Good morning. My name is Paulina Lucio Maymon. In 2017, as a master’s student, I embarked on a research project that involved interviewing indigenous women in Mexico, including representatives of the National Coordinating Committee of Indigenous Women (known as CONAMI). My goal was to understand the relevance of the CEDAW Convention in the lives of indigenous women in my country. Today, I want to share with you two of my findings.

First, the CEDAW Committee must guide State parties on interpreting and applying the Convention from an intersectional standpoint. Otherwise, CEDAW provisions will continue to fail in protecting indigenous women’s rights. Indigenous women are not mentioned at all in the text of the Convention. The Convention makes no reference to the right to culture, to language, to inheritance, to water, to traditional healing practices, or to sustainable development. The forthcoming General Recommendation must fill these gaps.

Indigenous women’s right to health cannot be realized if States ban traditional healing practices and medicines. If indigenous communities cannot exercise their right to self-determination, indigenous women’s right to political participation cannot be fulfilled. Indigenous women’s right to property is worthless if they are displaced from their ancestral lands. If their indigenous languages and stories are absent from the academic curricula, or if indigenous girls have no means to get to school, their right to education is nothing but ink on paper.

The second finding of my research is that unless the rights enshrined in CEDAW become part of the social consciousness of indigenous women, the Convention will have little impact on their lives. The critical question is whether indigenous women and girls recognize their rights under CEDAW and know how to assert them. My research suggests that most indigenous women in Mexico don’t. The new General Recommendation must guide State parties on how to make CEDAW relevant in local contexts.

These can be done, first and foremost, by requiring State institutions to treat indigenous women as right bearers. As Professor Sally Merry once said, “a woman’s willingness to take on rights depends on her experience in trying to assert them.” The more institutions respond to indigenous women’s claims, the more indigenous women will identify themselves as right-holders. Second, the CEDAW Committee should require States to fund legal literacy programs for indigenous girls and women to discuss, deliberate, and translate CEDAW provisions in ways that make sense at the local level. This process would bring human rights as a justice ideology and help challenge discriminatory practices from the ground up. We all have a role to play in this endeavor. Indigenous women will think of themselves as having rights under CEDAW only when society and its institutions treat them as if they do.

Thank you.

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