

# **The Indigenous Women's Network Our Future, Our Responsibility**

## **Statement of Winona LaDuke**

Co-Chair Indigenous Womens Network, Program Director of the Environmental Program at the Seventh Generation Fund, at the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, China, August 31 1995.

I am from the Mississippi Band of Anishinabeg of the White Earth reservation in northern Minnesota, one of approximately 250,00 Anishinabeg people who inhabit the great lakes region of the North American continent. Aniin indinawaymugnitok. Me gweich Chi-iwewag, Megwetch Ogitchi taikwewag. Nindizhinikaz, Beenaysayikwe, Makwa nin dodaem. Megwetch indinawaymugunitok.

I am greeting you in my language and thanking you, my sisters for the honor of speaking with you today about the challenges facing women as we approach the 21st century.

A primary and central challenge impacting women as we approach the 21st century will be the distance we collectively as women and societies have artificially placed ourselves from our Mother the Earth, and the inherent environmental, social, health and psychological consequences of colonialism, and subsequently rapid industrialization on our bodies, and our nations. As a centerpiece of this problem is the increasing lack of control we have over ourselves, and our long term security. This situation must be rectified through the laws of international institutions, such as the United Nations, but as well, the policies, laws and practices of our nations, our communities, our states, and ourselves.

The situation of Indigenous women, as a part of Indigenous peoples, we believe is a magnified version of the critical juncture we find ourselves in as peoples, and the problems facing all women and our future generations as we struggle for a better world. Security, militarism, the globalization of the economy, the further marginalization of women, increasing intolerance and the forced commodification and homogenization of culture through the media.

The Earth is our Mother. From her we get our life, and our life, and our ability to live. It is our responsibility to care for our mother, and in caring for our Mother, we care for ourselves. Women, all females, are the manifestation of Mother Earth in human form. We are her daughters and in my cultural instructions: Minobimaatisiwin. We are to care for her. I am taught to live in respect for Mother Earth. In Indigenous societies, we are told that Natural Law is the highest law, higher than the law made by nations, states, municipalities and the World Bank. That one would do well to live in accordance with Natural Law. With those of our Mother. And in respect for our Mother Earth of our relations -- indinawaymuguni took.

One hundred years ago, one of our Great Leaders -- Chief Seattle stated, "What befalls the Earth, befalls the People of the Earth." And that is the reality of today, and the situation of the status of women, and the status of Indigenous women and Indigenous peoples.

While I am from one nation of Indigenous peoples, there are millions of Indigenous people worldwide. An estimated 500 million people are in the world today. We are in the Cordillera,

the Maori of New Zealand, we are in East Timor, we are the Wara Wara of Australia, the Lakota, the Tibetans, the peoples of Hawai'i, New Caledonia and many other nations of Indigenous peoples. Indigenous peoples. We are not populations, not minority groups, we are peoples. We are nations of peoples. Under international law we meet the criteria of nation states, having a common economic system, language, territory, history, culture and governing institutions. Despite this fact, Indigenous Nations are not allowed to participate at the United Nations.

Nations of Indigenous people are not, by and large, represented at the United Nations. Most decisions today are made by the 180 or so member states to the United Nations. Those states, by and large, have been in existence for only 200 years or less, while most Nations of Indigenous peoples, with few exceptions, have been in existence for thousands of years. Ironically, there would likely be little argument in this room, that most decisions made in the world today are actually made by some of the 47 transnational corporations and their international financiers whose annual income is larger than the gross national product for many countries of the world.

This is a centerpiece of the problem. Decision-making is not made by those who are affected by those decisions, people who live on the land, but corporations, with an interest which is entirely different than that of the land, and the people, or the women of the land. This brings forth a fundamental question: What gives these corporations like CONOCO, SHELL, EXXON, DIASHAWA, ITT, RIO TINTO ZINC, and the WORLD BANK, a right which supersedes or is superior to my human right to live on my land, or that of my family, my community, my nation, our nations, and to us as women? What law gives that right to them? Not any law of the Creator, or of Mother Earth. Is that right contained within their wealth? Is that right contained within their wealth, that which is historically acquired immorally, unethically, through colonialism, imperialism, and paid for with the lives of millions of people, or species of plants and entire ecosystems? They should have no such right, that right of self-determination, and to determine our destiny, and that of our future generations.

