

Gender Forum of the Americas

Buenos Aires, Argentina

April 7- 9, 2005



The Gender Forum of the Americas held in Buenos Aires, Argentina April 7 – 9, 2005 served as preliminary discussions for the upcoming Summit of the Americas to be held in Mar de Plata, Argentina in November this year. As a preparatory meeting, the forum provided a thorough reflection of women's issues in the present day; however, the forum was criticized for its minimal involvement of indigenous women representatives; and therefore its content in regards to indigenous women's issues. In terms of pressing indigenous women's issues, the forum identified self-determination as key to improving indigenous women's situation.

The forum opened with panelists presenting on issues of poverty and exploitation of women, violence, gender relations, economy, migration, indigenous peoples, and afro-descendant peoples. The ten minute presentation on indigenous women's situation gave a brief and accurate reflection of indigenous women's issues today. Topics discussed included poverty, economic dependency, compound barriers, militarization within indigenous communities, commercial exploitation of indigenous lands, and finally, a lack of indigenous women representatives at the international level. Apart from the opening panel, indigenous women's issues were not represented by indigenous women representatives throughout the forum, but instead were voiced by non-indigenous women. This criticism was voiced by indigenous women participants.

As a group within the context of the world, indigenous women are impoverished. These women face compound barriers to access to employment and other resources that could improve their economic situation. These compound barriers include discrimination based on gender, and ethnicity. The effect of colonialization on indigenous peoples has left them marginalized and searching for their identity. As a process, colonialization strips a group of its cultural identity, thereby devaluing them into vulnerability.

Within the hierarchical structure of community, marginalized communities such as Indigenous peoples' leaves the most vulnerable – women and children – feeling the effects of poverty more so than their male counterparts. Indigenous women's reality leaves them economically dependant upon their life partners to provide for their families. A solution offered to empower indigenous women toward becoming independent was the role of education. Education and awareness were stressed as a means to decrease this dependency.

Indigenous women are also affected by the effects of the erosion of their culture and traditional way of life. Increased militarization of indigenous communities and mega projects on indigenous land exploit communities. Universal improvement projects neglect to take into account indigenous peoples' way of life. Capitalism projects tend to destroy and raid

the land of the resources upon which indigenous peoples way of life seeks to protect, and sustain itself.

In terms of self-determination, the panelist expressed the importance of indigenous women representation being reflected by indigenous women. The problem of indigenous representation was expressed as indigenous women's issues tend to be expressed by third parties, rather than by indigenous women representatives. It must be remembered at international meetings that indigenous people's situation is specific and must be treated as unique. The panelist identified Indigenous women's views and input as mandatory inclusion within the policy-making process.

The forum mainly entailed an event of presentations rather than an interactive medium where working groups could provide feedback. Due to the depth of women's issues, working groups to discuss issues more specifically were put on hold. Time constraints were an issue. Instead facilitators asked that written submissions be emailed at a later date.

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