

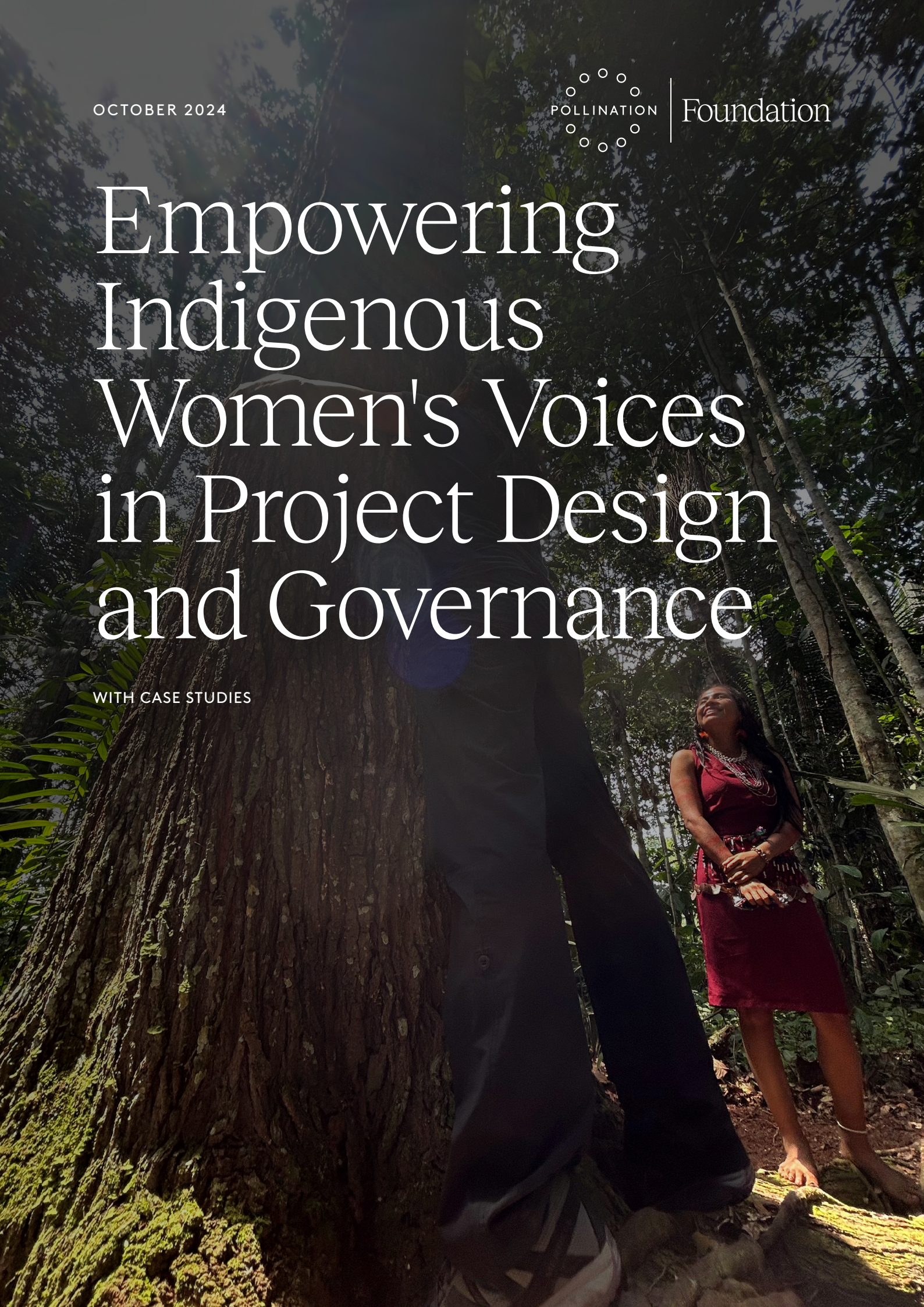
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Foundation

Empowering Indigenous Women's Voices in Project Design and Governance

WITH CASE STUDIES





Acknowledgement of country

We acknowledge the past and present generations of Traditional Owners from the lands on which our contributors are based, and we celebrate the stories, culture and traditions of the Indigenous Peoples across all the lands, waters and oceans where we live, work and enjoy.

