

# Diversity, Universality and Democracy: a Perspective of an Indigenous Woman

By Victoria Tauli-Corpuz

**T**he “Global Conference on Feminist Leadership” held in South Africa in September 1997 had a speaker on the panel on Democracy who said: “Diversity or difference is often used to rename inequality and division, and it is also very much at the core of the extreme right and racist agenda...” Diversity was described in this same conference as “... a much used concept with opportunities and pitfalls.” Basically, what both were saying was that diversity is a contested territory and it can be good or bad, depending on who uses it and how it is used.

For us, indigenous women, diversity is a concept and practice crucial in our struggle for self-determination, for the defense of our ancestral territories, and for control over our indigenous knowledge and natural resources. This is not to say that we are oblivious to the dangers and pitfalls of integrating diversity in our struggle. In the history of our oppression and exploitation as peoples, however, it was homogenisation, more than diversity, that was used to violate our rights as indigenous peoples.

It is to our credit, our ancestors’ and the present generation’s that we managed to salvage and even further nurture what ancestral territories and resources, aspects of our indigenous cultures, economic systems, political structures, and even ways of thinking remained after the destruction wrought by the colonisers and post-colonial governments on our en-

vironment and our communities. However, the assault on us continues and, in this era of globalisation, has become even more vicious. This globalisation makes use of old and new instruments and methods to further conquer territories to control and appropriate. These territories include not only land, air, and water, but also the minds, knowledge, and even genes of human beings, and of other living creatures.

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resources—minerals, forests, biodiversity, freshwater, and potential energy sources such as powerful rivers, hot springs, etc.—are in indigenous peoples’ territories. Indigenous peoples maintain an estimated 5,000 different cultures that represent 70 to 80 percent of the cultural diversity in this world. Even our biological diversity as human beings is perversely acknowledged as so-called Human Genome Diversity Project, a project collecting our genetic materials and preserving these as “isolates of historic interest” in the laboratories. The proponents of this programme claim that this is one way of preserving the diversity left in the human race.

The globalisation project of the rich northern countries and their transnational corporations, which is facilitated by institutions like the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, already has tremendous impact on us.

### **Indigenous Women’s Movements**

Women have always been part of the struggle of many indigenous peoples for self-determination and defense of ancestral territories. According to the indigenous women involved in the Zapatista movement in

Chiapas, Mexico, the movement would not have materialised without their active participation and support.

The issues around which indigenous women mobilised themselves are diverse, ranging from the defense of the ancestral lands from “development aggression” (dams, mines, plantations, tourism projects, etc.) to forced sterilisation; from the dumping of toxic or radioactive wastes and deforestation to violence against women and alcoholism; from patenting indigenous plants to patenting the genes of indigenous peoples. These resistance campaigns have been carried out on various levels, local to international, either by the indigenous peoples themselves or jointly with other movements, organisations or networks.

Whenever we meet with our counterparts from the other parts of the world, we arrive at similar conclusions and recommendations on how to move on. For example, in Beijing, we supported the paper “Gender Equity vs. Self-Determination” issued by the Indigenous Women’s Network, a network of indigenous women from North America. This document critiqued how the concept of gender equity, which is focused on sex-based or gender-based discrimination, has been used by women’s organisations and even governments to avoid issues of racial, environmental, civil, political, economic, and cultural injustices.

The critique was pursued further by sisters in Hawai’i who had plenty to share in relation to their difficulties with white feminists in Hawai’i and in mainland U.S. Said Haunani Trask in her book *From a Native Daughter; Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i*:

In Hawai’i, as in so many parts of the Island Pacific, *haole* feminists have steadfastly refused to support our efforts to regain our lands, to pro-

rect our civil rights, and to achieve self-government. They have defined what is “feminist” as that which relates to women—and only women—e.g., reproductive rights, women’s health problems, employment and educational concerns. But to most Native people, women’s concerns are part of the greater concern for our *lahui*, our nation. For example, we see our lack of control over our bodies as a result of colonialism. Therefore, poor Hawaiian health is directly traceable to [the] Americanisation of our country, including loss of our lands where we once grew healthful native food. High breast cancer rates for our women are similarly related to our forced assimilation into the junkfood, supermarket, American diet.

