

CARR CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

Conflict, Militarization, and Exploitation of Indigenous Land and Resources



Adapted from the 2021 Carr Center Conference,
“Indigenous Women Convening for Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation”

Introduction

The 2021 *Indigenous Women Convening for Peace, Justice, and Reconciliation Conference* brought together Indigenous scholars and female leaders from seven Indigenous socio-cultural zones around the world. Together, they shared stories of war and conflict in their territories and discussed collective ways of ideating Indigenous conflict resolution and peacemaking processes.

The event was organized by the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy; the Committee on Ethnicity, Migration, and Rights; the Scholars at Risk Program; and the Global Alliance of Indigenous Peoples, Gender, Justice, and Peace. Co-sponsors included the Center for the Study of World Religions; the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures; the Harvard College Writing Program; HUNAP; Religion, Conflict, and Peace Initiative; and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

The event was moderated by Jacqueline Bhabha, FXB Director of Research and Professor of the Practice of Health and Human Rights at the Harvard School of Public Health, and Shelly Lowe, Executive Director of the Harvard University Native American Program. Opening remarks were provided by Raquel Vega-Duran, Chair of the Committee on Ethnicity, Migration, and Rights, and Sushma Raman, Executive Director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy.

This publication features the 10 speakers of the conference and their profound statements on the state of human rights and peacemaking in their respective Indigenous zones.

Speakers



**MARIAM
ABOUBAKRINE**

President, Association
Tinhinan, Canada



**CLAIRE
CHARTERS**

Associate Professor,
University of
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Law, New Zealand



**LOUISE
HERNE**

Bear Clan Mother,
Mohawk Council;
Founding Member,
Konon:kwe Council



**RAUNA
KUOKKANEN**

Professor of Arctic
Indigenous Studies,
University of
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**LUCY
MULENKEI**

Executive Director,
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Network, Kenya



**BINALAKSHMI
NEPRAM**

Fellow, Carr Center;
Co-founder, Global
Alliance of Indigenous
Peoples, Gender
Justice, and Peace



**TUKUMMINGUAQ
OLSEN**

Board of Trustees
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**VERA
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**ELSA
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Former Chief, UN
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Indigenous Peoples;
Director, Indigenous
Studies Program,
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**TARCILA
RIVERA ZEA**

Founder, CHIRAPAQ:
Center for
Indigenous Peoples
Cultures, Peru

**Indigenous women are not alone.
Strong, effective social movements in the
past few decades accompany their struggles:
the human rights movement, the women’s
movement... and the peace movement.**

Elsa Stamatopoulou

Human Rights and Peacemaking in Indigenous Communities

ELSA STAMATOPOULOU

Indigenous Studies Program,
Columbia University

Indigenous women are not alone. Strong, effective social movements in the past few decades accompany their struggles: the human rights movement, the women’s movement, the Indigenous people’s movement, and the peace movement. These movements have had a sustained international profile and a strong relationship with the UN over the decades. Indigenous women symbolize the meeting point of these global social movements. We know that the violence imposed on Indigenous people’s sovereignty, lands, and cultures also passes over women’s bodies as well. At the same time, Indigenous women in many countries have developed dynamic initiatives for peace and conflict resolution at the local and national level.

More visibility, documentation, and exchange of their experiences will contribute to peace-building. Resistance, persistence, resilience, and vision for life are essential in moving forward Indigenous women’s struggles for peace. Through peace-building processes, Indigenous women are writing their own histories and creating more just societies—societies that will follow the fundamental principle of dignity.

TARCILA RIVERA ZEA

CHIRAPAQ: Center for
Indigenous Peoples
Cultures, Peru

In my region, when we talk about peace, we talk only in the context of armed conflict. We remember Guatemala, Colombia, and Peru—how Indigenous peoples died struggling for peace. In the 1980s, Peru had different kinds of armed conflict. While the enemies were very clear in Colombia and Guatemala, in Peru, the Khmer Rouge was imported from Cambodia into Indigenous communities to “sell the dream of justice.” They profited from exclusionism and disinformation in the communities, and for many years, our Indigenous peoples believed that we didn’t have rights in the state. I come from one community where we lost, I believe, more than 85 strong leaders. We still don’t know where the bodies are. This is related to the reconciliation: What is the meaning of reconciliation in this kind of situation? Who is committed to building peace in our territories?

I think it is necessary in our analysis to include the concept of racism as an ideology, because those in power expressing racism use their power to kill others, because they don’t think that we have the same rights as others. It is necessary to be stronger and clearer about how we can work with politicians to resolve these issues and create a more peaceful world.

RAUNA KUOKKANEN

University of Lapland,
Finland

For the Sámi, wind energy is not seen as climate justice or a way to address climate change, but instead a pressing climate injustice.

The European Commission has established a set of policy initiatives known as the European Green Deal, which aims to make Europe climate neutral by 2050. The EU Green Deal is seen as the roadmap to a sustainable and resource-efficient economy, with the European Commission stating that it is “turning climate and environmental challenges into opportunities, and making the transition just and inclusive for all.” One of the main ways that states have accomplished these goals is through the investment in environmentally friendly technologies, which has become known as the “Green Shift.”