SALT WATER, AUSTRALIA. IMAGE CREDIT: WAYNE QUILLIAM
COVER IMAGE: NUWAS FOREST IN SHAMPUYACU, PERU, IMAGE CREDIT BILL SALAZAR

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Introduction

While visiting a remote Indigenous women’s community-owned and led forest in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon, we take a moment to sit, take in the surroundings and taste local fruits. We’re sharing this experience with a collective of community leaders and allies interested in Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IP&LC) carbon project development. The sun casts a warm glow over the group of Awajun women sharing thoughts under the branches of an ancient tree. This space, known as the [Nuwas Forest](#), encompasses nine hectares of land owned by a collective of Awajun women who cultivate medicinal plants and care for nature here.

The women, ranging from elders to young mothers, engage us in discussions about the future of their community. They speak with passion and wisdom about preserving cultural traditions and nurturing their environment. To financially sustain their work, they’re developing sustainable agroforestry systems and biotrade, weaving handicrafts and inviting visitors in for ecotourism experiences. Their focus is on creating a promising future for their families and forest ecosystem. The experience captures the power and importance of Indigenous women’s voices in shaping the projects and policies that affect their lives.



WOMEN AT WORK IN THE BOSQUE DE LAS NUWAS (AWAJUN FOR WOMEN'S FOREST), IMAGE CREDIT BILL SALAZAR

Why Indigenous Women's Voices Matter

DEEP CULTURAL INSIGHTS

Indigenous women are often the keepers of their communities' traditions, stories, and sustainable practices. Their deep connection to their culture and environment provides a holistic understanding that is crucial for creating projects that are truly beneficial and respectful of their heritage.

HOLISTIC ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP

Indigenous women hold a unique understanding of their local ecosystems, which is often passed down through generations. Their traditional ecological knowledge includes medicines, foods and sustainable farming practices, conservation techniques, and a deep respect for natural resources. This knowledge is invaluable in project design, particularly in areas related to environmental sustainability and resource management. Studies have shown that projects which integrate Indigenous knowledge tend to be more successful in achieving long-term sustainability goals.

BUILDING TRUST AND COOPERATION

When Indigenous women are involved in project design, it helps build trust and cooperation within the community. They are seen as trusted leaders and can bridge the gap between project implementers and community members, ensuring that everyone feels included and heard. This trust is crucial for the success of any project, as it fosters a sense of ownership and collaboration.

ADDRESSING SPECIFIC NEEDS

Indigenous women can highlight gender-specific issues that might otherwise be overlooked. These include aspects related to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities for women and girls. Addressing these issues not only promotes gender equity but also enhances the overall impact of the project by ensuring that all community members benefit.

ENHANCING SOCIAL EQUITY AND JUSTICE

Including Indigenous women in project design and governance is also a matter of social justice. It helps to correct historical injustices and marginalization by giving these women a platform to influence decisions that affect their lives. Their participation ensures that projects are not only equitable but also empower marginalized groups, contributing to greater social justice.



WOMEN PRESENTING ON THE AWAJUN WOMEN IN CONSERVATION INITIATIVE IN SHAMPUYACU, PERU. IMAGE CREDIT: CI PERU

Making It Happen: Practical Steps

So, how can we ensure that Indigenous women's voices are heard in project design and governance? Here are a few practical steps:

Engage Early and Often: Involve Indigenous women from the very beginning of the project and throughout its lifecycle. Their early input can shape the project's direction and goals. For example, establish a project advisory board with equal representation of Indigenous women, or implement a co-design process where Indigenous women are key decision-makers from the planning stage onwards.

Build Genuine Relationships: Take the time to build trust and genuine relationships with Indigenous communities. This involves listening, respecting their knowledge, and being open to their ways of working. Consider organising regular community gatherings, or implementing a cultural exchange program where project team members spend time living and working in the community.

Create Inclusive Spaces: Ensure that meetings and decision-making processes are inclusive and accessible to Indigenous women. This might mean providing translation services, childcare, or meeting in locations that are convenient for them. For instance, establish a mobile consultation unit that can travel to remote areas, or create women-only discussion forums to address sensitive topics.

