



FIMI

*Seeds of Strength:
Indigenous Women's Stories
of Empowerment and Struggle*

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SEEDS OF STRENGTH: INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT AND STRUGGLE

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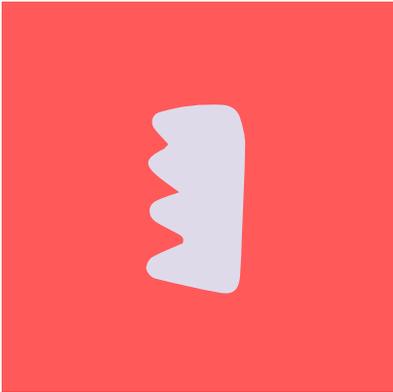
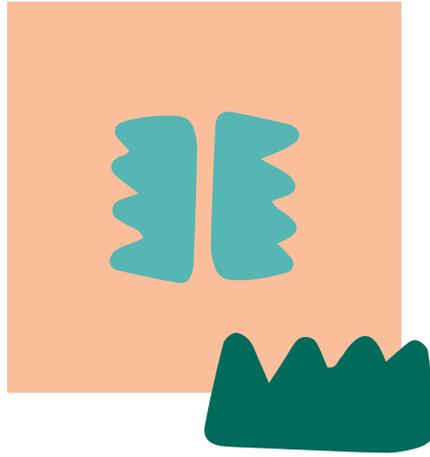
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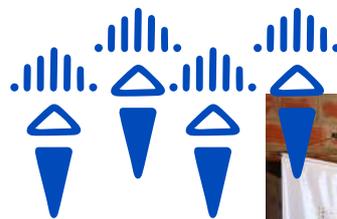
INTRODUCTION

We Indigenous Women are leaders of change, with an active and resilient position in the front of the challenges we face. Two examples of this are our adaptation to climate change in the Paraguayan Chaco, where Guarani Indigenous Women are leading the way to a more just future, and the recovery of matriarchal roots in Guam. Our leadership can be individual, such as that of a human rights defender in Cameroon, who works to strengthen Indigenous Women's leadership; or collective, such as AIWO in Africa, which recognizes the importance of regional coordination to promote the individual and collective rights of Indigenous Women, and RWUS in India, which promotes the empowerment of Indigenous Women through community leadership. Whatever forms our leadership takes, its impact goes beyond ourselves, as demonstrated

by the case of a Sami leader and her struggle to preserve the traditions of Indigenous Women in the Arctic region. Finally, we do not work alone; we are like trees whose roots connect to support each other, regardless of borders.

In this magazine, we present six stories of empowerment of Indigenous Women leaders, their organizations and/or their communities. These stories allow us to understand, from the voices of their protagonists, the paths they have taken with their struggles and achievements, and the significant changes in their lives, communities, or organizations. Indigenous Women leaders and their organizations have stood out for their wisdom, perseverance, collective effort, and leadership to promote and defend the individual and collective rights of Indigenous Women. All of them have faced complex situations and transformed difficulties into transformative action. These are stories of empowerment and transformation that we illustrate in the magazine, one for each region of IIWF's global mechanism.

IIWF's trajectory, through its programs of political advocacy, capacity-building and training, research on issues of impact on the lives of Indigenous Women, and its co-investment from intercultural philanthropy implemented by the Ayni Fund, has allowed it to grow and gain experience and recognition at a global level in the defense and promotion of the individual and collective rights of Indigenous Women. They, together with their organizations and communities, have been the protagonists of these achievements and that is what we want to highlight in this magazine.



EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN AFRICA: THE ROLE OF AIWO

In 1998 a group of Indigenous Women from Africa noticed that there were few spaces in which they could come together to discuss the problems they experienced personally, as well as in their families and communities. In order to create a safe space, these women decided to form the African Indigenous Women Organization (AIWO). Lucy Mulenkei, an Indigenous Masai from Kenya and one of the founders, explains: "We were listening to the good stories from Latin America, from Asia, and we had voices from there, but for us we didn't have the voices". AIWO enabled them to come together to promote women's and indigenous peoples' rights in Africa and thus empower themselves socially, politically and economically.

Lucy's long career as an activist even goes back to her childhood, since from a young age in her social environment she served as a leader concerned about her community. She left her job as a journalist to focus on community development and women's empowerment. For Lucy, women are like trees, their branches tackle the winds and problems that can affect families.

For this reason, it is important for Lucy to create networks of women to discuss challenges and find solutions, regardless of their place of origin, since they have found common ground all over the world. Through dialogue, plans are developed to address these issues. In a certain way, the roots of the trees to which Lucy refers must connect to support each other, regardless of borders. "That is why the AIWO women try to have a global school so that they can train their young women and even other women there. In order for them to learn and know what aspects to improve, they must work with their own communities. To highlight some of the issues and try to get strategies on how to go along with them".

Lucy, through her collective work with other women around Africa, detected that the challenges facing their communities are related to climate change, such as droughts and the loss of biodiversity: "It is a call for women to see and develop strategies or mechanisms on how to deal with and adapt to climate change". For this it is crucial to work collectively, it is also important that women know their rights to exercise them.



To continue with community development, it is necessary for today's leaders to also be role models for younger women, Lucy believes, since the latter will be able to continue working to progress in their own lives and in their communities. Her experience has taught her that patience, listening and sharing are very important things to achieve development, because only then will we be able to move forward.

Looking to the future, Lucy believes it is important to focus on the young women she has been working with so that they can continue and thrive in their own communities. She sees that these women are moving forward and receiving accompaniment, working in different areas and supporting each other. For Lucy, AIWO is like a flower that continues to bloom and a tree that continues to generate different leaves and branches, without fading or dying. She sees a bright future for AIWO and for the Indigenous Women of Africa who continue to fight for their rights and the development of their communities.

Since its founding, AIWO has integrated women like Winnie Kodi, originally from the Uba indigenous people of Sudan: "Now women are talking about the

effects of climate change and how it affects Indigenous Women." She highlights the involvement of women in the implementation of adaptation and mitigation strategies in their countries, where they see for themselves. "We have groups that do tree planting activities as part of their identity and efforts to reforest the area. So those who live in the forests and those who don't are encouraged to plant and build".

Winnie is another of the many voices in AIWO. She and her community organization advocate for women to strengthen skills that allow them to empower themselves economically, as well as their families. She shares: "Indigenous Women are brilliant, they just don't have the space or opportunity to show it, to use their brilliant nature to do something for themselves." When they have the opportunity, they have managed to ensure that their sons and daughters can go to school and receive medical attention. However, they still face the serious problem of female genital mutilation, a harmful practice in the name of tradition, which must be eradicated. To accomplish this, we

emphasize teaching women's sexual and reproductive rights.