Norway was among the first to begin discussing the “Green Shift” nearly a decade ago. In recent years, it has been at the forefront in its push to reduce carbon emissions. Central to, but also controversial in this process, has been the drastic growth of the wind industry. Norway has seen a boom in wind power development over the past few years. Many of the initial projects have been built in northern Norway, often in the area central to reindeer herding—the main Sámi traditional livelihood. For the Sámi, wind energy is not seen as climate justice or a way to address climate change, but instead a pressing climate injustice. The president of the Sámi parliament in Norway, Aili Keskitalo, calls this wind energy industry construction “green colonialism.” It is very much the same process of intrusive colonial behavior, unequal benefit sharing, and disregard for public consultation with Indigenous peoples and their communities.

In the Sámi case, there have been strong alliances built with environmentalists on many occasions. But on the other hand, there are occasions where we can’t always assume that the environmentalists will be on our side. I think that Indigenous solidarity is very strong, and we see it in movements like Standing Rock—how it mobilized not only Indigenous people around the world who traveled to Standing Rock, but also local Indigenous communities. Now, social media is an avenue through which we can get real-time information about the events and conflicts that are happening around the world in Indigenous communities. That’s very powerful, and perhaps the most important aspect for us to strengthen further.

MARIAM ABOUBAKRINE

Association Tinhinan,
Canada

The wisdom of the Tuareg people says that women are the pillar of society. We are the ones who protect the culture, the ones who educate, and the ones who heal. If there is a conflict, how will you be able to transmit the culture and the education? Where will we find the plants in whichever new land we discover ourselves?

This year, the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues will focus on SDG 16: peace, justice, and strong institutions. There are several international instruments, including the UN, that call for attention to Indigenous women, youth, and elders. Yet we do not see a meaningful place for and participation of Indigenous women within the prevention and resolution of conflict. We need specific mechanisms at all levels—international, regional, and national—to solve conflicts that affect Indigenous peoples.

VERA SOLOVYEVA

Department of Environmental
Science and Public Policy,
George Mason University

The Russian Federation has not endorsed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People, nor did it rectify the ILO Convention 169. Additionally, there are hidden issues within Russian legislation that prevent us from effectively addressing the rights of Indigenous people to land and natural resources. The main issue is that not all Indigenous people are recognized as Indigenous in the Russian Federation.

My homeland is the Republic of Sakha Yakutia, located in the northeastern part of the Russian Federation. There are many Indigenous people who live in the same territories; however, these ethnic groups have different rights and recognition status under Russian legislation. In Russia, ethnic groups are officially recognized as Indigenous with some special protected status only when their population is smaller than 50,000 individuals. This definition is very important, because it blurs the self-identification of many large-numbered Indigenous peoples—many of them don't know they're actually Indigenous. By not being recognized as "Indigenous," large-numbered Indigenous peoples of the Russian Federation are excluded from the federal programs aimed to support Indigenous culture, language, and traditional ways of life. And all international tools and mechanisms, including international assessments and programs developed to better defend the rights of Indigenous peoples, overlook problems of the large-numbered Indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation, leaving them invisible. No recognition means that these individuals can't effectively protect their rights and their environment.

So what are the ways toward peace, justice, and reconciliation in this situation? Recognition of the 2007 Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and recognition by the Russian Federation. Both will contribute to the peaceful resolution of many conflicts related to land and natural resource rights and allow Indigenous peoples to take care of our land and use it sustainably. To reach this destination, it is very important to educate people around the world about this problem. The international institutions and programs developed to defend the rights of Indigenous peoples must pay attention to the issue of legal recognition of the Indigenous status of the large-numbered Indigenous peoples in the Russian Federation.

There seems to be an understanding among some Arctic states that the implementation of Indigenous self-determination is a level of human rights, and therefore the rights of Indigenous peoples are not irrelevant.

TUKUMMINNGUAQ OLSEN

UN Voluntary Fund for
Indigenous Peoples

The desire to keep Greenland within the Kingdom of Denmark has never been as strong as it is now, ever since former president Trump tried to buy the country back in 2019. Ever since, it feels as though Denmark is sizing up its strategies within the Arctic. Our former mining minister, in an official letter, stated that Indigenous rights will become more irrelevant the more independence we gain from the Kingdom of Denmark.

The goal of the current government is to open pit mines that contain hazardous materials like uranium and thorium in South Greenland to build a firm economic foundation for an independent Greenland state. Currently, an Australian company's mineral exploitation project intends to exploit the uranium and its by-product. The project is heavily disputed due to environmental concerns. The general provisions of all licenses note that any mineral exploitation should not harm the environment, the wildlife, or human beings. Yet, the people in South Greenland have frequently raised concerns that they are not being heard or receiving adequate information. When they ask for more details, no one provides answers. And the information that is available is unintelligible, as it is roughly translated into our languages. There seems to be an understanding among some Arctic states that the implementation of Indigenous self-determination is a level of human rights, and therefore the rights of Indigenous peoples are not irrelevant. Working for our rights is constant, and we can never take our rights for granted.

