

Indigenous Women's Visions of an Inclusive Feminism

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ABSTRACT *Myrna Cunningham reflects on two experiences that motivated her to seek out Indigenous women who identify as feminists, who understand both the importance of feminism and the transformations that are needed within the international women's movement in order for feminism to live up to its potential as a political practice.*

KEYWORDS *self-determination; women's rights; CEDAW; justice; equality*

Introduction

Recently, I was invited to give a lecture in the US to a group of feminist studies students. I was in the middle of describing how resource privatization threatens Indigenous Peoples on the North Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, where I am from, when the professor stopped me. 'We were really hoping you could speak from your experience as a woman, not so much as an Indigenous person,' she said in a tone meant to be encouraging.

The day after returning from that trip I was at a community meeting in Waspmam, Nicaragua. Members of one of our local committees were strategizing about how to get the national government to honour a long-standing commitment to fund a new school for the community. During the meeting, I raised the issue of girls' education and its significance as a component of the Beijing Platform for Action. Once again, I was interrupted, this time by an Indigenous woman. 'Another feminist document?' she said scornfully. 'Those are words written by white women, for white women.'

These two experiences motivated me to seek out other Indigenous women who identify as feminists, who understand both the importance of feminism and the transformations that are needed within the international women's movement in order for feminism to live up to its potential as a political practice.

An indigenous feminist critiques the international women's movement

Many women like me who are from historically marginalized groups, whether Indigenous, African-descendent, or poor – have seen the potential of feminism to our struggles, especially our struggle for our rights as women within our communities. We have used

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feminist tools for looking critically at our Indigenous systems of social organization and at Indigenous values; and feminism has informed our development as women and our participation in Indigenous organizations. Many Indigenous women identify as feminists; others recognize the feminist movement as an ally in our struggles as Indigenous women. The strength and integrity of the international women's movement is therefore important to us as Indigenous women who have been working to articulate our own feminist politics and to integrate our perspectives into a broader feminist movement. It is from this standpoint of identification with feminism that I offer a critique of the international women's movement.

When I ask some Indigenous women why they think of feminism as a white women's movement, they reply with some rendition of the following analysis. They see that the dominant feminist paradigm is based on an unacknowledged model of centre and periphery. In this model, Indigenous, African-descendent, and poor women occupy the periphery and must accept the ideas and conceptualization of feminism as defined by those at the centre. In other words, we Indigenous women are expected to accept the dominant picture of what constitutes women's oppression and women's liberation. The trouble is, this picture is only a partial match with our own experiences. Elements of our experience that do not match this picture are denied or marginalized. This dominant model tries to homogenize the women's movement, claiming that all women have the same demands and the same access to the enjoyment of their rights. This flawed assumption denies the diverse cultural, linguistic and social needs and visions of distinct groups of women.

For Indigenous women, human rights, women's rights, and the rights of Indigenous Peoples are intrinsically linked. To Indigenous women, who experience these elements of identity as an organic whole, this claim is patently obvious. However, to many feminists whose sole experience of oppression is on the basis of gender, this claim seems to require endless explanation.

Like other women from historically marginalized groups, Indigenous women have had to fight to be heard in a movement where the only ostensi-

ble criteria for participation are to show up and be a woman. Even now, after decades of international conferences, discussions, publications, and much hard work, issues that are a matter of life and death for Indigenous women – racism, for example, or the exploitation of the earth's resources – are relegated to a tagged-on conceptual category called 'diversity,' in the dominant feminist paradigm. In fact, the homogenizing tendency of the women's movement sometimes recreates the same frameworks of discrimination and cultural degradation through which national governments exploit Indigenous Peoples, especially indigenous women.

Indigenous rights are women's rights

The process of articulating an Indigenous women's standpoint requires synthesizing our collective identity as a People and our individual identities as women. For Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous women, exercising our rights – both as Indigenous People and as women – depends on securing legal recognition of our collective ancestral territories. Our territories are the basis of our identities, our cultures, our economies, and our traditions. Indigenous rights include the right to full recognition as Peoples with our own worldview and traditions, our own territories, and our own modes of organization within nation-states; the right to self-determination through our own systems of autonomy or self-government based on a communal property framework; and the right to control, develop, and utilize our own natural resources. Indigenous Peoples are entitled to these rights *in addition* to the rights guaranteed to all individuals by the full body of internationally agreed-upon human rights laws and standards.

