

**42<sup>nd</sup> Session of the Human Rights Council**  
***Annual panel discussion on rights of indigenous peoples***  
**Geneva, 18 September 2019**  
Christine Loew, Director, UN Women Liaison Office

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**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Thank you, Mr. President.

UN Women welcomes this year's theme of the annual panel discussion on the rights of indigenous peoples.

The ability of indigenous women to express themselves in the language of their choice is critical for their contribution to public life, whether as citizens, politicians, human rights defenders, or community leaders. It is also essential for their access to public services. A language barrier should never be used as a reason to turn away indigenous women from a health facility or deny them access to vital services like reproductive health care.

Similarly, when indigenous women seek justice from both formal and indigenous justice institutions, accessibility means that their right to interpretation and to give evidence in the language with which they are familiar must be respected. Education systems—from early childhood to primary, secondary, tertiary, vocational and adult learning—must respect the linguistic needs of indigenous women and girls and, where possible, promote bilingual education.

Languages are not simply a means of communication; they form an essential part of the histories, art, oral traditions, literatures and worldviews of indigenous communities. As custodians of their distinct cultures, indigenous women play a vital role in passing their languages on to future generations, thereby preserving identity, diversity and social unity.

Yet, indigenous languages continue to be threatened by 'extractivism' entailing dispossession and displacement. Of the 6,000-7,000 languages in the world today, it is estimated that the vast majority (96 per cent) are spoken by just 3

per cent of the world's population (UNESCO)—a significant number of whom are indigenous peoples.

Addressing these issues is an important part of fulfilling the 2030 Agenda's pledge to leave no one behind. UN Women will also be calling on the game-changing activism of indigenous women over the next year as we work to build Generation Equality, our global movement to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, and ensure a future of equality for all peoples.

We stand with indigenous women and girls in their call to revive, preserve and sustain their languages, and to speak with voices that are loud, strong and clearly heard in the many spheres that they inhabit.

Thank you.