

## Brief history of the movement for a CEDAW General Recommendation on Indigenous Women

January 2019

**Editor's Note:** *This history is a work in progress, compiled by staff of the Women's Human Rights Institute (WHRI)<sup>1</sup>, an effort to document an important movement that is in process, growing and unfolding day by day. As with any movement, many actors, some very visible and others less outwardly so, contribute to support its flowering. This is a collective, ongoing effort to which many women have contributed. Given that this is a working document, we regret any omissions and welcome information to further expand this story-in-progress. That said, we felt it very important to share this information widely, even if incomplete, as it often happens that grassroots efforts & movements are not documented, and their history & impact remains unknown. The recent movement calling for a General Recommendation to CEDAW on Indigenous Women documented here was organic, growing out of the analysis and intention of a group of indigenous women, along with the support of allies, to assert their own vision of their rights. It is important that this history be documented and known, as important as centering indigenous women's cosmologies, knowledge and analysis at the centre of the future General Recommendation itself. Please see our website for the online version: [www.learnwhr.org](http://www.learnwhr.org)*



The grassroots movement for the adoption of a General Recommendation on Indigenous Women by the Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) seeks the full articulation and recognition of indigenous women's human rights, historically denied as a result of colonization, racial and gender-based discrimination. The particular intersections of discrimination experienced by indigenous women, though implicitly protected under the CEDAW framework, need to be made explicit to ensure the respect, protection and fulfillment of the collective and individual human rights particular to the situation of indigenous women, as articulated by indigenous women themselves.

While calls had been made previously to or within the UN system regarding the need for the articulation of indigenous women's specificity within CEDAW and other instruments pertaining to human rights and fundamental freedoms, including by indigenous-led organizations, notably [FIMI](#) – the International Indigenous Women's Forum - and in a [2004 recommendation](#)<sup>2</sup> made by the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Peoples calling for a general recommendation to CEDAW on indigenous women, the CEDAW Committee continued to enhance their awareness and

<sup>1</sup> Anya Victoria & Angela Lytle

<sup>2</sup> "Noting that the CEDAW makes no reference to indigenous women and does not take into account the specific nature of the gender dimension of racial discrimination, the Permanent Forum at its third session (2004) recommended that CEDAW: a. Pay special attention to the issues related to maintaining the integrity of indigenous women and the gender dimension of racial discrimination against indigenous peoples; b. Organize a meeting, in collaboration with indigenous women...with the objective of beginning a process to develop and adopt a general recommendation on indigenous women, including women living under colonization." (E/C.19/2004/23, para. 6)

inclusion of indigenous women’s lived realities in their jurisprudence, but did not take up the development of a general recommendation.

The impetus for the particular initiative for a General Recommendation on Indigenous Women highlighted here began in 2009, when the [Tz’ununija](#) Indigenous Women’s Movement from Guatemala prepared their first shadow report to the CEDAW Committee on the situation of indigenous women in their territory<sup>3</sup>. By assessing the State’s compliance of the obligations contained in CEDAW regarding the particularity of indigenous women, the group of women that drafted the report realized how this was an important instrument that could contribute to the protection of their rights, and saw the need for a fuller articulation of their rights within the CEDAW framework, given the lack of explicit mention of indigenous women in the core text of the Convention.



A few years later, in 2012, a Mayan member of [Tik Na’oj](#)<sup>4</sup>, an organization based in Guatemala, was invited to participate in the first “CEDAW Week for Indigenous Women”, a week-long educational workshop that took place in Wayuu territory in La Guajira, Colombia, organized by local indigenous women<sup>5</sup> from the region, led by the [Fuerza de Mujeres Wayuu](#) in collaboration with the [Women’s Human Rights Education Institute \(WHRI\)](#). This workshop allowed for the participants to develop a deeper understanding of CEDAW, as well as for the visualization of strategic alliances with other organizations promoting actions within the framework of women’s human rights. The Wayuu organizers went on to participate in the development and presentation of a coordinated Shadow Report to CEDAW on the

situation of indigenous women in Colombia. The participant from Tik Na’oj then invited WHRI to collaborate in order to replicate the workshop to strengthen the capacities of more indigenous women’s organizations and women’s rights defenders in Guatemala.