Self-determination should be understood as an aspect of respect for cultural diversity within nation-states. From our point of view as Indigenous women, there cannot be a national policy for the development and promotion of citizenship that does not take into consideration the cultural, linguistic and historical characteristics of its Peoples. Gender justice for Indigenous women must be rooted in Indigenous self-determination,

reflected in Indigenous self-management, recognition of Indigenous technology and knowledge, incorporation of traditional Indigenous norms of social organization, and respect for intellectual property rights. Indigenous self-government means collective decision-making regarding economic, social and cultural policies. These decisions should be made in a way that is inclusive, egalitarian and pluralistic, which entails changes in the traditional distribution of power and authority. These changes have already begun to take shape, as evidenced by the participation of more women and young people in different arenas and at various levels of public life. For example, in numerous countries, Indigenous women are participating in the processes of building multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual states.

The struggle of Indigenous Peoples is not a threat to our struggles as Indigenous women. On the contrary, we see these struggles as reciprocal. Our work in Indigenous women's organizations is carried out in keeping with the cultural cohesion of our Peoples. We do not reject our Indigenous identity or disregard our role in the cultural, social, economic and political development of our Peoples. The collective development of our Peoples will strengthen the participation of Indigenous women in Indigenous societies and in our countries. Therefore, we emphasize the importance of both collective and individual human rights from our own socio-cultural and linguistic vantage point.

As Indigenous women, we do not see our cultures as the source of gender oppression. In fact, the traditional notion of duality between men and women in Indigenous worldview is closely compatible with our vision of feminism. In this view, men and women are complimentary and women are revered as the source of preservation of the social and cultural heritage of our Peoples. Our cultures, then, offer a model of gender justice that Indigenous women can draw from. This egalitarian ethic has been eroded over centuries of colonization. Yet it remains at the core of our cultures. We believe that Indigenous women's struggles should be against the patriarchal systems, which grew out of colonialism, and not against Indigenous men.

Historically, Indigenous women have been discriminated against in three areas: ethnicity, gender, and economic status. Nation-states have established cultural patterns of discrimination against Indigenous women, reflected in the low wages that Indigenous women are paid, and in national policies and legislation that, although they mention women, usually fail to establish specific actions to safeguard the rights of Indigenous women (and when they do, these measures generally lack monitoring and verification mechanisms to ensure that those actions are carried out). This reality has been neglected in mainstream feminist analysis, which focuses on the inequality of women in the family and society, but pays less attention to ethnic differences that exist in our countries. We need to develop a feminist analysis that addresses social, economic *and* ethnic inequality. This analysis must recognize that these inequalities are the legacy of the colonial era in our countries and communities, and that, in the current context of globalization, these inequalities are reproduced – once again making the cultural and linguistic diversity of our Peoples invisible.

Today, the political goals of Indigenous women are under mounting threat from the interrelated phenomena of economic globalization, militarization of our territories, and religious extremism. In recent years, we have witnessed increased plunder of our territories, natural resources and knowledge and the displacement of our communities in preparation for huge construction projects by multinationals. Plunder has been facilitated by a systematic centuries-long elimination of our historical rights over our territories. And we have seen ongoing violations of our human rights and fundamental freedoms as armed conflicts rage on our lands and as our seeds are pirated by industries that contaminate our bodies and ecosystems with genetically modified organisms. These are not only 'Indigenous problems.' These are the crises that threaten to undermine development and human rights around the world. Therefore, these issues should be at the top of the agenda of the women's movement, for we are all seriously affected by the processes of economic 'expansion' that are taking place within our territories.

Indigenous women's political agenda: local, national and international accomplishments

Indigenous women have articulated an agenda and are working to develop strategies to combat the many forms of violence that have been perpetrated by nation-states against Indigenous women and Peoples, including violations of our rights to control our own resources and govern ourselves. An overarching demand for self-determination creates the framework for this agenda, which includes overlapping demands for basic food security for our communities, rights to our Indigenous territories, rights to sexual and reproductive health, intercultural and bilingual health and education, political and economic participation, access to the use of natural resources and land, and skills training. Strategies for achieving of all these demands are grounded in recognition of our fundamental right to our territories, which is the starting point for pursuing justice and development for Indigenous women and Indigenous Peoples.

