

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN INDIGENOUS INFORMATION PRESERVATION: A GENDER-SENSITIVE PERSPECTIVE IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Women have long served as custodians of indigenous knowledge systems, yet their contributions remain underrepresented in information management scholarship. This article explores the multifaceted role of indigenous women in preserving cultural memory, ecological knowledge, languages, and material culture. Drawing on reports from UNESCO, UN Women, and peer-reviewed studies, the paper highlights how women act as transmitters of language, caretakers of traditional ecological knowledge, and sustainers of oral traditions. It also examines contemporary challenges, including land dispossession, migration, and gendered exclusion from decision-making which threaten the survival of these knowledge systems. This article concludes with recommendations for gender-sensitive, community-led approaches to information management that uphold women's rights as knowledge holders.

Keywords: Indigenous knowledge, Gender, Information management, Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Cultural preservation, Women's role.

Introduction

A fundamental requirement for education and knowledge acquisition is to get acquainted with how to find information and use it proficiently in order to contribute to

development. Indigenous knowledge systems are dynamic repositories of cultural identity, environmental stewardship and historical continuity. Among the key actors in sustaining these systems are women, who often act as intergenerational transmitters of knowledge. From oral storytelling and craft traditions to ecological practices and language preservation, women's roles are pivotal yet historically marginalized in mainstream research on information management. Recent policy developments, such as UNESCO's recommendations on language revitalization and the Convention on Biological Diversity's recognition of traditional knowledge, call for a closer examination of women's contributions to indigenous information preservation United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2023) Current Bibliographic Database (CBD) (2024) Smith, (2012) Odora Hoppers, (2002).

Indigenous knowledge preservation is deeply embedded in social practice and environmental interaction rather than formal documentation. Berkes (2018) emphasizes that traditional ecological knowledge is transmitted through long-term observation, practice, and belief systems, making it inseparable from everyday life. Such knowledge systems therefore require preservation approaches that respect their holistic and experiential nature. The study looks at; indigenous women primary agents of knowledge transmission, indigenous women custodians of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), indigenous women preserve material culture as an embodiment of knowledge and ascertain the challenges faced by indigenous women in the advancement of TEK, and possible strategies to be employed to encourage indigenous women active involvement in TEK

Methods of Indigenous Information Preservation

Most indigenous knowledge are shared through intergeneration transfer, though at times the elders are reluctant to share because of fear of indigenous laws of ownership not being respected Zwane, & Masipa,(2021). This is more prevalence among the traditional system where there is secrecy by the healer, this is in order to retain his client and maintain his esteem. Despite this, there are diverse methods of Indigenous Information Preservation, they can be through traditional methods, and community-centered approaches to modern digital and legal methods. These methods are often summarized in educational materials like Power Point presentation so as to safeguard cultural heritage and knowledge system.

Traditional and community methods can take the form of folkways, storytelling, myths, mores rituals which are normally transmitted from one generation to the other. Da Silva, Pereira,& Amorim (2023) aligned that indigenous knowledge is conveyed in folktales and applied to various social contexts .Cultural practices involves daily activities in the community; ways of cooking, dressing, salutations farming etc. Also there exists community archives mainly located at the eldest persons resident where documents and photos of those who have joined the ancestors were kept for reference purposes on any event.

Modern and institutional methods comprise documentation and archiving of information gotten through observation, interview, and surveys. Those information can also be digitized for broader access and long term uses. A group of scholars developed

the theory of Decolonial Epistemology (AnibalQuijiano, Walter Mignolo, Enrique Dussel, Boaventura de Sousa Santos and others) in the late 20th and early 21st century. The theory challenges the dominance of western ways of knowing and seeks to recover, validate, and foreground knowledge systems from the Global South and marginalized communities. It critiqued the continuing legacy of colonialism in shaping culture, power, and knowledge. In Canada, cultural memory institutions bear ethical responsibility to respect and promote indigenous knowledge despite if copyright question are answered or pertinent indigenous systems of laws are yet explained, Camille, Roy.& Gretchen (2021).

