

INDIAN WOMEN



Photo: Käthe Meetsen

First South and Central American Indian Women's Gathering Held in Lima

(Perú) The First South and Central American Indian Women's Meeting was held March 25-27 and hosted by the Interethnic Association for the Development of the Peruvian Amazon (AIDSESP) with support from the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA). The organizing commission included active participation of indigenous women from Ecuador and SAIC.

The participants, women from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Perú, stressed the importance of this event for Indian women throughout the Americas. "We, indigenous women, are progressing along with Indian men and our children in our struggle for rights to: land and the control over natural resources, traditional forms of law, autonomy and self-government, as well as against forced sterilization and all forms of exploitation, oppression and discrimination."

The conference presented an opportunity for Indian women to foster solidarity with Siriono, Mozatene, Chiman, Guaraní, and Mgeno people of Bolivia, who shared information with the other participants about their 36 day march from the Bolivian Amazon to the capital of La Paz, to demand legal titles to their lands. Ashaninka women from Peru told of their continued enslavement today. The Yalalteca people of Mexico, the Mayas of Guatemala and the Nahuatl of El Salvador spoke about their struggles against wealthy landowners.

In this first meeting, organizational experiences were exchanged, solidarity and sisterhood was strengthened, and the organizational process for the coordination of work among Indian women was begun.

The following was written by SAIIC Board Member, Wara Alderete, on her return from the conference in Lima.

I have just returned from Lima, Peru where I attended the First South and Central American Indigenous Women's Conference. I would like to share with you my enthusiasm about the historical significance of the meeting.

As women occupying positions of responsibility within our organizations, or as community leaders, we had an opportunity to share a wealth of experiences such as the role that women play within our communities, the limitations that exist for the effective participation of Indian women in the decision-making process at the local, national and international level. Of utmost importance, we had the opportunity of developing together, concrete strategies for promoting the organization of Indian women.

It was agreed upon to build an international organization of indigenous women. We emphasize that our current priority is to work at the grassroots level, building step by step, to ensure that this process be truly representative and participatory.

Five task forces were formed and a coordinator for each task force was designated. We tried to avoid creating centralized structures that have yielded such harmful consequences in the past. At the same time, working in a decentralized way is a real challenge since a great input of resources will be needed for maintaining effective communication. This is a new experience and we expect that many adjustments will be needed along the way. Nevertheless, we feel satisfied that we are developing our own ways of organizing, with a spirit of solidarity, participation and honesty like our grandparents taught us.

It is worth noting that this was the first time that Indian women from South and Central America fully assumed the responsibility for organizing an international conference. Our brothers in Peru were amazed at the resources and support that the sisters from the organizing committee were able to gather. Among the accomplishments at the conference, for the first time in Peruvian history, Indian people were allowed into the House of Representatives (Senators), where we held the opening ceremony.

The sisters who managed the financial and organizational aspects of the conference are Shipibo and Aguaruna

Indian women from the Peruvian Amazon and deserve a great deal of credit as effective administrators and organizers. Quechua and Aymara women from the Peruvian highlands contributed work, experience and support.

Many obstacles lie in our path and we are well aware of them. We are also aware that we have responsibilities for our children and elders; that we are strong and have demonstrated our abilities, although often this has not been acknowledged or recognized. We realize that we need to improve our capabilities and that many other sisters must have the opportunity to acquire experience and training, so we can better work for the well-being of our people.

Not all the sisters we expected to participate were able to. Some sisters were prevented from participating because of restrictions and/or fear of the cholera epidemic. We received word from some organizations that they do not have women who are ready or experienced in attending international meetings. We will make special efforts to have direct contact with the women in these organizations since we believe there must be hard-working women supporting these brothers, but perhaps their work and capacity is not being recognized.

It is our goal in the near future to support and promote meetings, seminars, and training courses for (and by) indigenous women at the local and national level. The next South and Central American Indigenous Women's meeting will be held in Guatemala, but the date is contingent on the organizational progress at local and national levels. As we have said, we want to put our efforts and resources in organizing at the grassroots level.

In the spirit of our Mother Earth!



Photo: Käthe Meeten