

New Investment Law in Peru Undermines Rights of Indigenous Women

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A new law in Peru encouraging investment in the country's extractive industries has reignited the debate on the lack of power indigenous women have in the mostly rural societies where they often live. The [International Indigenous Women's Forum](#), which drew more than 60 native women from across the world to Peru last month, highlighted this important issue.

The forum coincided with the approval of [Bill 3627/2013-PE](#) by the Peruvian Congress last month; the new law that has drawn sharp criticism from both human rights and environmental groups in the country and worldwide. The law restricts audits by the Ministry of Environment, changes ecologic zoning regulations, reduces the number of days for environmental impact studies to 45 and complicates the process that preserves natural areas.

Support for the law comes as Peru's political and business elites attempt to reassure foreign investors that the country's economy will maintain the [6 percent growth rate](#) it has averaged over the last 10 years, [amid signs](#) that the decade-long boom may be fizzling. Specifically, the legislation aims to stimulate Peru's sputtering mining industry — particularly copper and gold production — by creating a regulatory environment more favorable to resource extraction. It also occurs as many nations contend with ways to make the mining and oil extraction industry — primarily in Africa — more open so that income from those sources are distributed more equitably to the people and poverty is reduced.

Backlash against the Peruvian law has been passionate from representatives of Peru's indigenous population — [estimated in 2011](#) as approximately 13 million people — who are heavily dependent on natural resources and the surrounding environment.

“Instead of strengthening the environmental institutions, management and monitoring, these measures promote the extractive activities, reward those who violate the law, reduce fines and relax environmental standards,” the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs said in a [statement](#).

Throughout conservation and land management policy debates, the voices of indigenous women are notoriously overlooked, even when the discussions affect these populations directly.

“For too long, women in Peru and around the world have been excluded from decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods,” said Omaira Bolaños in a [press release](#). Bolaños is the Latin America regional program director of the [Rights and Resources Initiative](#), which is based in Washington and helps the world's indigenous people secure the rights to own, control and benefit from the natural resources they depend on. “Historically, governance of land and resources is one of these decisions, with perhaps the most far-reaching and devastating impact.”

Though female voices may have little to no say in policy forums overall, their role in managing and interacting with natural resources is often much greater than that of men. In rural areas of Peru, women make up a major portion of the agricultural work force and contribute to as much as [80 percent of household labor](#), including gathering water and firewood, tasks that require daily interaction with the natural environment.

Rural women's proximity to natural environments means they are [the most heavily impacted](#) by changing ecosystems, either as a result of misguided land management policies or climate change, as noted in a United Nations Environment Program report, "[Women at the Frontline of Climate Change](#)."

"Because women are at the front lines in terms of dealing with the negative effects of climate change, their voices, perspectives and action are critical to adaptation planning, long-term sustainability and building resilience to shocks and long-term climate change impacts," Roger-Mark De Souza, the director of population, environmental security and resilience at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, said in an interview with PassBlue. "Adaptation plans and community resilience will not succeed without the input of rural indigenous women."

Support for the new law in Peru now leaves environmental and human-rights groups grasping for strategies to roll back its potentially dire effects.

"The best and perhaps the only way forward is to ensure compliance and enforcement of international norms and laws that protect the rights of indigenous peoples and particularly of women, whose equal participation at all levels of decision-making is crucial," Janis Alcorn said in an interview as director of country and regional programs for Rights and Resources Initiative. "Without ensuring adoption of these principles in all countries' legal frameworks, any international climate change mitigation and adaptation strategy will fail to take off."