

# A Portrait of Indigenous Women of the Americas

**“Unfortunately, gender-specific statistics on indigenous peoples are rare. There are too few comparative statistics on indigenous and non-indigenous populations, and studies on indigenous women and male-female relations are still inadequate.”**

*Angela Meentzen, IDB – Inter-American Development Bank, 2001*

For many years, particularly since the creation of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, there has been a deplorable absence or lack of statistics on indigenous peoples. It is crucial that this gap be filled if States are to develop public policies that take into account the socio-economic status of indigenous peoples.

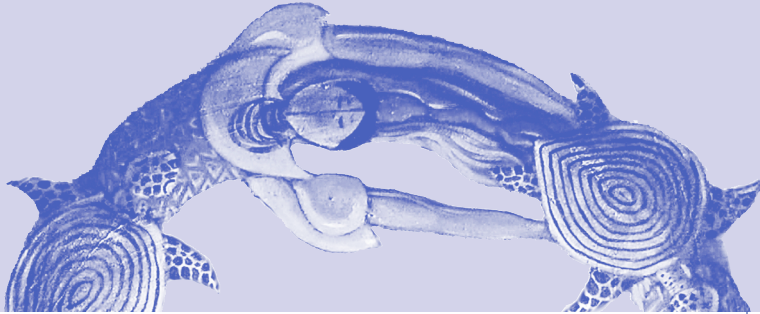
The Permanent Forum has taken a first step to deal with this problem by organizing the Workshop on Data Collection and Disaggregation for Indigenous

Peoples, held in New York in January 2004. The workshop concluded that to be effective, statistics must be produced according to clear indicators and must, above all, be based on an accurate definition of who can be considered an indigenous person. In the past, definitions varied from one country to the next, and were established unilaterally by each State (language, registration on the Indian Register). Secondly, there must be agreement on the type of information to be collected (health, education, access to land and services) and relevant questions must be included in the census forms for each country.

## Total Indigenous Population in the World\*

- ▲ 300 million (4% of humanity); 75% of the living 6,000 languages
- ▲ Asia: 150 million (approximately 70 million in East Asia, 50 million in South Asia and 30 million in Southeast Asia)
- ▲ Latin America: 45 to 50 million, or 10% of the total population (Source: IDB 1999)
- ▲ Africa: status difficult to define; an estimated 14 million indigenous nomads in North, East and West Africa, and 350,000 indigenous people in Central and Southern Africa.
- ▲ North America (excluding Mexico): 1.5 million
- ▲ Australia and the Pacific: 1.5 million in the Pacific region, 350,000 Maoris and 300,000 Australian Aborigenes
- ▲ Russian Federation: 1 million
- ▲ Europe: 50,000 Samis in Norway, 20,000 in Sweden, 10,000 in Finland (source: Sami Parliament)

*\*Innocenti Digest no. 11, Unicef, 2004*



## Indigenous Women: Where Are They?



- |                      |                           |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Arctic            | 10. Pacific NW Coast      |
| 2. Sub-Arctic        | 11. Central America       |
| 3. Eastern Woodlands | 12. Circum-Caribbean      |
| 4. Southeast         | 13. Amazonia              |
| 5. Great Mountains   | 14. Mato Grosso           |
| 6. Northwest-Plateau | 15. Gran Chaco            |
| 7. California        | 16. West Andean Highlands |
| 8. Great Basin       | 17. Andean Highlands      |
| 9. Southwest         | 18. Patagonia-Pampas      |

## A Few Statistics

The scant data produced in various countries reflects the same situation: indigenous peoples are disadvantaged compared to non-indigenous people, and indigenous women even moreso compared to indigenous men.

In Peru, where 50% of the population lives in poverty, this reality affects 80% of indigenous people. In Mexico, a country where 18% of the population is poor, 80% of the indigenous population lives in poverty (PAHO – Pan American Health Organization, 1998). In Bolivia, 78% of indigenous households do not have access to drinking water, 72% do not have sanitation services and infant mortality rates are the highest in South America. In Chile, in 1992, the infant mortality rate among the indigenous population was 40 points above the national average.

In Mexico, the mortality rate among pregnant indigenous women is three times higher than that of non-indigenous women, and the infant mortality rate of 58% is higher than the national average (IFHR – International Federation for Human Rights).

In Canada, despite recent progress, the life expectancy of indigenous women is 6 years less than that of non-indigenous women (INAC – Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, 2000) and three-quarters of these women have been victims of family violence (Health Canada, 1999).

Furthermore, illiteracy is more common among indigenous women. In Ecuador's rural areas, 48% of indigenous women and 32% of indigenous men are illiterate, compared to 18% of non-indigenous women (El Comercio, 2003). In Guatemala, in 1995, 53.4% of women of child-bearing age had never attended school (INE – Encuesta Nacional de Salud Materno infantil, Guatemala). Illiterate



indigenous women are usually unilingual and have difficulty accessing public services when they migrate to urban centres where services are only provided in the language of the majority.

Representing over one-third of involuntary migrants in Colombia, displaced indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians are highly over-represented in the statistics.

Indigenous women are among the poorest, are more likely to be illiterate, to die of infectious disease or to be victims of perinatal death. In addition, they are the object of multiple forms of discrimination, namely gender and racial discrimination.

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**“Our problem is not poverty,  
but the highly-coveted  
wealth on our territories.”**

Testimonial of an indigenous woman at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Continental Meeting of Indigenous Women in Panama, 2000.

### **What the Statistics Don't Tell Us**

Aside from inadequate statistical reports on the usual indicators, such as life expectancy, income, education or employment, data is also lacking on other dimensions such as access to land or resources and the quality of the environment in indigenous territories.

But what the statistics do not and cannot reveal, is that poverty is not necessarily the result of low income. Poverty results, perhaps primarily, from the fact that indigenous peoples are dispossessed of their means of subsistence, uprooted, invisible and powerless.

To find out more, you can read the conclusions from the workshop on statistics organized by the Permanent Forum at: [www.un.org/esa/socdev](http://www.un.org/esa/socdev).



### **Discussion Questions**

- **Are there statistics on the situation of indigenous women in your country?**

**If so, how can these statistics support your work?**

**If not, what type of data would you need for your work?**

- **Do you think that your community is living in poverty?**

**What are the causes of this poverty?**

