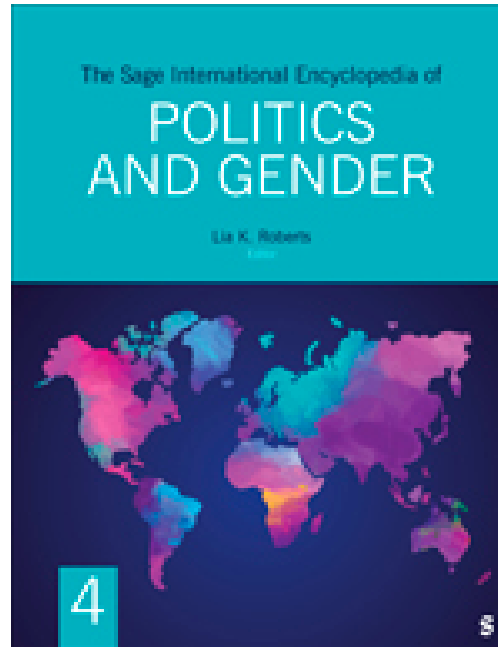


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Indigenous Women's Rights

Indigenous women worldwide face a myriad of challenges stemming from historical and ongoing injustices, including colonization, discrimination, and marginalization. Indigenous women's rights encompass a range of issues related to gender equality, cultural preservation, land rights, and socioeconomic empowerment within their communities and societies. Despite their integral roles in preserving cultural heritage, sustaining communities, and advocating for environmental stewardship, Indigenous women often face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence, both within their communities and in broader society. This entry discusses the key concerns of Indigenous women's rights as well as the historical context for the development of activism in this area. Various rights movements and acts of activism are also discussed.

Key Concerns

Key areas of concern for Indigenous women's rights include access to education, health care, and economic opportunities as well as the disproportionate rates of violence, including sexual assault, domestic violence, and trafficking Indigenous women face. Factors such as poverty, lack of access to services, and systemic racism contribute to their heightened vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Furthermore, Indigenous women often face systemic barriers to justice and legal protection, compounded by inadequate resources, discriminatory laws, and lack of representation within justice systems.

Despite centuries of oppression, Indigenous women have long played central roles in resistance movements, cultural revitalization efforts, and advocacy for Indigenous rights. In the 21st century, Indigenous women have been instrumental in leading environmental activism and advocacy efforts to protect Indigenous lands, territories, and natural resources from extractive industries and environmental degradation.

Historical Context

The historical context of Indigenous women's rights is marked by colonization, violence, and systemic discrimination but also by resistance, and resilience. Indigenous communities worldwide have endured the impacts of colonialism, involving the dispossession of Indigenous territories and societal structures; suppression of their ways of life, cultures, and languages; and imposition of foreign legal and political systems.

Colonial Subjugation

A central tool of colonization and dispossession was gender violence as colonial powers frequently targeted Indigenous women as part of their strategies to subjugate and control Indigenous peoples. For example, colonial governments such as Canada, the United States, Australia, and those in Latin America, implemented policies aimed at reducing Indigenous populations through forced sterilization as part of broader assimilationist agendas that sought to eradicate Indigenous cultures and identities. As a tool of colonization, assimilation, and population control, forced sterilization of Indigenous women is a grave violation of their reproductive rights and bodily autonomy. In most cases, Indigenous women were sterilized without their informed consent or under duress, including threats, misinformation, and coercion by health care professionals.

Assimilationist policies—such as residential schools, child removal, and other forms of cultural genocide—aimed to eradicate Indigenous cultures and identities by separating Indigenous children from their families, communities, and languages. These policies had devastating consequences for Indigenous women and families, leading to intergenerational trauma and the loss of cultural knowledge and social cohesion.

Indigenous women have historically faced legal discrimination and exclusion from rights and protections afforded to other citizens. Colonial legal frameworks frequently discounted or distorted Indigenous legal traditions and customs, contributing to the dismantling of Indigenous governance systems and the relegation of Indigenous women to the fringes of formal political and legal structures. Consequently, Indigenous women encounter systemic legal biases and impediments in accessing justice and legal safeguards.