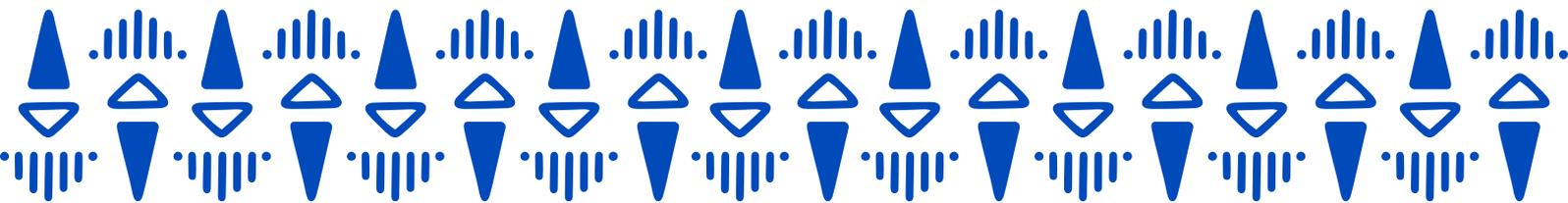
Winnie knows that engaging Indigenous Women on platforms where they can be heard and network is essential to achieving real change. For her, it is crucial to "explore ways to involve Indigenous Women in the UN political spaces and mechanisms that impact their lives, giving them tools to advocate for themselves not only locally or regionally, but also internationally".

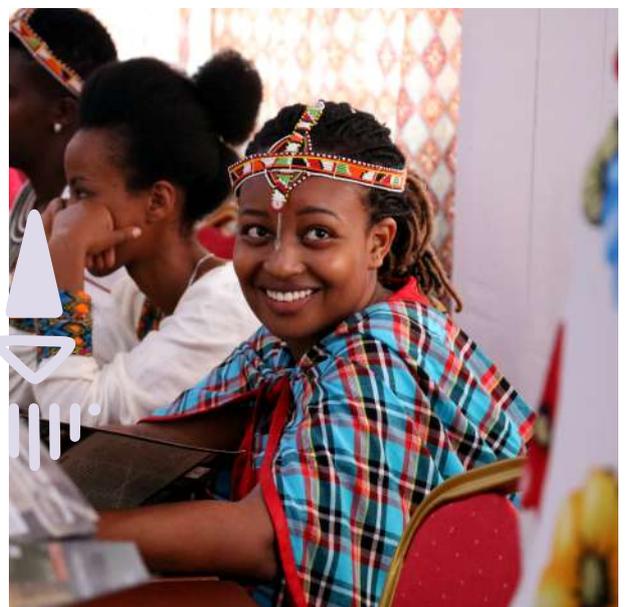
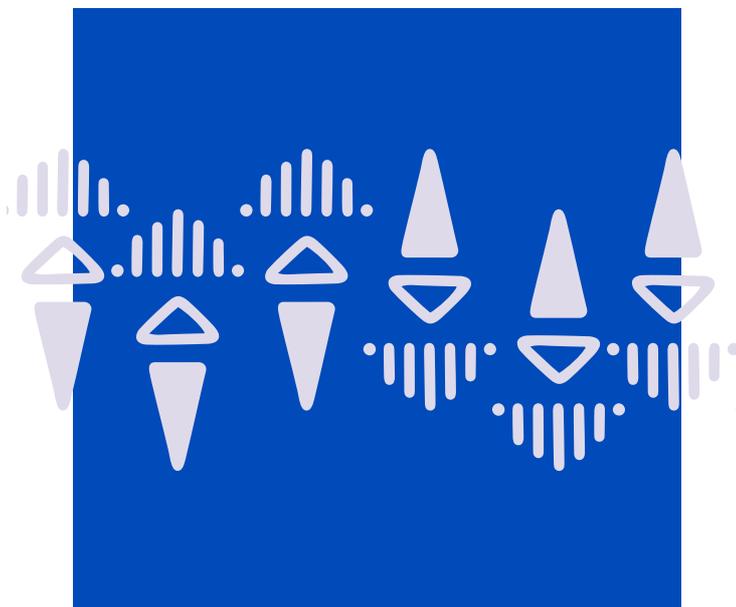
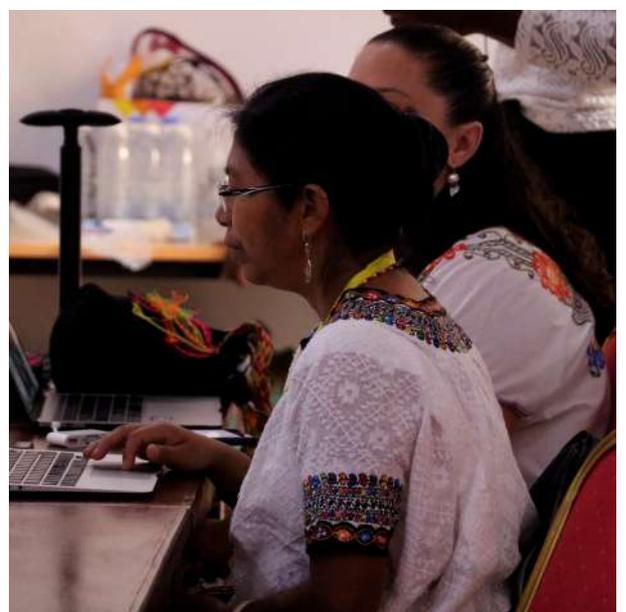
Winnie, who participated in IIWF's first Global School of Leadership and later became an academic advisor, strongly believes in the opportunities that Indigenous Women and Girls can find by being part of a global network. In her words, "by joining a network, they can benefit from the opportunities that arise, and when they are called up globally, we can

share that with the networks that we have already extended to some of the organizations that we know have powerful Indigenous Women or Girls that will benefit from global leadership".

Finally, she mentions that the forums allow them to discuss solutions at different levels: local, national, regional and international, and to plan how to act. In her words: "We have a whole document outlining the different issues Indigenous Women in Africa face and what they would like to do about it." In these international meetings, Indigenous Women from different countries exchange ideas and information, good practices, and discuss challenges. According to her, these approaches have taught them that they experience kind of the same challenges, such as access to social justice, social services and human rights mechanisms, and reproductive health, but "We are in different contexts or geographies."

**"WE ARE IN DIFFERENT
CONTEXTS OR
GEOGRAPHIES."**





LEADING INTO THE FUTURE: AMINATU GAMBO AND HER WORK IN STRENGTHENING THE LEADERSHIP OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN

Rebel, as she was called in the Mbororo community of Cameroon. Her defiance of gender conventions by studying at university instead of marrying was viewed with suspicion. This reflects the gender inequalities entrenched in some Indigenous Communities, accentuated by the colonial past that imposed western stereotypes, limiting women's mobility and freedoms. Aminatu Gambo knew that she needed more than just studying to bring about a change in the destiny of girls like her. Her determination led her to become a lawyer, challenging conventions and fighting for gender equality.

