recommend governments in Asia to:

- Secure Indigenous Peoples collective rights to land, territories and resources; including securing land titles for indigenous women.
- Implement nationally and contextually appropriate social protection mechanisms that are in line with the rights of Indigenous Peoples, as set out by the UNDRIP and other relevant frameworks.
- Recognize that in indigenous and rural territories, statutory recognition of women's access to land may require specific and contextually relevant analysis in order to calibrate it alongside the dominant society.
- Recognize indigenous women as those most at-risk to climate related disasters and provide contextually relevant and culturally sensitive safeguards to ensure their economic, social and environmental protection.
- Support the indicators under Goal 1, include data sets that are disaggregated at the intersection of indigeneity and gender in recognition of the fact that indigenous women are among the poorest of the poor globally.
- Implement measures for legal recognition, protection and implementation of the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples, in particular indigenous women, over their lands, territories and resources.
- Recognize, protect and promote traditional sustainable livelihood practices of indigenous women.
- Recognize and respect customary laws, traditional knowledge and forest governance systems, including their systems of collective decision-making.
- Eliminate all forms of discrimination against indigenous women in line with international and domestic laws, including an improvement of the economic and social conditions of indigenous women.
- Ensure that all women, including indigenous women, can enjoy the same human rights and fundamental freedoms as men in political, social, economic and cultural fields by passing laws to end discriminatory practices against women and ensuring those laws are enforced.