The origins of this problem lie with the predator-prey relationship industrial society has developed with the Earth, and subsequently, the people of the Earth. This same relationship exists *vis a vis* women. We, collectively find that we are often in the role of the prey, to a predator society, whether for sexual discrimination, exploitation, sterilization, absence of control over our bodies, or being the subjects of repressive laws and legislation in which we have no voice. This occurs not only on an individual level, but, equally, and more significantly on a societal level. It is also critical to point out at this time that most matrilineal societies, societies in which governance and decision-making are largely controlled by women, have been obliterated from the face of the Earth by colonialism, and subsequently industrialism. The only matrilineal societies which exist in the world today are those of Indigenous nations. We are the remaining matrilineal societies. Yet we also face obliteration.

On a worldwide scale and in North America, Indigenous societies historically, and today, remain in a predator-prey relationship with industrial society, and prior to that colonialism and imperialism. We are the peoples with the land -- land and natural resources required for someone else's development program and the amassing of wealth. The wealth of the United States, that nation which today determines much of world policy, easily expropriated from

our lands. Similarly the wealth of Indigenous peoples of South Africa, Central, South American countries, and Asia was taken for the industrial development of Europe, and later for settler states which came to occupy those lands. That relationship between development and underdevelopment adversely affected the status of our Indigenous societies, and the status of Indigenous women.

Eduardo Galeano, the Latin American writer and scholar has said.

In the colonial to neocolonial alchemy, gold changes to scrap metal and food to poison, we have become painfully aware of the mortality of wealth which nature bestows and imperialism appropriates.

Today, on a worldwide scale, we remain in the same situation as one hundred years ago, only with less land, and fewer people. Today, on a worldwide scale, 50 million indigenous peoples live in the world's rainforests, a million indigenous peoples are slated for relocated for dam projects in the next decade (thanks to the World Bank, from the Narmada Project in India, to the Three Gorges Dam Project, here in China, to the James Bay Hydro Electric Project in northern Canada).

Almost all atomic weapons which have been detonated in the world are also detonated on the lands or waters of Indigenous people. This situation is mimicked in the North American context. Today, over 50% of our remaining lands are forested, and both Canada and the United States continue aggressive clearcutting policies on our land. Over two thirds of the uranium resources in the United States, and similar figures for Canada are on Indigenous lands, as is one third of all low-sulphur coal resources. We have huge oil reserves on our reservations, and we have the dubious honor of being the most highly bombed nation in the world, in this case, the Western Shoshone Nation, on which over 650 atomic weapons have been detonated. We also have two separate accelerated proposals to dump nuclear waste in our reservation lands, and similarly over 100 separate proposals to dump toxic waste on our reservation lands.

We understand clearly the relationship between development for someone else, and our own underdevelopment. We also understand clearly the relationship between the environmental impacts of types of development on our lands, and the environmental and subsequent health impacts of in our bodies as women. That is the cause of the problems.

We also understand clearly, that the analysis of North versus South is an erroneous analysis. There is, from our perspective not a problem of the North dictating the economic policies of the South, and subsequently consuming the South. Instead, there is a problem of the Middle Consuming Both the North and the South. That is our situation. Let me explain.

The rate of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon, is one acre every nine seconds. Incidentally, the rate of extinction of Indigenous peoples in the Amazon is one nation of Indigenous peoples per year. The rate of deforestation of the boreal forest of Canada is *One Acre Every Twelve Seconds*. Siberia, thanks to American corporations like Weyerhaeuser, is not far behind, In all cases, indigenous peoples are endangered. There is frankly no difference between the impact in the North and the South. Uranium mining has devastated a number of Indigenous communities in North America.