Aminatu is a 36-year-old human rights defender who works internationally to strengthen Indigenous Women's participation and political advocacy. Born in 1986, she grew up in the indigenous Mbororo region, located in the border areas of Cameroon. It was there that she became sensitized to gender inequalities and began to feel a vocation to defend the rights of Indigenous Women. During her adolescence, she noticed that the education of girls was relegated to a

secondary role compared to the education of boys due to the gender roles historically reproduced in her society, as in many parts of the world. Despite this, she decided to study law at the University of Yaoundé II to help defend the futures of women and youth.

"In the name of tradition, many people in my community believe that girls, once they are 13 or 14 years old, should get married, have children and be housewives, and education is more reserved for men," explains Aminatu. "I was lucky because, as a child, I received a scholarship to study outside my community. The school required parents to sign a document promising not to take us out of school to get married."

During her first year at university, Aminatu began volunteering with an organization as an advocate for girls' and women's rights. It was through this opportunity that she met Lucy Mulenkei, vice president of IIWF and coordinator of the African Indigenous Women's Organization (AIWO), who

guided her on her path to leadership. "Her mentor," as she calls her, pushed her to become a network partner at the regional level and soon after, in 2013, Aminatu participated in IIWF's Global Indigenous Women's Leadership School. This global mechanism has allowed her to meet Indigenous Women from different regions of the world, and to strengthen her career as a promoter of Indigenous Women's political participation.

The empowerment of women that Aminatu has promoted through IIWF is inspiring. For this human rights advocate, true power comes from actively building knowledge. For this reason, her work has

focused on making sure that Indigenous Women first know the mechanisms, policies, and laws, both national and international, that are available to them and that they need to understand to stand their ground. "You can only stand up for your rights when you know what they are," she recently noted in an interview for the International Human Rights Film Festival in Colombia.

In a world that is still reluctant to fully recognize Indigenous Peoples and where inequities in access to information and political training prevail, Aminatu's leadership has the responsibility to foster more leadership: Indigenous Women trained and





empowered to influence the most important decision-making spaces on the planet. As IIWF's former political participation coordinator, and in line with the organization's mandate, she ensured that more women from diverse communities were able to make use of their own voice in global arenas such as United Nations forums, including the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII), and the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), among others.

In addition, Aminatu has shared with the women tools to attend events such as the United Nations Climate Change Convention (COP), where they seek to influence global policies and, above all, that the important role of Indigenous Women in the fight against the climate emergency is recognized.

"If women are not in leadership positions, there will never be change," says Aminatu, who was in charge of coordinating the political advocacy of Indigenous Women leaders to participate in and influence international events. According to her, one of the biggest obstacles is the difficulty in obtaining visas and being able to travel. IIWF also supports them through communication strategies and the creation of opportunities for dialogue and influence.

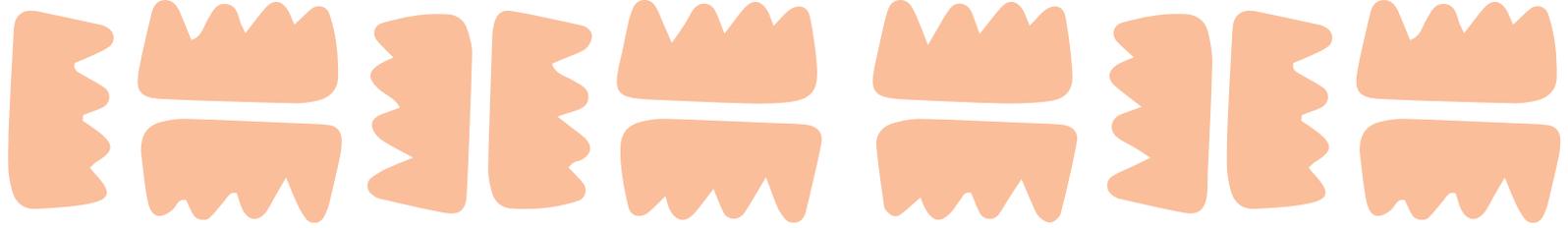
"We Indigenous Women are discriminated against not only outside our community for being Indigenous, but within them as well, because men do not consider us when it comes to making decisions," explains Aminatu. "This is because, historically, Indigenous Women have been seen as responsible for the home and raising children, while men have been in charge of tasks related to the productive

"IF WOMEN ARE NOT IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS, THERE WILL NEVER BE CHANGE"

sphere." Aminatu stresses the importance of giving Indigenous Women a leadership position in making decisions that affect their lives: "So, if you are making a law that will affect the lives of these women, they should be at that table. Giving them that leadership position gives them that window to make decisions and lead societies. We have had cases where women are leaders and communities feel more protected and safer than when they were led by men."

The promoter of Indigenous Women's rights focuses on sharing knowledge, enabling bilateral negotiation spaces, and strengthening women's capacities to represent themselves through seminars, workshops, and campaigns. Her leadership is based on knowledge transfer and accompaniment: "We make sure that the women do the talking. We don't speak for them. If it comes from them, it is much more powerful for the states," she explains.

"An important part of the international struggle of these Indigenous Women leaders and IIWF's is to make the world and the political agenda understand that Indigenous Women, although we fall under the general category of 'women', face specific challenges." According to Aminatu, many countries still do not recognize the existence or rights of Indigenous Peoples in their constitutions, leading



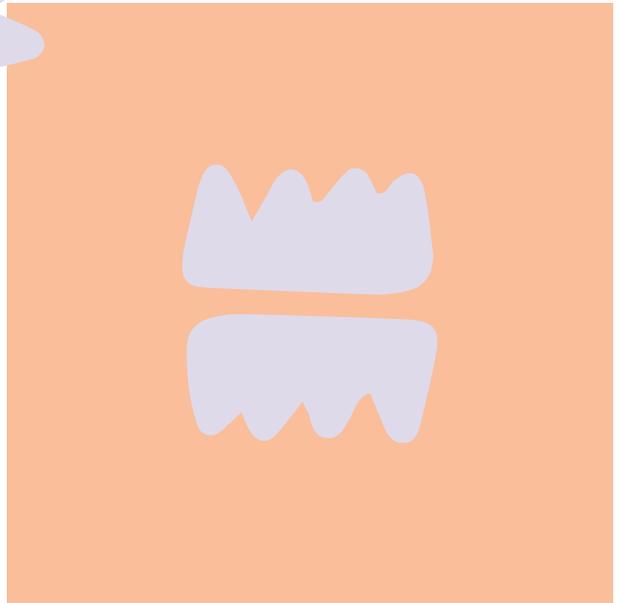
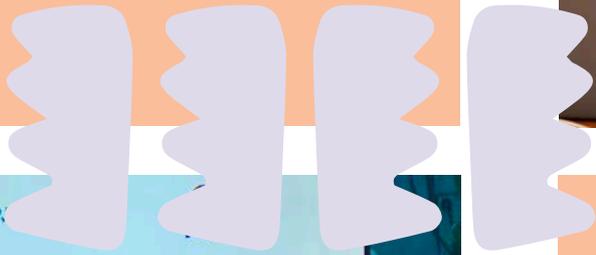
governments to not consider our differences when implementing laws and initiatives at the national level. The lack of programs developed in our local communities, the absence of interpreters in hospitals who speak our Indigenous languages, and public schools with regulations that do not take our culture into account are just some of the situations that persist in many countries. Despite the fact that 189 nations approved in 1995 the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, considered the most ambitious plan of global policies on the rights of women and girls, Indigenous Women continue to face obstacles and discrimination.