Recognize and Respect Their Expertise: Acknowledge the unique expertise that Indigenous women bring. Their knowledge is just as valuable as scientific and technical knowledge and should be treated with equal respect. This could be achieved by incorporating traditional knowledge into project methodologies, co-authoring research papers with Indigenous women, or creating a formal role for Indigenous women as cultural and environmental advisors within the project team.

Unlock Capacity and Educate: Invest in educational programs and capacity-building initiatives that empower Indigenous women with the skills and knowledge needed to participate effectively in governance and project design. This could include leadership training, workshops on governance processes, and access to educational resources.

Policy Advocacy and Support: Encourage and support Indigenous women by advocating for changes that facilitate their participation in governance. This may involve working with local and national governments to create policies that recognise and protect Indigenous women's rights and ensure their voices are heard in decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Including Indigenous women in project design and governance is not just the right thing to do; it's the smart thing to do. Their voices bring essential insights that can lead to more effective, inclusive, and sustainable projects. Just as the ancient tree in the Nuwas Forest stands as a guardian of tradition and life, we should stand as guardians of inclusion and equity, ensuring that Indigenous women's voices shape the future of our projects and policies. Honouring their contributions helps to pave the way for a more just and sustainable world.

Indigenous Desert Women in Leadership Right Way

BACKGROUND

Women's leadership is often collaborative, networked and responsive to our communities, which are essential skills for looking after Country and working for a sustainable future. The Indigenous Desert Alliance (IDA) is facilitating cultural learning initiatives and career development pathways for Indigenous women leaders to work in two worlds, both within the IDA and the conservation sector at large.

CHALLENGE

For Indigenous people of the Australian desert, we are in the middle of the nation singing out. Indigenous women have a vast array of skills and experience to offer the land management sector, yet historically there has been a lack of commitment and support for organisations to improve recruitment, development and retention of Indigenous staff the right way.

Concerns of Indigenous women include having to choose between their cultural, family and work obligations; lack of recognition that they live and operate in two different worlds; and not enough support for the process of 'code-switching' between the two.

APPROACH

As an Indigenous-led, member-based organisation, IDA plays a vital role in empowering Indigenous people managing Australia's desert country to realise their aspirations through prioritising the development of Indigenous leaders, including women. IDA's approach includes:

1. Connecting and committing with a resourced plan to the development journey
2. Working together to increase cultural understanding and learning amongst staff
3. Improving the recruitment process to open doors and deliver more diversity of candidates
4. Evaluating recruitment, development and retention plans
5. Engaging and building good relationships with Indigenous communities
6. Practical ways of creating cultural safety in the workplace
7. Supporting and developing people the right way with culturally appropriate strategies



SAM MURRAY, YILKA/WONGUTHA/NYOONGAR WOMAN AND CEO OF THE INDIGENOUS DESERT ALLIANCE. IMAGE CREDIT: IDA

IMPACT

The IDA is on a journey to ensuring Indigenous women leaders are empowered, marked by a milestone in 2024 with the leadership transition to Yilka Wongatha Nyoongar woman Sam Murray, following a two-year CEO transition with mentoring from the IDA's Chairperson and senior Nyangumarta woman Nyaparu Rose.

Other initiatives include recruiting Indigenous women from remote areas onto IDA's Board, employing Indigenous women across the organisation, facilitating leadership exchanges for women rangers, and prioritising women's leadership at national conferences.

THE 'BIG LESSON'

Visibility matters. Young Indigenous women cannot be what they cannot see. Leadership development, paired with mentorship and acknowledgment of the cultural load Indigenous women carry, is essential for their success. Strong Indigenous women leaders wear many hats, they are mothers, daughters and aunties for their mob and communities, and are increasingly being called on for their skills and experience in many circles of professional and public life. The true value of these cultural and professional responsibilities must be accounted for.

Rather than an organisation requiring a person fit a designated role, the better way, and right way, is supporting Indigenous women leaders to set the conditions for cultural learning and professional leadership development to take place, for example, by ensuring intergenerational knowledge sharing, work flexibility and deep care.