### The Tensions Between

The diverse realities confronting us, indigenous women, define the diverse approaches we use in our organising, education and campaign work. Our women’s organising efforts, for example, do not necessarily have to start from the standpoint of gender oppression. In our experience, and also that of indigenous women from other parts of the world, the issue that catalyses women’s political involvement is land rights. Gender inequity, although recognised as a problem, is not addressed with equal fervor as the question of land, the destruction of the environment, militarisation and development aggression. As Haunani Trask eloquently put, the inadequacy of the gender-equality paradigm for many of us is that the conventionally recognised gender issues of reproductive rights, and equal employment and educational opportunities, are once removed from our everyday struggle for survival as a community.

During the “Global Conference on Feminist Leadership,” I had private talks with a woman who had big problems with diversity. South Africa, she pointed out, provides for women’s rights in the new constitution after Nelson Mandela came to power. However, this same constitution also respects the personal laws or family laws of the different tribes, the Muslims, the Hindus, etc., a clause which effectively undermines the gender-equity provisions, some tribal laws and parts of the Shariah being discriminatory to women. To her mind, diversity is therefore being used to subvert the agenda for gender equity, which is an agenda of democracy.

While I understood the context of her misgivings, I propose that democracy and diversity should not be seen as opposing principles. Democracy also means being able to respect diverse ways of living, thinking and governing. One aspect of the demand for the right to self-determination means the right of indigenous peoples to use their own indigenous socio-political structures to govern themselves. This is important because what the colonial and post-colonial governments did was to impose governance structures and laws contradictory to customary laws and indigenous socio-political structures. While we recognise that some of these indigenous structures and laws are not women-friendly, the approach to having these changed is to organise and educate the women belonging to the particular tribe. They are the ones who will take on the responsibility of having women-discriminatory provisions in the customary laws changed.

The indigenous women in the Cordillera, with the support of the more enlightened men, have managed to remove the practice of bride-price, dowries and arranged marriages. This could be the route for women who are Muslims, Hindus, and those belonging to some

South African tribes. Our task as women activists or feminists, if you will, is to organise the women within these groups and get them to design and develop their own programmes for the necessary changes in their customary laws. If at a certain point such reforms are not the priority because they have to contend with the problem of their threatened survival as diverse communities, it is not for us to judge these women and declare that they deserve what they get.

When our communities in the Cordillera were being bombed and militarised, and certain groups of indigenous peoples were threatened with genocide and ethnocide, our campaigns had to focus on ensuring their survival as communities and peoples. (It should also be added that the militarisation of our territories was launched under the guise of democracy, although in truth this was merely an effort to protect the interests of the logging concessionaires raiding the forests that were actually ancestral territories of the Aytas, indigenous peoples from Zambales and Pampanga, Philippines.) We documented what happened to the women, completing a study on the impact of militarisation on the women. However, we did not flag gender equity as the main agenda.

### Challenges for Feminists

Some feminists, especially those locked on to the framework of “women’s rights are human rights,” are unfortunately blind to the realities of the other women they are working with. They universalise the construct of woman and the agenda of gender equity to a point where nothing else could be more important. Some become self-righteous and consider those not addressing the issue with the same zeal as “not really for women’s rights” or fake feminists. They can not, for one moment, leave their paradigms and try to understand the particularities of women in diverse situations from the

perspective of these women. In many cases, the gender equity agenda cannot be in the forefront of all agendas.

The forces behind globalisation are in fact the most enterprising in trying to homogenise laws, cultures, food habits and world views to be in harmony with their own. Their agenda is to create a world that fits into their “free market” and framework for growth. We will once again witness how gender equity issues, human rights, women’s rights, even indigenous peoples’ rights, etc. will be appropriated by these forces to further their agenda. Trade liberalisation, global competitiveness, competitive advantage, their favorite slogans, are being pushed under the democracy banner.

Appalling poverty is the fate of most women, and this cannot always be solved by micro-credit schemes for women or even gender-equity provisions in the laws. Poverty has yet to become the main priority in the feminist agenda. It is not any wonder, then, that many women cannot identify with feminism.

The challenge to feminists is to broaden and deepen their understanding of the present global economic and political situation so that the women’s movement can become a significant force in the fight against the evils of globalisation. It is also for feminists to become more attuned to the realities prevailing at the local, national, regional and international levels so that their strategies will be more relevant to the majority of the women in the world who are poor. ♪

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