Structural Inequalities

Structural inequalities, such as poverty, lack of access to education or health care and systemic racism, that manifest through disproportionate rates of incarceration perpetuate Indigenous women's vulnerability to violence. Limited infrastructure and housing options in remote and rural Indigenous communities exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities and can contribute to cycles of violence. Indigenous women often face inadequate housing conditions, including overcrowding, substandard housing, and lack of access to clean water and sanitation facilities. As a result, many Indigenous women experience higher rates of health disparities, including chronic diseases, mental health issues, and maternal mortality, which are closely linked to socioeconomic factors such as poverty and inadequate health care services.

Violence

Violence against Indigenous women is a pervasive and pressing issue that persists globally, rooted in historical injustices, systemic inequalities, and intersecting forms of discrimination. Indigenous women experience disproportionately high rates of various forms of violence, including sexual assault, domestic violence, and human trafficking. Missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (MMIWG) is a crisis affecting Indigenous communities worldwide, characterized by disproportionately high rates of Indigenous women and girls who are reported missing, murdered, or subjected to violence. The systemic factors driving MMIWG include colonial violence, gender-based violence, and inadequate responses from law enforcement and government agencies.

Legal Systems

Indigenous women often encounter systemic discrimination within legal and justice systems, including bias and racism from law enforcement, court officials, and judicial authorities. Indigenous women also often have limited access to support services, such as shelters, counseling, and legal advocacy, which are essential for addressing the immediate and long-term impacts of violence. Remote and rural Indigenous communities commonly lack adequate resources and infrastructure to provide these services.

Addressing violence against Indigenous women is further compounded by many Indigenous women's reluctance to report incidents of violence and abuse due to fear of retaliation, mistrust of authorities, and stigma within their communities. The fear of further victimization, coupled with the perceived futility of seeking justice, contributes to underreporting of crimes against Indigenous women and perpetuates a culture of silence and impunity.

In some countries such as the United States and Canada, Indigenous women face jurisdictional complexities that complicate their ability to access justice and legal protection. Jurisdictional disputes between federal, state and provincial, and tribal and Indigenous governments can lead to confusion over which authorities are responsible for addressing crimes committed against Indigenous women, resulting in gaps in protection and accountability.

Land, Language, and Tradition

The loss of language, cultural traditions, and connection to traditional lands contributes to Indigenous women's sense of dislocation and alienation. Indigenous women commonly face exclusion from decision-making processes related to land management and resource governance within their communities. Patriarchal norms and traditional power structures may marginalize women's voices and limit their ability to participate in decisions concerning land use, conservation, and resource allocation. Before colonization, in many Indigenous societies, land ownership and control were vested in male leaders or elders, leaving women with limited rights to access and manage land and natural resources. The lack of land tenure security can undermine Indigenous women's economic independence, food security, and ability to assert their cultural rights. Indigenous women defending their cultural and land rights often face gender-based violence, intimidation, and reprisals from state authorities, private companies, and local power structures. Women land defenders are targeted for their activism, risking physical violence, sexual harassment, and stigmatization for challenging vested interests and defending their communities' lands and resources.

Political Representation

Historical processes of colonization and patriarchy have marginalized Indigenous women's voices and leadership roles, limiting their ability to advocate for their rights and interests. Sometimes patriarchal interpretations of traditions are used to marginalize and oppress Indigenous women. Indigenous women continue to be underrepresented in political and decision-making processes, both within Indigenous governance structures and mainstream political institutions. Limited political representation hinders Indigenous women's ability to advocate for their rights, address systemic inequalities, and participate in shaping policies and programs that affect their lives.

Indigenous Women's Rights Movements and Activism

A central tenet of Indigenous women's rights advocacy is emphasizing that their rights are human rights. From organizing grassroots movements to participating in international forums, Indigenous women have been at the forefront of efforts to reclaim their rights, sovereignty, and integrity. While Indigenous women have always

played critical roles within their communities, formalized movements specifically focused on addressing the unique challenges and aspirations of Indigenous women began to gain prominence in the late 20th century.