"If the States that committed to eradicate illiteracy through the Beijing Declaration are not reaching out to local communities, it means they are not doing their job properly," says Aminatu, who also acted as coordinator of the Global Study on the Situation of Indigenous Women, published by IIFW in 2020. "The report aimed to provide an overview of the situation of Indigenous Women 25 years after the Beijing conference, and to review the measures implemented to verify whether governments had considered us, Indigenous Women, in their actions. "During the Generation Equality Forum, IIFW presented these issues. However, during the last 25 years, and based on this report, Indigenous Women are still not considered different from the hegemonic women's society. We are working to establish that distinction".

Nevertheless, Aminatu is confident in the results and impact of activism and advocacy. She reminds us that this kind of work is not quick and requires years of dedication and patience. But she assures us that no matter how long it takes, change will always be seen in the future. "IIFW is growing, and its leadership

is excellent. We learn every day how to improve. As one of the largest global networks of Indigenous Women, IIFW leads by example. Their documents are referenced by United Nations agencies and other organizations, and their work is highly valued because they work directly with communities."

Despite the multiple barriers we face as Indigenous Women and Girls, from cultural and religious barriers to political and economic barriers, for Aminatu the key remains that which moved us in our youth and, she assures us, changed our lives: education. "If a woman has access to education, she will have the ability to identify when she is experiencing violence and know how to avoid it. She will know how to gain economic power. If we can provide more access to education, that would be the most important thing."



RECLAIMING MATRIARCHAL ROOTS: JUANITA'S VISION FOR A FAIR FUTURE IN GUAM

Guam, the largest island in the Mariana Islands in the Eastern Pacific, is home to the Chamorro people. Although the community is resilient, colonization and militarization have left a legacy of poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunity, which can lead to stress and anxiety, as well as contribute to the high rate of alcoholism. This problem aggravates the levels of violence against women. For 23 years, Juanita Blaz has taken actions to protect her five daughters from the adversity of society, saying, "When all those things are happening, you have the choice of letting it hit you and be afraid of the world, or finding something that you and your children can participate in. For me that was the beginning."

With Island Girl Power, an organization founded in 2001 by Carlotta León Guerrero, Juanita found a way to contribute to the development of her community and provide alternatives for Chamorro women and families. Through role models, the organization

guides the girls in their growth and leadership, like a big sister teaching the younger ones. Juanita herself is a great big sister concerned about preventing risky behaviors in her community and teen pregnancy.

"You have to create a community of helpers, a community of individuals who are aware of the issues are capable to help girls by being positive role models. When we started creating big sisters in high school and college, we young women had to teach them how to be big sisters," says Juanita.

With westernization, Chamorro society lost its matriarchal roots, but Juanita believes that female empowerment will bring back this past. Island Girl Power was created to accompany adolescent girls and their families through the transition of puberty and to support them in finding their own voice. "I have always said that Island Girl Power relies heavily on family, on our reciprocity and our true respect for



“ISLAND GIRL POWER IS ABOUT RESPECTING EACH OTHER, EVERYONE HAS THEIR ROLE, EVERYONE HAS THEIR PLACE. (...) THE ISLAND GIRL POWER WE ARE TALKING ABOUT BRINGS A COMMUNITY TOGETHER”

each other. And the power we bring to island girls is an empowerment that connects them to the environment, to the community and to themselves." For her, empowerment is about gaining the ability to communicate, to not be taken for granted and to teach girls the signs of harmful relationships, but many times adult women also need to show by example what a healthy relationship is.

Juanita believes that everything is a cycle and that what they do at the Island Girl Power center helps develop stronger individuals and communities to live in: "It's about loving the land, loving the community and finding ways to help people love themselves." The community planted a community garden for food sustainability. "Each family could rent a garden plot and grow their own food, but they also learned how to farm and the girls learned how to take the food that was grown and cook it, prepare it or use it for traditional healing purposes. In this way, the garden connected the girls to a larger community of people."

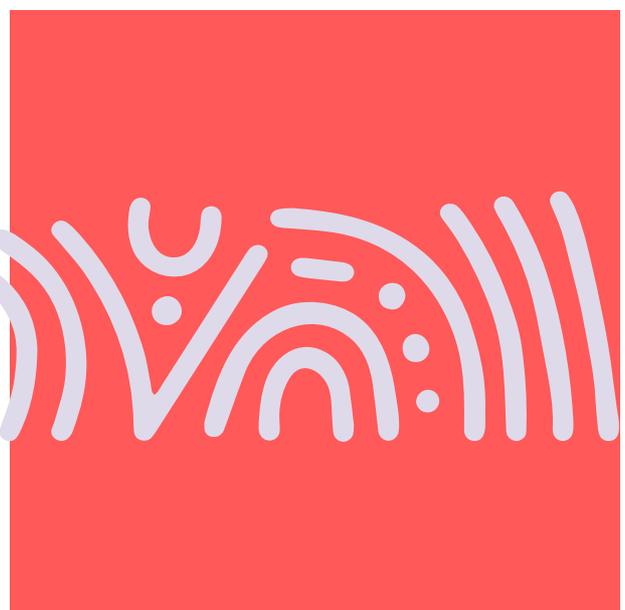
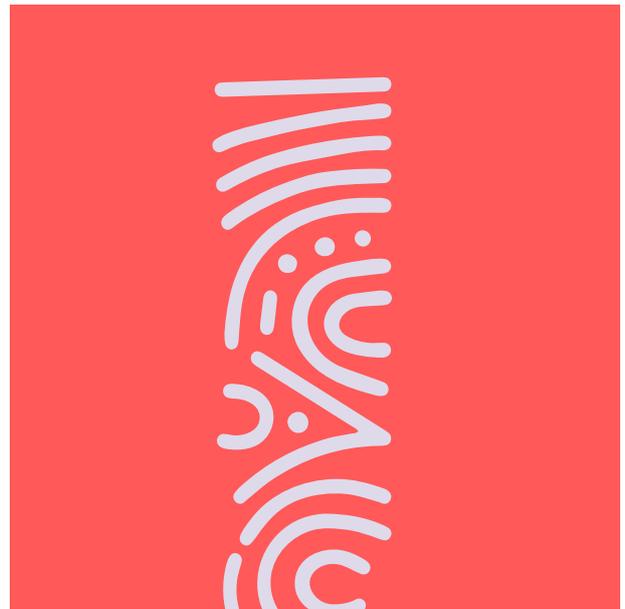
Through this garden, Juanita wanted the people of the island to know where their food comes from,

as health problems resulting from obesity are alarming in Guam. The community garden has a store that helps families access low-cost products and provides clothing, shoes, and books to those in need. Through IIWF's Ayni Fund, they have contributed to the funding of the programs implemented by Juanita and her collaborators, which has allowed them to have a seed bank to collect medicinal and edible plants and learn their cultural and culinary uses.