With the inclusion and commitment to empowering Indigenous women leaders' right way, our eternal goals of looking after Country, Culture and Community can be fulfilled.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information on the IDA's working in two worlds framework visit:

<https://www.indigenousdesertalliance.com/what-we-do/sector-development/a-track-to-follow>

Tribal Women in Jharkhand: A Fight for Land Rights

BACKGROUND

In Jharkhand, India, tribal customs and laws place land ownership primarily in the hands of men, leaving women - especially widows - without rights. These women are often seen as barriers to men's full enjoyment of land, leading to various forms of violence against them. Landesa and the Samuel Hahnemann Associates & Research Centre (SHARC) conducted a study to understand and address these challenges.

CHALLENGE

Tribal women are systematically excluded from land ownership and decision-making processes. Patriarchal customs deny them access to land and silence their voices in local governance, leaving them vulnerable to violence and economic instability.

APPROACH

Landesa and SHARC's study explored the cultural, legal, and social barriers to tribal women's land rights. By engaging with community members, legal experts, and government officials, they highlighted the absence of women in governance structures and stressed the need for their inclusion in land policy discussions. Equally important is to sensitise the community leaders on women's identity as independent individuals and their right to a life free of violence.

IMPACT

The study brought attention to the struggles of women like Bhuliya, a widow who faced significant obstacles in claiming her land rights. Supported by networks like Ekal Nari Sashakti Sangathan (ENSS), she was able to successfully challenge patriarchal customs. The study also highlighted that sustainable change requires consulting women and including them in land policy. When women's voices are heard, solutions become more equitable.

THE 'BIG LESSON'

Reforming land laws to make them gender-just, and raising awareness of women's rights are essential solutions. Involving women in project design and decision-making is vital for creating more just and effective land policies.

LINKS

Landesa Center for Women's Land Rights: <https://www.landesa.org/what-we-do/womens-land-rights/>
Jharkhand Case Study: <https://cdn.landesa.org/wp-content/uploads/This-is-not-your-home-10-August-2021-Jharkhand.pdf>



Empowering Indigenous Women in Amazon Conservation

BACKGROUND

Women play a key role in the management of their territories and in community organization. Their involvement in conservation and the generation of economic opportunities is a priority for the sustainable development in the Amazon.

CHALLENGE

At present, there are still many barriers to their full and effective participation in the decision-making processes of their communities. Understanding and empowering women's intercultural leadership is fundamental to articulating programs, policies and principles that enable access to resources and social services for indigenous youth and future generations.

APPROACH

Women in Conservation is an initiative that supports women's leadership through a dedicated fund aimed at generating opportunities and strengthening the leadership of women in communities who are contributing to climate change solutions, while generating positive change in their families, communities, and environment.

IMPACT

To date, 29 women from the indigenous communities of Alto Mayo have participated in this initiative, receiving advice on the management and execution of their projects, strengthening their soft skills and building support networks. They have focused on revaluing their traditional foods, reforesting native plants for medicinal and nutritional uses and for the production of handicrafts, as well as the enhancement of traditional Awajún practices.

We have seen that little by little the women in the communities, who were previously afraid to speak in public, or were unaware of the importance of their role within their homes and communities, are gaining confidence to feel more like owners and leaders in their territories. For example, Lety Sejekam has planted more than 2,000 seedlings in the native community of Shampuyacu through coordination with various members of her community. Her dream is to recover the wooded areas that used to be very close to her home and that are now deforested and used for monoculture plantations. Chela Allui, who, together with other women from the Bajo Naranjillo community, have organized themselves to make bio-jewelry with seeds they collect from their farms, exchange ancestral knowledge and build a support and learning network. In addition, they have decided to plant more trees so that in the future, these seeds can be available for coming generations, and they can learn about the native species of their forests.

THE "BIG LESSON"

It is increasingly clear to us that providing support and financial backing so that these women can learn to manage their own initiatives and resources for a common benefit, generates transformational changes in them. By recognizing their participation in their communities and territories as more important and valuable. On the other hand, we know that for conservation to be sustainable, we need families to be happy and have their needs covered, whether it is food security or access to the necessary inputs that allow them to cure their families or produce what brings them income, such as handicrafts.

LINKS

Lety: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sx7KHWfzmXM>

Chela: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRyFerbHCrs>



PICTURED: LEFT: CHELA ALLUI, RIGHT: LETY SEJEKAM. IMAGE CREDIT: CI PERU

For further information please visit
pollinationgroup.com/foundation

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