

The role of Indigenous women in the protection of traditional knowledge

Presentation by Quebec Native Women Inc.

According to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), all the rights and freedoms are equally guaranteed to male and female indigenous individuals. The rights of Indigenous women are recognized specifically under articles 21, 22 and 44 of the UNDRIP. Therefore, the rights of Indigenous women are guaranteed under the Declaration. There are also specific rights to traditional knowledge and access to resources that are recognized by the UNDRIP. It is important to remember the role of Indigenous women with regards to the protection of traditional knowledge.

Ensuring the protection of Indigenous women's knowledge on the issue of ABS is of particular concern since **colonial structures** tend to reinforce the role of men and their activities. Colonization has undermined the role of Indigenous women who once enjoyed a prominent and respected place in their communities as leaders and decision makers, guardians of the language, customs and traditions of their peoples. Indigenous women have a vital role in facilitating the healing of families and communities as well as nation building. Indigenous women's inequality in the area of land rights and resource exploitation is the result of the implementation of government policies that promote and concede to male leadership, such as band councils. Discrimination extends into large-scale resource development which tends to disregard the socio-economic and cultural impacts of its development. For women, the potential loss of traditional activities and knowledge must be weighed during environmental impact studies.

In traditional societies, women held the main responsibility of educating their children to take on adult roles. As Indigenous peoples we have the right to ensure the continuity of our practices, customs and traditions, so women must bring back this role so that our spiritual and cultural knowledge does not disappear and it transmitted to the next generations. Current governing structures within Indigenous communities lack the recognition of Indigenous women's participation and contributors within traditional Indigenous societies.

Indigenous women possess significant TK that today can contribute to the environmental integrity and biodiversity. However, Indigenous women face limited opportunities and resources to facilitate their participation at most negotiations. Moreover, policies and laws have not been sufficient to ensure that unique traditional knowledge of Indigenous women is included or protected.

Indigenous women must have sufficient capacity to ensure meaningful and effective participation at any legislative, administrative and policy regime affecting Indigenous and traditional knowledge. ILCs have achieved the recognition of Indigenous women within the discussions on article 8 (j) and ABS but we must ensure that these are passed on to the national level and so on.

Another important aspect is the issue of language. Essential to cultural identity, linguistic diversity is closely linked to cultural diversity, and languages play an important role in the transmission of TK, as much of the knowledge is contained within the Indigenous languages. Mothers are important transmitters of TK, as we often speak of mother tongues since children are more likely to retain the language of their mothers. Families and communities also play an important role in passing on languages. However, thousands of languages around the world will likely disappear in the space of a few generations because they are few very speakers left.

Therefore we must encourage states:

- To elaborate a work plan inclusive of a gender based analysis that will facilitate the participation of women during the elaboration of their national policies on ABS and protection of traditional knowledge.
- To establish a mechanism that assures the participation of Indigenous women to carry out relevant research on the effects of an ABS policy on Indigenous women.
- To accord equal opportunity to Indigenous women in the decision-making process relating to ABS and that capacity-building initiatives be included before the passing of legislation.
- To assure adequate mechanisms so that Indigenous languages are protected and that TK can be preserved.