Just as they were about to implement their program, the COVID-19 pandemic got in the way of their plans, but they managed to adapt. This time they decided to use buckets of soil to distribute the seeds and grow plants as a family, engage in physical activities, and help each other cope with the isolation caused by the pandemic. They took advantage of the long hours of confinement to become gardeners and spend time as a family. Juanita emphasizes that knowing their nature is one of the basic things children should be taught, as many do not know about Guam's endemic plants.

Juanita is planning to expand Island Girl Power to other islands in Micronesia and explains that it is not

just a program for women, as men also need to learn how to communicate properly in their day-to-day lives with the girls. "Island Girl Power is about respecting each other, everyone has their role, everyone has their place. (...) The island girl power we are talking about brings a community together." Juanita believes that with love you can bring people together, help each other to expose their potential, what they have inside.





INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE THEIR TRADITIONS IN THE ARCTIC REGION

The Arctic region is one of the most fascinating in the world, as it is composed of diverse landscapes ranging from arctic tundra to glaciers and fjords. There are also mountains, coniferous forests and icy rivers flowing into the sea. This region is home to the Sami, Inuit, Nenets, and many other Indigenous Communities. Despite the extent of this region, Indigenous Women living in the Arctic, comprised of

countries such as Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States of America, do not exceed one million people and face similar situations to Indigenous Women living in other regions of the global south. 66% of these women live in rural areas, while 33% reside in urban areas.

Gudrun Eliassá Eriksen, a Sami leader, believes that the role of women is crucial to surviving the cold



temperatures of the arctic tundra. As Indigenous Women of the Sami people, a semi-nomadic people engaged in, among other things, reindeer herding in Lapland, Gudrun has experienced firsthand how Sami women have been critical to her community's survival in a low-temperature climate.

Sami women have played an essential role in obtaining and preparing food, making clothing, and constructing adequate housing to protect themselves from the extreme cold. In addition, they have passed down from generation to generation the knowledge and skills necessary to adapt and survive in an arctic environment.

Unfortunately, today, Sami communities are facing the loss of their land, resources, language, and culture. In this context, Gudrun has been actively working as a member of the Sami Women's Forum since 1998 to network with other women and preserve Sami culture, while struggling to make

herself heard in a society that often only pays attention to male voices. Furthermore, she has worked as a part-time secretary at the Sami Women's Forum (SNF). Since 1996, she has been editor of the Sami women's magazine GABA and has written articles, interviews, and other work on Sami women's issues in four countries.

Gudrun studied at Tromsø University, The Arctic University of Norway, and Nesta University College. She is self-employed as a project manager, cultural mediator and producer, and Sami-Norwegian interpreter and translator. In addition to her mother tongue, Sami, Gudrun speaks Norwegian, Swedish and English. She considers herself a feminist and believes it is crucial to preserve the cultural heritage of her people. "I feel it is the responsibility of every Sami to speak and teach the Sami language to new generations. That is one of our biggest challenges: to pass on the traditions to the young people." Gudrun worries about the future that awaits the younger

generation. She advocates unity as a hope for facing the threats her people face.

As a member of the Sami Women's Forum and in collaboration with IIWF, Gudrun encourages women from cross-border territories to meet and discuss topics such as politics, gender equality and structural violence in order to design joint action plans. "We must cooperate and fight together to become stronger. Our experience is very important for us, as we come from small villages where it is not always possible to discuss issues related to Sami women, as well as political issues or issues related to Indigenous Women." Gudrun obtained funding for a project that unites Sami women from four countries, but the COVID-19 pandemic thwarted the meetings. However, they were able to adapt and hold them virtually and in person until the end of 2022.

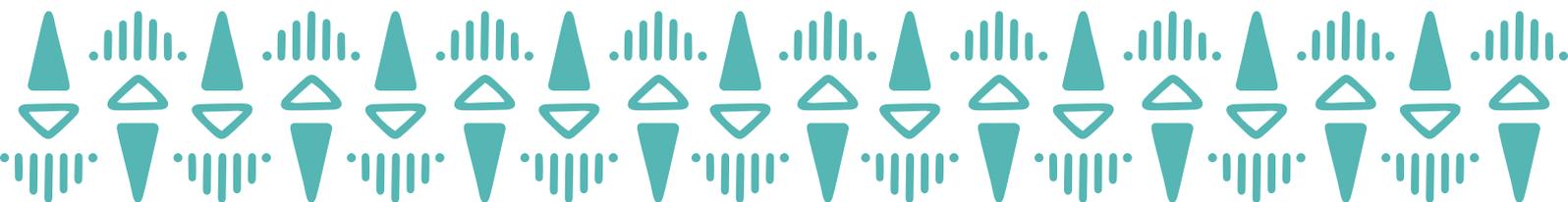
Gudrun regrets that violence against women still exists in some communities. "We need to talk louder about it, make it public and not hide it as a taboo. It is also important to talk to girls and boys about sexuality to teach them to take care of themselves and be aware." From their organizations, they have carried out projects to eradicate domestic violence and alcoholism.

In September 2021, during an Indigenous Rights conference, Gudrun participated in a session called Land Rights and the First Sami Women's Resistance. During the session, one of the speakers shared her experience of how the land where they herded their reindeer was being threatened by a mine. "Reindeer herding is an ancestral tradition that has endured for many years, but the family fears that they will be left without land, and this will mean the end of their traditional way of life. This would affect not only their

way of life, but also their language, culture, and spirituality. A potential forced migration would have a negative impact on their relationship with the land and nature, as they do not exploit the land but live in harmony with it and all beings that inhabit it." Gudrun herself has seen how wind turbines have encroached on grazing land.