This workshop took place in 2013<sup>6</sup>, within the International Summit of Indigenous Women (Encuentro Internacional de Mujeres Indígenas), where indigenous women from Guatemala, Honduras, Panama, Colombia and Mexico



<sup>3</sup> With technical assistance from Costa Rican women’s human rights expert Alda Facio

<sup>4</sup> Sara Dalila Mux Mux

<sup>5</sup> This workshop was the vision of Karmen Ramírez Boscán, (Wayunkerra), and was brought into fruition in Wayuu territory by the work of many women and supporters.

<sup>6</sup> The workshop was facilitated by Alda Facio, WHRI founder, with JASS Mesoamerica, WHRI, Tzununija, TikNa’oj.

started and/or continued their learning journey on CEDAW as the first and most important instrument of the United Nations that holds states responsible for acts of discrimination against women, whether perpetrated by the State or by private persons. While the group agreed that the CEDAW Convention offered multiple opportunities to defend women’s rights, the text of the Convention does not make specific the type of intersectional discrimination indigenous women experience, nor does it take into account the relationship between their collective rights as indigenous communities, and their rights as women. Therefore, the participants concluded, a General Recommendation specifically on the situation and rights of indigenous women, for the CEDAW Committee, was needed to reflect the uniqueness of their experience, and to incorporate their own women’s human rights vision.

At the conclusion of this workshop, a draft compiled by T’zununija Indigenous Women’s Movement of initial thoughts on what they would recommend for inclusion in the text of a CEDAW General Recommendation on indigenous women was shared for comment and input to those gathered for the summit. An additional session was held at which an international women’s rights expert<sup>7</sup> who had been supporting the work of the indigenous women’s organizations on CEDAW and two CEDAW committee members invited in their personal capacity<sup>8</sup> had a dialogue with the organizations about this draft, and the idea to lobby for a General Recommendation on Indigenous Women was discussed.



At the end of the event, the participating organizations, [Uk’uxB’e](#), [Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial – ECAP](#), [TikNaoj](#), [SinergiaNo’j](#), [T’zununija Indigenous Women’s Movement](#), [JASS – Just Associates Mesoamerica/Asociadas por lo Justo](#) and the [Women’s Human Rights Education Institute \(WHRI\)](#) agreed together to form the “[Indigenous Women’s Alliance for CEDAW](#)” (hereafter referred to as “the Alliance,”) with the purpose of calling upon the CEDAW Committee to develop and adopt a specific General Recommendation that would contribute to the understanding and enjoyment of the human rights of indigenous women.

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<sup>7</sup> Alda Facio Montejo

<sup>8</sup> Line Bareiro and Silvia Pimentel



Ongoing organizing, including a consultation process, continued amongst the Alliance members in Central America, with further efforts unfolding to undertake outreach and dissemination of the call for a GR on Indigenous Women, and to continue building the draft recommendations. In April 2015 a series of in-depth conversations took place between women’s organizations in Guatemala and as a result a document, which called for the issuance of a General Recommendation on indigenous women by the CEDAW Committee, was collectively adopted.

The Alliance members also sought to share the initiative internationally. In 2014, a member of the Alliance from Guatemala<sup>9</sup> was invited by the Women’s Human Rights Education Institute (WHRI) to travel to Nepal to participate in a two-week CEDAW training program WHRI convened there, at which time a meeting was arranged with indigenous women advocates from Nepal and elsewhere in Southeast and South Asia to share the initiative and invite participation and collaboration. Then, in 2015, the Women’s Human Rights Education Institute (WHRI) invited the same member of the Alliance to Toronto to present the Initiative for the General Recommendation to the [Native Women’s Association of Canada \(NWAC\)](#), the [Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action \(FAFIA\)](#) and other local organizations along with a [public forum](#), and at that time collaborated on the development of an online petition, one in [Spanish](#), one in [English](#), calling for the adoption of a GR on Indigenous Women. WHRI also solicited letters of support from indigenous women’s and ally organizations for the Initiative.



Later in 2015, with the support of JASS Mesoamerica and the WHRI, members of the Indigenous Women’s Alliance for CEDAW travelled to Geneva to meet with CEDAW Committee members and Special Rapporteur Mandate Holders, presenting the results of the online petitions and support letters along with the results of their ongoing consultation work within their region. All these efforts paid off when the petition got the attention of members of the CEDAW Committee<sup>10</sup> and the Working Group of

Discrimination against Women in Law and in Practice<sup>11</sup>, who committed, in their individual capacity, to support this initiative. In 2016, the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous

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<sup>9</sup> Silvia Tecun León

<sup>10</sup> In particular Gladys Acosta.