Role of Women in Indigenous Information Preservation

Before the advent of written texts (hardcopies) and softcopies (electronic learning's), women has peculiar means of knowledge preservation and cultural transmission. For Guterres, (2022), women are guardians of traditional food and medicines, champion the safeguarding of indigenous language and cultures, preserve the environment and indigenous people's human right through the use of indigenous knowledge. Managing indigenous knowledge is an important and useful input in the management of sustainable developments. Achebe & Margret (2018), noted that women played important role in the society, religious, political, social and economic sphere; exhibiting control over key aspects of life. Most of their roles were explained below;

Women as Custodians of Indigenous Knowledge, Language Transmission and Socialization

Women are frequently the first teachers of indigenous languages, transmitting vocabulary, songs, and oral histories to children in domestic and communal settings. Their role ensures the survival of endangered languages and underpins intergenerational cultural continuity (UNESCO, 2023).

Ecological and Medicinal Knowledge

Indigenous women hold significant expertise in biodiversity management, seed selection, food preparation, and medicinal practices. This traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is essential for local sustainability and increasingly recognized in climate adaptation policies (UN Women, 2024).

In many African societies, women's environmental knowledge constitutes a critical component of indigenous information systems, particularly in agriculture, health, and resource management, yet this knowledge remains underrepresented in formal LIS structures (Ngulube, 2018).

Material Culture and Memory Systems

Craft traditions such as weaving, basketry, and beadwork act as encoded archives of cultural history and cosmology. These practices are not only aesthetic but also pedagogical, transmitting ecological and social knowledge through symbolic motives and production processes (Lopez, 2022).

Community Memory and Oral Traditions

Through ceremonies, storytelling, and genealogical preservation, women act as

memory keepers of social and cultural identity. These roles often operate outside formal archives, reinforcing the need for flexible information management systems that accommodate community-based forms of knowledge preservation (Kouritzin & Nakagawa, 2021).

Women as Primary Agents of Knowledge Transmission

The secondary data suggests that indigenous women remain central to the intergenerational preservation of knowledge systems. UNESCO (2023) highlights that in more than 60% of documented indigenous communities; women serve as the primary transmitters of language and oral traditions within households and community ceremonies. Similarly, Kouritzin and Nakagawa (2021) found that mothers and grandmothers function as the "first language teachers", embedding cultural vocabulary and narratives into early socialization. This evidence confirms that linguistic survival is closely tied to women's caregiving roles, making them indispensable actors in language revitalization strategies.

Custodian of Traditional Ecological Knowledge

A recurring theme in the literature is the ecological dimension of women's knowledge. UN Women (2024) reports that women in indigenous communities manage between 60-80% of subsistence food production globally, a responsibility that provides them with deep familiarity with seeds, soils, biodiversity, and medicinal plants. Case studies from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa illustrate strategies, such as seed banking, drought-resistant farming, and forest conservation (Lopez, 2022; CBD, 2024).

This reinforces the argument that women are not merely passive holders of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) but active innovators in environmental stewardship.

Material Culture as Information Archives

Secondary studies on weaving, beadwork, and pottery shows that indigenous women use material culture as mnemonic systems to preserve social and cosmological knowledge. Lopez (2022) demonstrated how weaving patterns, textile motifs, and culinary practices in West Africa suggest that they act as repositories of history and genealogy (UNPFII, 2023). These findings challenge conventional definitions of archives, broadening the scope of information management to include embodied and aesthetic forms of knowledge transmission.

Community Memory and Oral Histories

Evidence also indicates that women serve as custodians of collective memory through oral histories, rituals, and kinship narratives. Christen and Anderson (2019) argued that women often act as informal archivists, curating, and mediating stories that sustain community identity. However, these roles are frequently overlooked in mainstream archival science, which privileges written and digital documentation. This gap underscores the need for de-colonial approaches in information management that validates oral and community-based preservation system.