Faced with the threat of industrial exploitation, the Sami women are trying to resist and fight for their territorial, cultural, and spiritual rights, as well as for the future of their children. For years, they have been promoting the creation of a documentation center for the history of Sámi women. "The Sami Women's Organizations were established 115 years ago, and people don't know the history we have. We have people who don't know the history because there is no documentation. There is nothing written down. There is a lot to be done to give Sami women their history and their tribute in the homages to them." They want decision-makers to understand the importance of having a Sami documentation center to gather statistics, stories of the women in different regions, and their current situation.

They have attended conferences such as Women's Worlds in France in 1999 and have collaborated with women from the Basque Country. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the meetings among the women of the Sami Nisson Forum were held in virtual rooms, which allowed many women to speak without fear, encouraged by the confidentiality offered by online meetings. Despite having varied backgrounds, different skills, and knowledge, they found common ground during their conversations, such as resistance to industrial exploitation. They also shared their expectations and talked about preserving their cultural heritage.



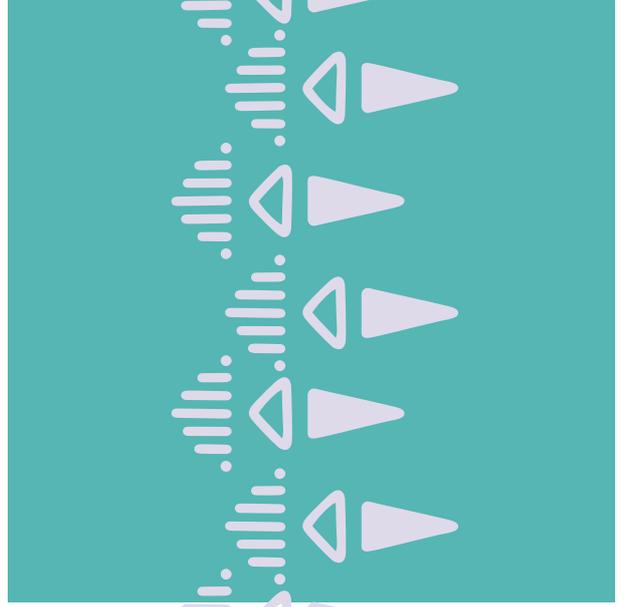
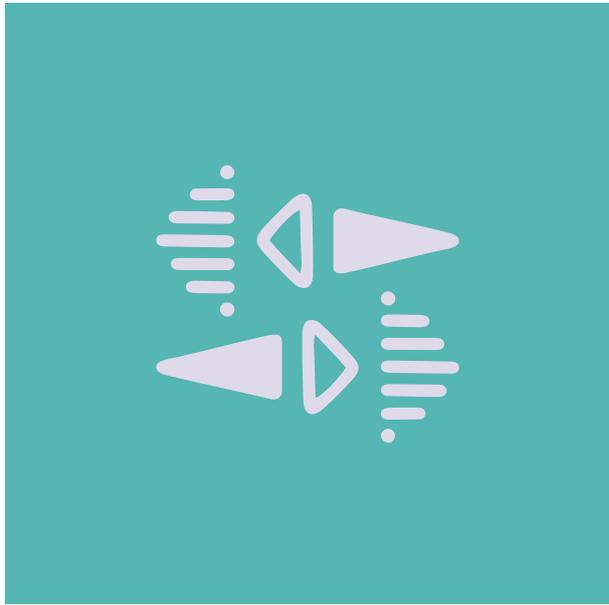
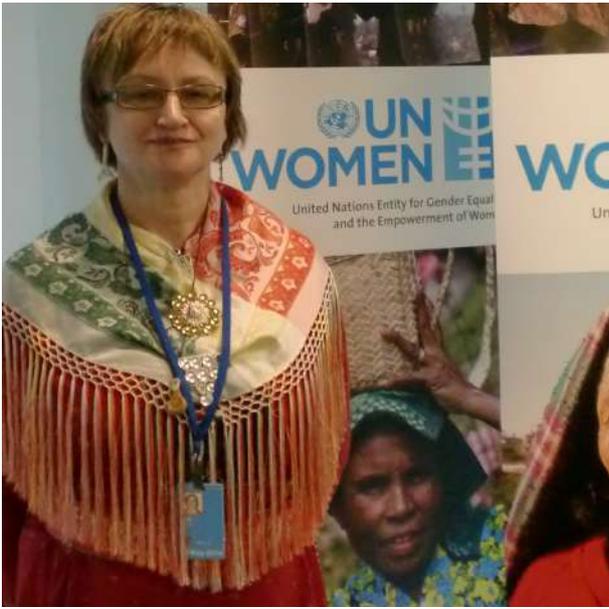
"I FEEL IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF EVERY SAMI TO SPEAK AND TEACH THE SAMI LANGUAGE TO NEW GENERATIONS. THAT IS ONE OF OUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES: TO PASS ON THE TRADITIONS TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE"

One of Gudrun's concerns is that the Sami Parliaments work together. "Some people are in Finland, others in Sweden and Norway. We want to draw up a strategic plan to strengthen ourselves and enable local organizations and NGOs to join in the work for gender equality in the Sami regions and societies".

Gudrun believes that Sami traditional knowledge should be recognized and valued at different levels of government. "There are so many levels to which they should report on Sámi societies, local

governments, regional governments, national governments, parliaments of the four Nordic states".

Indigenous Women play a fundamental role in transmitting the ancestral knowledge of our people to future generations. Through our work, indigenous cultural heritage is preserved, cultural diversity is maintained, knowledge is diversified, and sustainable development practices are promoted in harmony with Mother Earth. It is essential to recognize and support the efforts of Arctic Indigenous Women to ensure the continuity of this invaluable cultural heritage for humanity.



LEADERSHIP AND RESILIENCE OF GUARANI INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE PARAGUAYAN CHACO

Angelina Barrientos gets out of a van driven by Adriano, her former schoolmate, who now helps her record the meetings she organizes as founder of the Guaraní Indigenous Women's Organization. Angelina travels through the Chaco region of Paraguay to meet with colleagues from various Indigenous Women's Organizations. In the area of Campo Loro she meets with the Organization of Women Artisans; in Macharety, with the Guaraní Nivacle Ayoreo colleagues, and in the community of Santa Teresa, with the Kuña Guaraní Katupiry Women's Commission. She also visits the area of Nasuuc, where there is still no Indigenous Women's Organization, but Angelina goes there to encourage its creation: "You can meet and see what you need, what you require," she says in front of an assembly. The women look at her and, with the help of the community's teacher-translator, they are encouraged to share some of their needs and challenges.