LUCY MULENKEI

Indigenous Information
Network, Kenya

Climate change is one of the biggest problems that has impacted the land of Indigenous peoples, as well as the degradation of the environment through logging, charcoal burning, and other activities. There are also large projects brought in by the government without pre-informed consent by the Indigenous peoples—so when they return to their land, it has been taken away. One of the greatest challenges we have always faced is that most governments and most people don't understand our traditional ways of life. They don't understand how we manage our own lives, our resources, our conflict resolution, and our problem-solving. In most Indigenous communities, the Council of Elders sits down and solves different conflicts that exist within the community, but those institutions have been broken down, making it difficult to bring peace to their community. They can no longer easily sit down and talk together, because their land has been divided. When the government gets involved, [it does not understand that] most of those communities like doing things on their own. To talk about reconciliation and justice, governments must try to understand the community and the customary laws, and try to adapt them.

We need to explore how we can begin creating awareness and helping our communities understand how we can strengthen institutions for Indigenous people. We have to work very closely with our elders and our people in the community and let them bring back those institutions.

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LOUISE HERNE

Mohawk Nation Council;
Konon:kwe Council

We are a highly policed community because our reservation straddles an international boundary line. The health of the rivers and their ability to provide healthy food has been degraded and diminished by heavy industry like aluminum plants, hydroelectric development, and the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway. These developments have continued over the years to have adverse effects on our environment. It restricts our ability to engage in fishing, harvesting, planning, and cultivation. The legacy of those industrial plants is still seen in the local wildlife and the contaminated riverbed, with enduring health consequences for surrounding communities. Even though we won a settlement with these super plants, we continue to fight for environmental cleanup and to have a leadership role in environmental management.

In Canada, too, all they offer us is fiscal compensation in order to heal ourselves, but the wounds of colonization are so deep, and we live in traumatized communities where we've been disempowered to help ourselves. For me, one of the most important things is having a clan mother who I can look to, because I'm responsible for the maternal and child wellness of our communities. In a matrilineal society, it's the women who are the law, the women who choose the leaders, and the women who have the right to call for war or peace. Women are the authorities and, in order to understand that fully, we have to go back to the beginning of our own creation story. History is vested in the self-appointed victor. But our ancestors were very present in the founding of the United States of America and its Constitution.

History is vested in the self-appointed victor. But our ancestors were very present in the founding of the United States of America and its Constitution.

CLAIRE CHARTERS

University of Auckland
Faculty of Law, New Zealand

Prior to colonization, the relationship between Maori men and Maori women was much more equal than it is today. Harms against women were a harm against the tribe, and required the collective to address. There was no stigma around women remarrying, which changed profoundly at the time of contact with the English around the late 1700s and early 1800s. Under British law, women were very much the chattel of the male. So, at the time of colonization, the impact was profound and genocidal in many ways.

Today, New Zealand is a very developed liberal democracy and is renowned to some extent for the leadership roles played by women. But the picture looks quite different when you look at Maori women. Maori women remain at the bottom of almost every socioeconomic ranking, including education and health. One of the worst rankings is in respect to incarceration. Maori make up approximately 15–16 percent of the population in New Zealand, but 60 percent of the prison population. That has only happened in the last couple of decades—this is not a historical phenomenon.

Occurring now is a tribunal review of the Manawahini Maori claim. *Manawahini* refers to the authority, the prestige, and the status of Maori women. This claim is presented at the Waitangi tribunal—a tribunal established to hear crown breaches or state breaches against the treaty of Waitangi in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It explores Maori women’s experiences of colonization, and is about justice, peace, and reconciliation for Maori women. The Waitangi tribunal functions a bit like a truth and reconciliation commission and uses the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in support of its framework. The claim is at least a start in trying to achieve some reconciliation and justice for Indigenous women.

BINALAKSHMI NEPRAM

Carr Center; Global Alliance of
Indigenous Peoples, Gender
Justice, and Peace

There are many unique ways in which the Indigenous women of Manipur have fought back against militarization, colonization, and the rampant violence that has been going on for the past few years. Manipur is an ancient Indigenous Asiatic state, yet India does not recognize the presence of its Indigenous people. Instead, the government uses colonial terms like “tribes,” and tries to divide and rule among many Indigenous populations. Manipur has been under martial law since 1958. The history of Indigenous people in northeast India has been blocked out from the nation’s history for more than 62 years. Manipur is home to South Asia’s longest-running conflict, but this fact is buried in a thing called “the world’s forgotten crisis.” People talk about the Rohingya crisis, but what’s happening in northeast India is not spoken about around the world.

Indigenous women have developed really ingenious ways of responding to violence that arises through colonization, militarization, racism, and capitalism. But when it comes to peace talks, women are not there. There are 17 peace talks in northeast India, and not a single Indigenous woman has been included. We have resolved that no peace talks in the northeast of India will occur without Indigenous women, and we have pledged to boycott any peace talk that does not include us.

Indigenous women have developed really ingenious ways of responding to violence that arises through colonization, militarization, racism, and capitalism. But when it comes to peace talks, women are not invited.

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