The local level is a primary arena of participation for Indigenous women; it is also the site of cultural survival and identity, where we practice harmonious relations between the communities and nature. We participate in community assemblies, meetings of local organizations and women's organizations. In these spaces, we have identified women's participation as a key to finding solutions to the social problems that affect the community. At the local level, Indigenous women and youth have increasingly taken up positions of leadership, a strategic process that has gone hand-in-hand with the struggle for the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights. By gradually asserting our leadership, Indigenous women have helped to solidify an emerging Indigenous community identity. At the same time, we have built our specific identities as Indigenous women with distinct social, cultural, linguistic, economic and political needs that support our holistic development as women.

At the level of nation-states, Indigenous Peoples have succeeded in transforming some systems that have traditionally excluded us. This achievement is a result of the growing participation of

Indigenous women in various political, cultural, economic and social arenas within the state. Indigenous women have participated in politics, defending the rights of the community and its people to natural resources and Indigenous cultural practices, and against foreign cultural penetration, imperialist intervention, the exploitation of our territories by transnational corporations, and the political partitioning of our spaces.

At the national level, the contributions of Indigenous women have been formidable, even enabling a reconceptualization of the nature of states and society. Indigenous women in national politics have promoted multiethnic democracies and respect for human rights with a holistic and balanced focus. Although Indigenous women have held government posts such as parliamentarians and ministers, our participation at the national level is not limited to the formal sphere of state power. Indigenous women have been instrumental in developing women's networks and mixed-gender organizations that have transformed lobbying work into national policies and advanced the position of civil society. As part of our work in national-level civil society, we have participated in issues related to education, health, social services, natural resources, and to a lesser degree national economic issues.

In the international arena, the work of Indigenous women began at the United Nations during the First World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975. In 1992, an Indigenous woman, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, received the Nobel Peace Prize. Her award laid the foundation for a spirit of equality and justice, which was reflected in later agreements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations. In various initiatives in the international arena, we have seen Indigenous women collaborate on national and international platforms, impacting international debates on environment, economy, intellectual property and collective rights of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, among others.

International processes, such as those that have yielded the Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the optional Protocol of Belem do Para and the Beijing Platform for

Action and its follow-up, have been important platforms for the demands of Indigenous women. At the World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, we had success as a common Indigenous front, as one of the results of the Conference was the 'Declaration of Indigenous Women,' with 40 points in which governments and non-state actors were urged to adopt concrete measures to promote and reinforce national policies and programs in favour of Indigenous women, regarding issues of human rights, health, education and economic development. Through participation in these processes, we have formed our own spaces, such as the International Indigenous Women's Forum and the Continental Network of Indigenous Women. These organizations have been a framework for us to develop our proposals and positions and above all, to articulate our own identity.

Towards a truly holistic feminism

Despite the significant achievements of the feminist movement and Indigenous women's organizations, much remains to be accomplished. We have won advances in policies and legislation to defend women's rights, but we still lack policies with cultural relevance, and development strategies that halt and reverse the feminization of poverty, such as educational and economic policies focused on the needs of all women.

To achieve these and other goals, we need to form alliances between non-Indigenous women's organizations and Indigenous women's organiza-

tions as an integrated front in the women's struggle. We need to halt the bureaucratization of the feminist movement, which began to manifest itself in the 1990s, and recover a culture of sustainability in our organizations. And we as Indigenous women need to press for the inclusion of our views and demands in the Indigenous Peoples' struggle.

In order for women to advance our agendas of justice and equality in this new world order, we need a women's movement that can address those issues that affect the current course of the world. We need a movement that can carry out a more detailed analysis and reflection from the point of view of Indigenous women. These issues include international trade processes, such as free trade agreements that violate Indigenous Peoples' collective rights, damage our natural resources, and erode women's rights; militarization of our territories; and terrorism. Taking up challenges such as these is critical to the feminist movement. Feminist leaders have recognized that the victories of feminism have so far been partial, and that patriarchal notions of gender that discriminate against women persist. However, in order to establish a unified and inclusive front of our struggle against women's oppression, we have to take into account the cultural and linguistic differences within the feminist movement. Ultimately, if the women's movement is to be enriched by being more inclusive, the feminist movement must expand its paradigm to include cultural and linguistic dimensions, including the spirituality and worldview of Indigenous women.