(Virtual) P223 / Recognition without Authority? Indigenous, Tribal and Adivasi Women in Environmental Governance and Policy

Topic : Equity, Gender, Inclusion and the Diversity in Public Policy

Chair : Pushpika Bara (Jawaharlal Nehru University)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Who protects the environment, and who governs it? What happens when policies celebrate indigenous/tribal/adivasi (ITA) women's ecological knowledge and environmental practices, but withhold their autonomy and authority? (ITA deliberately used for contested/ context-specific categories) This panel critically examines recognition, authority, and governance, focusing on the paradox of ITA women's recognition as environmental protectors, alongside their exclusion from decision-making processes.

As climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation intensify, environmental policies increasingly seek to incorporate local, indigenous, and traditional knowledge. However, authority over environmental governance and policy remain largely concentrated within states, markets, and transnational/supranational institutions (Bumpus and Liverman, 2008; Biermann et al., 2012). Existing scholarships document ITA women's diverse contributions to environmental protection, from forest patrols in Odisha (Mohanty and Suresh 2026) to Garo women's struggles in Bangladesh (Datta et al. 2026) and Tukano biocultural monitoring in Colombia (Amaya et al. 2025). Despite their increasing recognition as pivotal to environmental protection globally (Singh et al. 2026; UN Climate Security Mechanism [CSM], 2026), their autonomy and authority remains limited.

Recognition can cast ITA women as virtuous custodians, adding responsibility without authority (Arora-Jonsson 2011), while rendering their knowledge legible for state and market use (Scott 1998; Nadasdy 1999; Coulthard 2014), risking extraction and romanticization. At the same time, land dispossession, displacement and extractive concessions steadily erode their knowledge and practices. Three gaps emerge from literature: policies recognize knowledge without autonomy and authority; they render it legible without safeguards against extraction or romanticization; and evidence that locally controlled governance conserves better (Dawson et al., 2021) is rarely disaggregated by gender or linked to policy design.

Against this backdrop, the panel investigates five interrelated questions:

How do ITA women's ecological knowledge and practices interact with environmental governance and policy?

How do land dispossession, displacement and extractive concessions erode them?

Does recognition result in extractive and/or romanticized inclusion and under what conditions does it yield autonomy and authority?

What does gender-disaggregated evidence show about locally controlled governance?

Is a shift from participatory and co-developmental frameworks to shared authority and leadership the way forward?

The panel explores several hypotheses:

First, policy recognition alone may be insufficient to produce meaningful authority unless accompanied by institutional mechanisms that redistribute decision-making power.

Second, governance frameworks that value indigenous knowledge without addressing structural inequalities may facilitate inclusion without empowerment.

Third, locally controlled governance arrangements may generate more equitable and effective conservation outcomes when women exercise substantive leadership.

Finally, environmental protection outcomes are likely to be strongest where recognition, land rights, and governance authority are institutionalized together.

Bringing feminist political ecology, indigenous feminist, intersectional, and decolonial theories, into

conversation with public policy analysis, the panel seeks to shift focus from participation to autonomy and authority. Its scientific relevance lies in advancing comparative, gender-disaggregated, and South-South analyses of environmental governance while generating insights for emerging policy frameworks. By asking whether policy coherence on recognition is matched by authority to decide, the panel speaks to the policy topic. It welcomes interdisciplinary contributions from political ecology, law, anthropology, gender studies, public policy, and related fields.

CALL FOR PAPERS

Who protects the environment, and who governs it? What happens when policies celebrate indigenous/tribal/adivasi (ITA) women's ecological knowledge and environmental practices, but withhold their autonomy and authority? (ITA deliberately used for contested/ context-specific categories). Contributions are invited from scholars, practitioners, legal experts, and activists to critically examine environmental governance and policy, focusing on ITA women.

As climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation intensify, environmental policies increasingly recognize indigenous and local knowledge as essential for conservation and sustainability. Yet environmental governance and decision-making authority often remain concentrated within states, markets, and transnational institutions. While ITA women are increasingly recognized as custodians of forests, biodiversity, water systems, seeds, and ecological knowledge, the questions remains whether recognition is translated into decision-making powers and if ITA women have actual influence over environmental governance and policy outcomes.

This panel invites papers that critically examine the relationship between recognition, authority, and governance in environmental governance and policy. The panel seeks contributions that move beyond documenting participation and representation to investigate the conditions under which ITA women exercise meaningful decision-making power in environmental governance. It is particularly interested in works that interrogate the gap between the recognition of their knowledge, of their contribution as protectors and the authority to govern.

The panel welcomes theoretical, empirical, methodological, comparative, and policy-oriented submissions from political ecology, public policy, gender studies, anthropology, sociology, law, indigenous studies, and related disciplines. The panel particularly encourages papers engaging with feminist political ecology, indigenous feminist, intersectional, and decolonial approaches.

Contributions may explore the following and other related themes:

ITA women's ecological knowledge, environmental practices, and contributions to conservation and sustainability;

Recognition, participation, representation, authority, leadership, and governance in environmental policy vis-a-vis ITA women;

Land dispossession, displacement, extractive concessions and their impact on ITA women's ecological knowledge and environmental protection practices;

The appropriation, extraction, commodification, or romanticization of ITA women's knowledge and practices;

Gendered dimensions of community-based conservation, climate adaptation, natural resource governance, and biodiversity protection;

Comparative analyses of environmental governance across the Global South;

Gender-disaggregated evidence on locally controlled governance and conservation outcomes;

Institutional, legal, and policy arrangements that facilitate or constrain ITA women's autonomy, authority and leadership;

Pathways for moving from consultation and participation towards shared authority, co-governance, indigenous self-determination, and women-led environmental governance.

By bringing together diverse disciplinary and regional perspectives, the panel aims to advance comparative and gender-disaggregated understandings of environmental governance while generating practical insights

for more equitable and effective policy design. It seeks to rethink ITA women's pivotal role in environmental protection from governance and policy perspectives through the lens of authority, asking not only who is recognized as an environmental protector, but who has the power to govern it.