In the shade of a tree to protect herself from the sun, Angelina says that the work in Nasuuc is just

beginning, but she is optimistic that they will achieve something because the seed has been planted. She says that when she applied to IIWF's Ayni Fund, she never imagined she would get it. Nevertheless, she applied. Some time later, she received an email confirming that she had obtained the technical and financial support. She immediately went to the nearest village to gather the requirements, including opening a bank account. When she informed her fellow Guaraní leaders, mostly men, they were surprised and even incredulous. But Angelina persevered, inspired by the legacy of leadership she had received from her mother, who was a leader in her community and co-founder of the Macharety Foundation. Angelina gathered the necessary documents and received the support, surprising everyone.

The funds were used to organize meetings with women from different Guaraní communities, some from Bolivia and others from neighboring communities far from Macharety, where Angelina

lives. However, what no one around the world imagined was that a pandemic would arrive, locking up everyone in their homes. Face-to-face meetings were not allowed for a while, which also affected the communities Angelina works with.

At the same time, and for some years, drought had been taking over the landscape of El Chaco due to the climate crisis affecting the region. According to various sources, rainfall levels have decreased significantly in the last decades, which has generated serious water shortage problems in the Indigenous Communities. Faced with this situation, Angelina resumed her leadership and focused her support on measures to mitigate the effects of the drought, such as the installation of plumbing, the construction of a water cistern and the supply of water in her communities. Despite the benefits, some of her male colleagues objected, but Angelina responded, "We are in this together, we are not going alone. We are all going at the same time".

Adriano's van travels a winding road through a mixed terrain of mud and fine soil that stirs up dust as it passes. Angelina comments that it has rained miraculously in the last few days, although not as much as before or in the quantity they need. The van pulls onto a road where coal trucks are fellow travelers. Through the window, the landscape of the Chaco can be seen: a vast Paraguayan savanna under a bright sun, with birds nesting on electricity pylons and some peculiar trees. At first glance, they may look deformed, but Angelina explains their common name: palo borracho. They are trees that look like they have indigestion, with a protuberance bulging from their trunk at the height where they could have a stomach. This deduction is not far from the truth, as due to the high salt load in the soil, the trees, which are actually ceiba trees, swell up and their trunk shows strange shapes.

"WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER, WE ARE NOT GOING ALONE. WE ARE ALL GOING AT THE SAME TIME".

IIWF is a global mechanism that works with Indigenous Women and Indigenous Women's Organizations from all 7 regions of the world, with an impact that spans local, regional, and international. At IIWF, we believe that local and global actions are interconnected, and this is evident in the work of Angelina and her organization in the fight against climate change and its adaptation. It is important that Indigenous Women and organizations recognize the challenges they face in applying to different IIWF programs, where they can strengthen skills that allow them to connect on an international level, but with the end result of creating change in their own communities.

Thus, it is like planting a seed, which has the potential to grow like a ceiba tree in the middle of a savanna landscape. The palo borracho is a visual metaphor for what the women of the Chaco communities are achieving. A tree of change, with winding paths and thorns, but resistant to extreme climates. This is the path faced by the women of the communities, with droughts and doubts from their

peers, but in the end they emerge transforming the landscape and giving identity to the territory.

"Teka-Pora means good living for the whole community, for the women who belong to it. To be able to do something, even small things," explains Angelina under another tree, sitting on a wooden chair in the shade. This Guaraní word stands for the

common good and good living for all. Angelina travels through the communities of Campo Loro, Macherety, Santa Teresa and Nasuuc, seeking to achieve a Teka-Pora for her companions and for all those who live there. She has already begun her work, she is the seed, it only remains to wait and see how far her efforts grow.



EMPOWERING INDIGENOUS WOMEN THROUGH COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP: THE WORK OF THE RWUS

Anchored in the northeast region of India, the Rural Women Upliftment Society (RWUS) has become a bastion dedicated to promoting empowerment in challenging rural communities, where Indigenous Women resist and create new possibilities on a daily basis. For 30 years, this non-profit organization has worked to strengthen and develop Indigenous Women and other collectives through programs and initiatives that seek to ensure food security, livelihoods, peace, and justice by strengthening their capacities and leadership.

RWUS was established in 1990 by a group of local volunteers committed to improving the situation of women in Manipur's Churachandpur district, a geographically and culturally isolated territory near the borders with Bangladesh and Burma. Its work first focused on providing livelihood programs and training. "Gradually, the organization set up its own offices and has now become the most important resource center for women in the rural area," says Mary Beth Sanate, the organization's general secretary.

Today, the Rural Women Upliftment Society works directly with more than 5000 local women and participates in national and international forums. In addition, it has expanded its focus to work directly with farmers and LGBTQ groups, demonstrating that work focused on women's development in communities can lead to the most important battles, including the preservation of life on the planet. This includes fighting for human rights, sustainable economic models, pacification of territories, food security, access to water and preservation of the environment. Indigenous Women in India, as in other parts of the world, have become key agents of change in the fight against the climate emergency.

"In northeast India, women, who are mostly artisans and farmers, play a key role in climate resilience," says Mary Beth. One of the most successful initiatives by local women, in collaboration with RWUS, is the campaign to save the Tuitha River, the only river in the area. "The river has been a source of livelihood for many Indigenous Communities, but the government built a huge dam at its mouth, which has caused pollution and severely affected the communities," explains Mary Beth.

"NORTHEAST INDIA, WOMEN, WHO ARE MOSTLY ARTISANS AND FARMERS, PLAY A KEY ROLE IN CLIMATE RESILIENCE"

Mary Beth described the campaign to save the Tuitha River as a powerful initiative, supported by the International Indigenous Women's Forum (IIWF). The campaign included home visits, distribution of informational materials on the importance of saving the river, and clean-up efforts, among other activities. After two years of work, Mary Beth believes that the river is slowly coming back to life.

"The Indigenous Women from the villages along the river started to organize themselves into committees to protect the river. The local government supported us, distributed materials, and also banned dumping waste in the river. I think that's a milestone for us," says Mary Beth. "We also undertook the Women for Clean Rivers campaign, which seeks not only to clean the river, but also to beautify its banks and prevent people from littering. Additionally, we started a tree planting program and planted close to 1,000 saplings last year".

For the Rural Women Upliftment Society, economic and political empowerment is a fundamental axis for the development of women and the region. Therefore, another of its projects consisted of the creation of a market led by Indigenous Women, where some 200 craftswomen and farmers gather to sell their products, ornaments,

traditional clothing, and food. In collaboration with IIWF, the local organization also works to strengthen the role of women in governance issues, as well as in projects to prevent violence and promote their participation in peace processes.

"In a conflict zone like the one we work in, women play a crucial role in peacebuilding. They often take to the streets and act as mediators with state and non-state actors," explains Mary Beth. "It is an area with diverse communities and different religious beliefs, which can create a dividing line. The Local Capacities for Peacebuilding Program provides tools to reduce tensions and increase connections. The young women learn what they have in common in their different histories through the concept of composite heritage, which looks for commonalities between societies beyond linguistic, religious, and ethnic differences".

