

in behalf

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**Permanent Forum on indigenous issues**  
Monday, 10 May 2004

**IPACC**

Indigenous Peoples of Africa Co-ordinating Committee

African Gender Representative  
for

My name is Mary Simat and I am speaking on behalf of the Indigenous Peoples of Africa Co-ordinating Committee.

Indigenous Women in Africa were never silent observers of abuses perpetrated by dominant groups to marginalize our peoples. In a situation where a community suffers from marginalization and violence from a national government or any dominant groups, the majority of victims are women. All the indigenous peoples in Africa find themselves in a situation whereby their right to identity and sometimes their very existence are denied. The indigenous women meet other obstacles related to their status of woman. Discrimination along gender lines is a reality we still have to face. Although it is often women who keep societies going, and despite their crucial role as teachers of the future generation, the violence and discrimination they are facing comes not only from the dominant society but also from within their own traditional communities.

It is high time to consider a strong gender focus in keeping traditional knowledge, protecting culture and basic human rights, preventing conflicts and building peace. The Permanent Forum, by choosing "indigenous women" as the main theme of this session, has made a further effort in this direction. In our views, the complementarity between women and men should be the key principle. The roles among and between women and men in traditional communities are indeed different but interdependent. In the indigenous communities of Africa, it is the women who keep and promote the culture of their people, the transmission of the language, the knowledge of the natural environment. Thus, the political empowerment and participation in policy-making processes of indigenous women are a prerequisite to any sustainable way forward for indigenous peoples of the entire continent.

Recommendations:

1. Participation of women in UN policy-making. We believe that indigenous women are not sufficiently involved in development policies. The Permanent Forum should recommend to the UN system that indigenous women be equally informed and consulted when development programmes affecting indigenous peoples are planned. Indigenous women should be involved in the planning, evaluation and implementation of any projects which are related to the land where they live or which may have disastrous implication in their lifestyle and ways of subsistence.

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2. Equal access of women in education. We all know that indigenous women do not have equal access to education and that a real effort is required to address the issue. The Permanent Forum should recommend that the UN system assist Governments to take measures to ensure that specific educational programmes are developed to improve the educational opportunities of indigenous women.
3. Protection of women rights. We believe that it is important that women rights are recognized, promoted and respected. The Permanent Forum should recommend that the UN system support indigenous women in promoting their rights nationally and within their communities.
4. Conference of Indigenous Women of Africa. We welcome the Declaration of the Continental meeting of indigenous women of the Americas held in Lima last April 2004. We deplore the lack of funding and resources that Africa is always facing. The Permanent Forum should through the voluntary fund that is now available support a similar conference in Africa to enable indigenous women of Africa to meet and exchange experiences so that African indigenous women can bring their own voice to the Forum.

I thank you all.

5. National Representation. Most African governments have national committees and structures promoting gender equity. We call on UN agencies, notably UNDP and UNIFEM, to advocate that indigenous women from rural areas be included on such national structures.

6 Many people in Africa suffer from the impact of HIV/AIDS. Some indigenous peoples may be destroyed by this epidemic. Medically, women are three times more likely to contract HIV than a man during sexual contact. UNAIDS and UNESCO need to give concerted attention to help vulnerable indigenous peoples to fight HIV/AIDS. This means creating opportunities for indigenous women to share their culture and perspectives in how to deal with this health care crisis.