Challenges associated with Indigenous Knowledge Preservation among women

Despite their contributions, women's knowledge transmission is endangered by

structural pressures. Land dispossession and extractive industries disrupt ecological contexts; migration and urbanization weaken intergenerational transmission; schooling in dominant languages displaces indigenous languages, and gender inequities restrict women's participation in policy making (United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues [UNPFII], 2023). Together, these dynamics contribute to both the loss of content and the erosion of social processes that sustain knowledge.

Bergh (2019) stated that cultural concerns such as established tradition inflexible views dominates in the indigenous knowledge preservation because most women are bound to a particular way of life in most cases to get first hand information beyond their locality because of cultural norms and traditions especially in areas considered the holy place of men. Women are believed to pollute the sacred arena especially during monthly blood and birthing blood. Globalization, modern education and technology undermining oral transmission and intellectual property laws failing to protect communal knowledge from cooperate exploitation and cultural shifts like migration and lose of interest among youths the culture are transmitted to, which threatens its continuity and application, necessitating integration with modern framework. Indigenous people, Western scientists, and politicians still requires further improvement Ellam, Raymond-Yakoubian, Daniel,& Behe, (2022).

Despite their vital contribution, indigenous women's roles face systematic threats. UNPFII (2023) documents how land dispossession and extractive industries have disrupted ecological contexts where women's TEK thrives. Migration and urbanization further weaken inter-generational ties, while schooling in dominant

languages erodes the domestic domains where indigenous languages are spoken. Gender inequalities exacerbate these challenges, as women are often excluded from decision-making in formal cultural and environmental governance structures (CBD, 2024). Thus, while women remain at the heart of preservation practices, structural barriers compromise both the survival of contents and discontinuity of knowledge systems.

Strategies for Promoting Indigenous Information Preservation by Women

Steps towards Gender-Sensitive Information Management:

Community-led Archives and Language Revitalization

Programs that prioritize women's leadership in community archives and language schools enhance knowledge survival while empowering women as agents of preservation (UNESCO, 2023).

Integration of TEK in Climate Policy

International bodies increasingly recognize the value of women's Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) in biodiversity conservation and climate adaptation, urging gender-responsive participatory approaches (UN Women, 2024).

Ethical and Rights-Based Archival Practices

Effective information management requires adherence to principles of free, prior, and informed consent; collective custodianship; and culturally appropriate meta-data to respect indigenous epistemologies (Christian & Anderson, 2019).

Implications for Information Management

Indigenous women are not passive repositories of information but active managers of dynamic knowledge systems.

For information management: this implies a need to;

Expand definitions of archives to include oral, ecological, and material knowledge systems.

Recognize gendered dimensions of knowledge management, ensuring that preservation strategies are responsive to women's roles.

Prioritize community-led, rights-based approaches where women are positioned not as info mentees but as co-archivists and decision-makers.

General Recommendations

1. Women-led community archives and language programs must be prioritized.
2. TEK should be integrated into environmental assessment and related programs through gender-responsive participatory methods that treats women as knowledge holders and rights bearing partners.
3. Information management protocols should be developed such that it will recognize collective custodianship, include culturally appropriate meta-data/vocabulary, and enable community control over access and use.
4. Creation of enlightenment programmes to reduce the traditional system of secrecy by

the healer, aimed to retain his client and maintain his esteem, but rather be open for scientific verification to ascertain quality and give room for investigation and improvement.

5. Accesses to information irrespective of gender as women are caretakers of traditional ecological knowledge, and sustainers of oral traditions.

Conclusion

Women's roles in indigenous information preservation are vital for sustaining languages, ecological practices, cultural memory, and community resilience. However, these roles are threatened by social, economic, and political pressures that erode indigenous knowledge systems. To safeguard these contributions, information management must adopt community-led, gender-sensitive, and right-based approaches that recognize women not as passive participants but as active custodians of cultural heritage.

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