<sup>11</sup> In particular Alda Facio.

peoples<sup>12</sup> mentioned the pertinence of this petition before CEDAW Committee in her report before the Human Rights Council.



The petition for a General Recommendation on Indigenous Women was been backed by multiple international and national organizations, and individuals, including Coast Women in Development, Kenya; the Women’s Legal Education and Action Fund Inc. (LEAF); the Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC); and the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA), who noted in their submission to the CEDAW Committee that a General Recommendation on Indigenous Women “would assist in shedding light on the profound, multiple, and particular inequalities experienced by indigenous women and girls in all parts of the world”.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the Avaaz Petitions circulated online gained the support of more than 800 individuals in each language in a short period.

**TOWARDS A CEDAW GENERAL RECOMMENDATION ON INDIGENOUS WOMEN**

**JOIN US FOR A CONVERSATION WITH:**  
 Juana Sales, *Movimiento de Mujeres Indígenas T'zununij'a*  
 Gladys Acosta, *Expert CEDAW Committee*  
 Christine Verschuur, *Professor, Anthropology and Sociology Department (ANSO), and Gender Center, Gender and Development Programme, The Graduate Institute, Graduate Institute Geneva.*

**MODERATOR:**  
 Sanyu Awori, *International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific*

The Graduate Institute, Geneva  
 Room S7 Chemin Eugène-Rigot 2, 1202 Genève

**7 November 2017**  
**18:30-20:00**

Spanish/English interpretation

**SUPPORTED BY:**

OMCT, FIAN, ACCION DE CAMBIO, ISHR, Race & Equality, Plataforma Intercultural contra la Impunidad, da-ip, RIDH

In June 2017, an additional public event was organized in Guatemala by the Indigenous Women’s Alliance for CEDAW to inform the community about the progress undertaken to date on the movement.

In November of the same year, the Alliance<sup>14</sup> convened a panel, coinciding with CEDAW’s periodic review of Guatemala, in collaboration with the Platform Against Impunity and the Graduate Institute in Geneva, among others, featuring representatives of the Alliance along with CEDAW Committee member Gladys Acosta, who commented on the importance of this initiative for indigenous women all over the world. Among the many people that expressed support to this initiative, were Sami delegates from Norway.

<sup>12</sup> Victoria Tauli-Corpuz.

<sup>13</sup> FAFIA’s support letter, October 21, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Represented by Juana Sales

In 2018, the organizing structure of the alliance of organizations working on this initiative shifted in line with each's ongoing work, and the work moves forward through parallel endeavors. The recently created [Colectivo IxPop](#), comprised of indigenous women and men in Guatemala along with allies from the original Alliance, adopted as one of its priorities the dissemination and support of the movement calling for a General Recommendation on Indigenous Women. Accordingly, they disseminated the initiative among indigenous women in Mexico, during a summit organized by Zapatista women in March 2018. More recently, in September 2018 in Quito, Ecuador, Colectivo IxPop along with WHRI, in collaboration with the [Instituto de Altos Estudios Nacionales \(IAEN\)](#), an academic institution in Ecuador, made a public presentation to call others to join and support the petition, together with a representative of the Defensoría del Pueblo -the national Ombudsperson office in Ecuador-, and a Quechua indigenous activist.



Growing out of that workshop in Ecuador, a group of Quechua women and non-indigenous women are organizing a national meeting in Ecuador, aiming to address the importance of the petition, and gain support from other groups and organizations of indigenous women. Others are taking their own steps and measures to move forward, in hopeful anticipation that the CEDAW Committee will soon declare the intention to draft a General Recommendation on Indigenous Women and actively call for contributions.

### **What next?**

Now that the movement has become more widespread, numerous organizations and individuals are picking up the call to action in order to advance movement towards the development of a General Recommendation to CEDAW on Indigenous Women. This movement is, and must be, global, to ensure that the consultation process on the development of the General Recommendation, once the CEDAW Committee officially takes it on, is inclusive and representative of a wide diversity of experiences and viewpoints from indigenous women throughout the world. If you are planning an event or your organization is undertaking a consultation process to build knowledge towards this end, we invite you to let us know what you are up to, and we will disseminate those initiatives through our website and social media.

### **Upcoming Events**

March 2019 - New York City – Consultation and discussion

August 2019 – Quito – [Training on CEDAW](#) and consultation on the General Recommendation