Uranium mining in northern Canada has left over 120 million tons of radioactive waste. This amount represents enough material to cover the Trans-Canada Highway two meters deep across the Country. Present production of uranium waste from Saskatchewan alone occurs at the rate of over one million tons annually. Since 1975, hospitalization for cancer, birth defects and circulatory illnesses in that area have increased dramatically -- between 123 and 600 percent in that region. In other areas impacted by uranium mining, cancers and birth defects have increased to, in some cases, eight times the national average. The subsequent increases in radiation exposure to both the local and to the larger north American population are also evidenced in broader incidences of cancer, such as breast cancer in North American women, which is significantly in the rise. There is no a distinction in this problem caused by radiation, whether is is in the Dine of northern Canada, the Laguna Pueblo people of New Mexico, or the people of Namibia.

The rapid increase in dioxin, organichlorides, and PCBs (polychlorinated byphenots) chemicals in the world, as a result of industrialization, has a devastating impact on Indigenous peoples, Indigenous women, and other women. Each year, the world's paper industry discharges from 600 to 3200 grams of dioxin equivalents into water, sludge and paper products according to United States Environmental Protection agency statistics. This quantity is equal to the amount which would cause 58,000 to 294,000 cases of cancer every year, based on the Environmental Protection Agency's estimate of dioxin's carcinogenicity. According to a number of recent studies, this has significantly increased the risk of breast cancer in women. Similarly, heavy metals and PCBs contamination of Inuit women of the Hudson Bay region of the Arctic indicates that they have the highest levels of breast milk contamination in the world. In a 1988 study, Inuit women were found to have contamination levels up to 28 times higher than the average of women in Quebec, and ten times higher than that considered "safe" by the government.

It is also of great concern to our women, and our peoples, that polar bears in that region of the Arctic have such a high level of contamination from PCBs That they may be facing total sterility, and forced into extinction by early in the next century. As peoples who consider the Bears to be our relatives, we are concerned also, significantly about ability to reproduce, as a consequence of this level of bio-accumulation of toxins. We find that or communities, like those of our relatives, the Bears, are in fact, in danger of extinction.

Consequently, it is clear to us that the problems also found in the south, like the export of chemicals and bio-accumulation of toxins, are also very much our problems, and the problems clearly manifested in our women. These are problems which emanates from industrial societies mis-treatment and disrespect for our Mother Earth, and subsequently are reflected in the devastation of the collective health and well-being of women.

In summary, I have presented these arguments for a purpose. To illustrate that that these are very common issues for women, not only for Indigenous women, but for all women. What befalls our mother Earth, befalls her daughter -- the women who are the mothers of our nations. Simply stated, if we can no longer nurse our children, if we can no longer bear children, and if our bodies, themselves are wracked with poisons, we will have accomplished little in the way of determining our destiny, or improving our conditions. And, these problems, reflected in our health and well being, are also inherently resulting in a decline of the status of women, and are the result of a long set of historical processes. Processes, which

we as women, will need to challenge if we will ultimately be in charge of our own destinies, our own self-determination, and the future of our Earth our Mother.

The reality is that all of these conditions -- those emanating from the military and industrial devastation of our Mother the Earth, and subsequently, our own bodies, and the land on which we live -- are mimicked in social and development policies which affect women. It is our belief, at Indigenous Womens Network, the following:

1. Women should not have to trade their ecosystem for running water, basic housing, health care, and basic human rights.
2. Development projects, whether in the north or in the south, whether financed by the World Bank, or by the coffers of Rio Tinto Zinc and Exxon, often replicate patriarchy and sexism, and by and large cause the destruction of matrilineal governance structure, land tenure, and cause a decline in the status of women. By denying us the basic land on which we live, and the clean food and streams from which to eat, and instead offering us a wage economy, in which privilege is often dictated by class, sex and race, indigenous women are frequently moved from a central role in their societies to the margins and to refugee status in industrial society.
3. The intellectual knowledge systems today often negate or deny the existence and inherent property rights of Indigenous people to our cultural and intellectual knowledge by supplanting our knowledge systems. Industrial knowledge system call us "primitive" while our medical knowledge, plants, and even genetic material are stolen (as in the Human Genome Project) by transnational corporations and international agencies. This situation affects Indigenous women, as a part of our communities. But on a larger scale it has affected most women.
4. Subsequently, our women find that the basic rights to control our bodies are impacted by all of the above through development policies aimed at non-consensual or forced sterilization, medical testing, invasive genetic sampling, and absence of basic facilities and services which would guarantee us the right and ability to control the size of our families safely and willingly. These same development policies often are based on tourism which commodifies our bodies and cultures (the Pacific and Native America are prime examples), and causes the same with women internationally.

Collectively, we must challenge this paradigm. In this international arena, I call on you to support the struggle of Indigenous peoples of the world for recognition, and to recognize that until all peoples have self-determination, no one will truly be free. Free of the predator and free to control our destiny. I ask you to look into the United Nations' International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, PART 1, Article 1, which provides that "All peoples have right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they may freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development."

All peoples, should be constructed to mean, Indigenous peoples have that right to self-determination. And, by virtue of that right, they may freely determine their political status and freely pursue, their economic, social and political development. Accord us the same rights as all other nations of peoples. And through that process, allow us to protect our

ecosystems, their inherent biodiversity, human cultural diversity, and those matriarchal governments which remain in the world.

And with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), we reaffirm that definition of self-determination provided in Article 1 of the International Covenant on Social Economic and Cultural Rights, further recognizing that the right to self-determination belongs equally to women and to men. We believe that the right of all peoples to self-determination cannot be realized while women continue to be marginalized and prevented from becoming full participants in their respective societies. The human rights of women, like the human rights of Indigenous peoples, and our inherent rights to self-determination, are not issues exclusively within the domestic jurisdiction of states. For further discussion of these, please see the international agreements and accords struck by hundreds of Indigenous nations, such as the Karioka document and the Matatua document.

Finally, while we may, here in the commonness of this forum, speak of the common rights of all women, and those fundamental human rights of self-determination, it is incumbent upon me to point out the fundamental inequalities of this situation. So long as the predator continues, so long as the middle -- the temperate countries of the world -- continues to drive an increasing level of consumption, and, frankly continue to export both the technologies and drive for this level of consumption to other countries of the world, there will be no safety for the human rights of women, rights of Indigenous peoples, and to basic protection for the Earth, from which we get our life. Consumption causes the commodification of the sacred, the natural world, cultures, and the commodification of children, and women.

From the United States position, consider the following. The US is the largest energy market in the world. The average American consumes seven times as many wood products per capita as anywhere else in the industrialized world. And overall that country consumes one third of the world's natural resources. By comparison Canada's per capita energy consumption is the highest in the world. Levels of consumption in the industrial world drive destruction of the world's rainforests and the world's boreal forests, drive production of nuclear wastes, production of pcbs, dioxin and other lethal chemicals, which devastate the body of our Mother earth, and our own bodies. Unless we speak and take meaningful action to address the levels of consumption, and subsequently, the exports of these technologies, and levels of consumption to other countries (like the international market for nuclear reactors), we will never have any security for our individual human rights as Indigenous women, and for our security as women.

If we are to seek and struggle for common ground of all women, it is essential to struggle on this issue. It is not that the women of the dominant society in so-called first world countries should have equal pay and equal status, if that pay and status continues to be based on a consumption model which is not only unsustainable, but causes constant violation of the human rights of women and nations elsewhere in the world. It essential to collectively struggle to recover our status as Daughters of the Earth. In that is our strength and the security; not in the predator, but in the security of our Mother, for our future generations. In that we can ensure our security as the Mothers of our Nations.

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