In the late-19th and early 20th centuries, Indigenous women began to organize grassroots movements and advocacy efforts to address issues such as land rights, education, health care, and political representation. The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) and Women of All Red Nations (WARN) were both founded in 1974. Comprised of Indigenous women from diverse backgrounds, NWAC emerged with the aim of advocating for the rights, well-being, and empowerment of Indigenous women and girls across the country, particularly on questions of Indigenous citizenship and political representation. Over the years, NWAC has grown into a prominent national Indigenous organization, playing a central role in policy advocacy, awareness raising, and community programs aimed at advancing the rights and dignity of Indigenous women and promoting cultural revitalization and self-determination within Indigenous communities.

In the United States, WARN emerged as a grassroots organization dedicated to Indigenous rights, sovereignty, and self-determination, while also addressing issues such as violence against women, health care disparities, and environmental justice. The organization played a significant role in raising awareness about forced sterilization of Indigenous women in the United States, advocating for policy reforms, and providing support to survivors. WARN's activism and advocacy contributed to broader social movements, including the American Indian Movement (AIM), and paved the way for increased recognition of Indigenous women's leadership and perspectives within Indigenous and feminist movements.

The International Forum of Indigenous Women (FIMI) is a global network of Indigenous women's organizations and activists founded in 2002 to promote the rights, well-being, and empowerment of Indigenous women worldwide. It provides a platform for Indigenous women to share experiences, strategies, and best practices, while also advocating for the recognition of Indigenous women's rights at the local, national, and international levels. FIMI engages in advocacy, capacity building, and networking activities to strengthen the leadership and participation of Indigenous women in decision-making processes and promote gender equality within Indigenous communities and societies.

In 2007, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) marked a significant milestone in the recognition of Indigenous rights at the international level. While Indigenous women succeeded in advocating for the inclusion of gender-specific language and provisions in UNDRIP, it fell short on addressing the specific rights and experiences of Indigenous women. While UNDRIP emphasizes collective Indigenous rights, Indigenous feminists argue that it neglects the intersecting forms of discrimination faced by

Indigenous women, perpetuating their invisibility within governance structures and society at large. Criticisms include the lack of explicit language regarding issues such as violence against Indigenous women, health care access, reproductive rights, economic empowerment, and political representation. Furthermore, Indigenous feminists highlight the marginalization of Indigenous women's voices in UNDRIP's development and implementation processes.

Indigenous women have been instrumental in leading movements for land and environmental justice, challenging extractive industries, environmental degradation, and climate change that disproportionately impact Indigenous communities. Movements such as Idle No More in Canada and the Standing Rock protests in the United States brought global attention to Indigenous women led resistance against harmful development projects.

Indigenous women-led initiatives have made significant contributions to advancing Indigenous rights, cultural revitalization, and community empowerment. For example, the Chipko movement in India, led by Indigenous women, successfully resisted deforestation and land grabs in the Himalayan region, leading to the recognition of local communities' rights to forest resources. Rigoberta Menchú, an Indigenous woman from Guatemala, became the first Indigenous woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992 for her advocacy for Indigenous rights and peace-building efforts.

Indigenous women-led initiatives focused on cultural revitalization have empowered communities to reclaim and celebrate their cultural identities, languages, and traditions. For instance, the Māori language revitalization movement, led by Māori women in Aotearoa (New Zealand), has revitalized the Māori language and fostered cultural pride and resilience among Māori communities. In Canada, Nunavut Sivuniksavut founded and led by Inuit women, is an educational program designed to provide Inuit youth with cultural education, leadership training, and skills development. The Native Youth Sexual Health Network is a grassroots organization led by Indigenous women and Two Spirit youth that works to promote sexual and reproductive health, rights, and justice for Indigenous youth in Canada.

In the 21st century, Indigenous women have taken leadership roles against the climate crisis. Indigenous women's rights and environmental justice are deeply entwined, not least because they have traditionally served as caretakers of the land, passing down knowledge, sustainable land management practices, and conservation ethics through generations. Indigenous women-led initiatives focus on cultural revitalization often incorporate environmental stewardship practices, recognizing the interconnectedness of cultural preservation, ecological sustainability, and community well-being.

See also Indigenous Feminism; Women's Rights as Human Rights; Intersectional Environmentalism; Extrac-tivism and Gender; Transnational Feminisms

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