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## Unpacking ‘indigenous women’s knowledge’: Perspectives on gender and intersectionality in Food-Land-Water systems governance

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### Abstract

Making ‘indigenous women’s knowledge’ the focal point for policies and programmes on sustainable development and building climate resilience of Food-Land-Water (FLW) systems in the Global South, has emerged as a buzzword in the international development discourse. While indigenous knowledge on the ecosystem, especially farming practices, forests, health and medicine systems is a truism, the attention it has received uncritically takes women’s knowledge and experience as given, regardless of their positionalities and contexts. Such orientation towards indigenous knowledge casts it in an ahistorical, apolitical light, assuming that the indigenous knowledge system is rigid and not constantly evolving and adapting. It also assumes that the ‘indigenous’, particularly ‘indigenous women’ are a homogenous group without any subjective differences. This paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in India on women land rights using ethnographic methods. The paper questions the orientation and impact of a certain kind of developmental thrust on gender and intersectionality in contemporary FLW systems research and governance of resources, particularly land. The experiences of women as well as men are defined by their subjectivities, social positions, ascribed gender roles, aspirations and knowledge production processes in their living environments. A unidimensional impetus on a rigid and unchanging knowledge system challenges the core idea of gender justice which is based on the principles of inclusion and diversity. This paper examines indigenous women’s relationship with land through two case studies from the Indian context and unpacks the means of access and control practices exercised by women in governance of land. We also discuss the role played by the interventions of civil society organisations in shaping the land governance strategies by women. We explore and examine the pathways through which women access information and knowledge for developing more sustainable and resilient governance strategies. We further argue that pursuing sustainable development goals for women’s empowerment and resilience in the FLW systems while working within an essentialised gender framework will have limited positive impact. A sensitivity and responsiveness to knowledge production processes, contextual gender and power relations could help create inclusive and adaptable development interventions and governance frameworks.

**Keywords:** FLW systems governance, gender, indigenous knowledge systems, intersectionality