According to Mary Beth, working with young people to reconnect with their roots and culture is another action that RWUS has implemented, as there is a generation gap that threatens cultural preservation. "There are limited job opportunities in the villages, so the migration rate to urban areas is very high. These generations that have migrated have lost connection with the life of their communities,



they have forgotten traditional games, crafts, and techniques for making traditional attire, for example, skills that only women over 50 possess today. Even food. Young people buy fast food and no longer cook traditional food. The global market affects the most personal areas, even the way we feed ourselves".

For Mary Beth, food is a political issue. "It's part of our identity," she says. As an essential element for life, collectivity and the preservation of cultures, food is one of the pillars of RWUS' work. The organization has been instrumental in establishing organic produce and seed banks to provide farmers with strategies to escape the clutches of capitalism. "In this globalized world, many of the traditionally indigenous seeds have been patented by corporations, who then sell them on the market," explains Mary Beth. "When farmers buy these patented seeds, they can only plant for one season.

But if we preserve them, we can harvest for decades. It is very important to preserve our seeds, otherwise our food system will continue to be controlled by corporations".

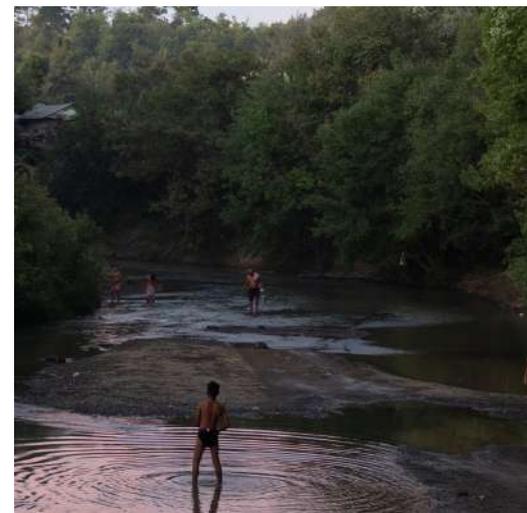
According to Mary Beth, in northeast India, moving forward means transforming the traditional role that women have played in their own communities and in a predominantly patriarchal culture. In this regard, RWUS is also working to change the customary laws that govern communities and are recognized by the Indian government, which state that women have no place on the councils that govern societies. For Indigenous Women's leadership to be complete, they must have the capacity to lead their own families and societies.

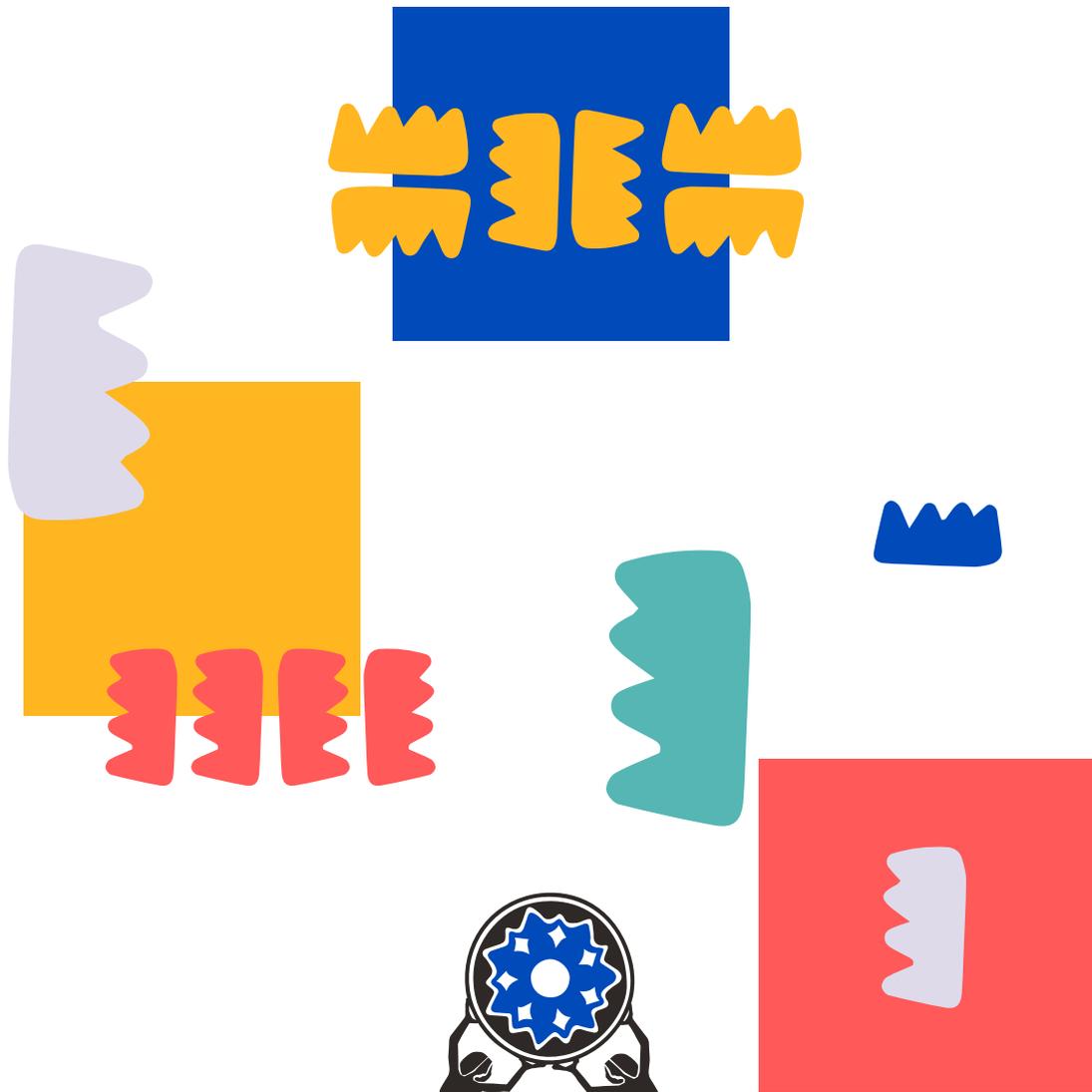
"There is no specific clause in the customary laws that talks about gender-based violence, child

custody or women's welfare," Mary Beth denounces. "Women have no custody of children, no right to own property and no right to participate in decision-making in their communities. Why are they not guaranteed their right to political participation? We are strongly advocating to the guardians of customary laws to review and revise these rules so that women can have access to justice".

Mary Beth emphasizes the need to create alliances between organizations at the national and

international level, such as networks like IIWF, to enable gathering and collective fighting. "It is very important to work together because many Indigenous Women live in isolation and face obstacles and issues alone. In India, we are a minority and many times you can feel helpless. When we come together, it gives us strength to know that there are other women who are fighting against the same issues".





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