

Indigenous Women Speak out to End Violence against Women

Contributed by Administrator
Friday, 28 November 2008

We, women of the world, commemorate the 25th of November to remind everyone that violence against women is a persistent lingering fact despite the advances that had been made to promote, protect and fulfill women's human rights. This day is a reiteration of women's assertion to a violence-free life. Women seized this day after November 25, 1960 to highlight the violence that women face day after day. That day was when the three Mirabal sisters were killed for their active participation in the resistance against human rights violations in the Dominican Republic. In recognition of this campaign by women, the UN General Assembly proclaimed this day in 1999 the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women to highlight the violence that women face for the assertion of their rights, as women, as individuals and as members of communities in struggle. This year's campaign to end violence against women comes 60 years after the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states in Article 1 and 2 that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status."

Sixty years after, how are indigenous women's human rights? As we celebrate this year 2008 as the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) we are reminded of the significant achievements of women in setting and developing international standards of women's human rights such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) adopted in 1979 and other documents from the UN processes including the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action (1993), the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), the Cairo Programme of Action (1994), the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action in 1995, while we take stock of the legacy left by our mothers and grandmothers which continues to inspire us to promote and protect our identities and rights as indigenous women and peoples. Indigenous women have not been remiss in the struggle for the recognition and protection of human rights including women's rights. Indigenous women have been actively engaging, creating and maximizing spaces and opportunities in their organizations, communities, local to national governments and regional and international arenas, including the different processes of the United Nations to claim their rights as women and as indigenous peoples. In this respect, we, indigenous women with indigenous peoples the world over, proudly celebrate 2008 as the first year of the adoption by the United Nations of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples - a milestone in indigenous peoples' collective struggles for almost two decades. We will continue to uphold and promote the UNDRIP in our struggles for gender equality and justice. Despite the women's human rights framework, however, indigenous women still face disproportionate discrimination and violations of their human rights with the enforcement of neoliberal globalisation, militarisation and global war on terror, and fundamentalism. On the ground, neoliberal globalisation come as development aggression and extractive industries where our land and resources are plundered by leading capitalist countries, their corporations and financial institutions and where we are called to sacrifice for the sake of development and the majority. Hunger, poverty and diseases have crept into the very homelands that our grandparents sustained to provide us source of food, medicines and natural resources. Today, our people are sick and so are our lands. From self-reliant and subsistence communities, we are pushed to market-oriented production and development. As our governments hurry to achieve their Millenium Development Goals (MDG) targets, we continue to be denied basic social services for the health and education of our children with privatisation policies and budget prioritisation for defense and debt payment such as the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Policy. In Kazakhstan for example, maternal mortality has reportedly increased instead of decrease from 49.9 in 2001 to 55.5 in 2006 basically due to the lack of government support for maternal and child care. Militarisation and the global war on terror punch on our daily life and security as we are regarded as terrorists or enemies of the state when we assert our collective rights to land, resources and self-determination, and our individual rights to life. Our leaders and organisations which are our institution of empowerment and liberation are seen as threats to states and/or power holders hence have become targets of the state's security forces. Our identities and indigenous practices are systematically disintegrated by the imposed culture of modernisation, commercialisation and individualism making us objects for sale and for profit. Moreover, sexual violence and rape of indigenous women and girls, aside from legal and extralegal strategies have been used to weaken our resistance to oppression and rights violations. The massive recruitment of armed forces for the global war on terror especially in the Pacific has brought home angry and disturbed husbands, brothers and fathers. In Guam, violence against women has reportedly increased during the homecoming of the six thousand-member naval and air forces.

As indigenous women we face various forms and levels of discrimination and violence by virtue of our sex, gender, ethnicity, location and status as minority or second-class citizens in society. As indigenous women, we continue to be denied of our ancestral land rights that ensure our economic, political and socio-cultural survival, identity and dignity. In the Philippines, mining applications have taken more than 60% of the country's land area, and more than 50% of this belongs to indigenous peoples' territories. Indigenous women and communities asserting their rights to land and natural resources suffer the impact of militarisation and repression that is used by the state to quell people's resistance against the plunder of their land and resources. Women who stood in the forefront of a barricade to stop the entrance of mining

equipments in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines were physically pushed, hoisted, threatened and actually attacked by those employed by the mining company. In one case, one woman in the barricade was physically hoisted by her own son who was employed by the mining company. In Indonesia, a woman leader against a marble mining company in West Timor, has not been able to enter her home community due to threats on her life and her family's security by people sympathetic to the company. In Sarawak, in the Malaysian part of the island of Borneo, sexual harassment, abuse and rape cases against Penan women, including school girls who relied on the companies' transportation service to get to school, by employees of logging companies have been reported. Several cases of pregnancy have been reported by the Penan communities as a consequence of rape and sexual abuse by the workers of logging companies. However, no action was taken either by the police or government, cases having been totally denied for the sake of development projects and goodwill of logging companies. In North-east India, the Armed Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA) has allowed a culture of impunity on the State armed forces against the rights and lives of the indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. Countless cases of gross violations of human rights, including massive raping of women and girls in public and in sacred places have been almost of daily occurrences. Rape has been institutionalised as part of the counterinsurgency programme in the region. Civil society groups have been up against this Act such as the case of Irom Sharmila who has been fasting for years now for the repeal of the Act. However, the State has responded to this with increasing militarisation. The persistent military rule in Burma has been the root cause of continued sexual violence against women and girls committed by military personnel with impunity and outright extermination of indigenous communities in Burma. While running for safety and refuge outside Burma, women and girls are again faced with similar violence in neighbouring countries including Thailand, India and Malaysia where they work in exploitative conditions for their survival. With no information of the destination, women are vulnerable to trafficking. Kachin women for example have reportedly been trafficked into China and sold as wives or sex workers. A growing number of indigenous women are forced into prostitution and sex trafficking as in the case of indigenous women in Thailand, Burma, Philippines, India and Nepal. In North-east India, there have been reports of heavy increase in human trafficking cases carried out by clandestine operators posing as established employment agencies in collaboration with southeast Asian agencies. One such case came to public light with the intervention by human rights groups in the region and mainland India where five (5) girls belonging to Zeliangrong Naga community were repatriated from Kaula Lumpur on 10th October, 2008. In a press conference, they revealed under what kind of conditions they were kept in and how some of them were attempted to be raped by gangsters of the so-called Abel & Leo Pvt. Limited agency. They were first taken to Singapore and then to Kaula Lumpur where their passports were confiscated by the agency. They also reported that hundreds of other women belonging to the region are under similar situation. Women with low level of income and education have been vulnerable to such cases. It is a condition aggravated by the prolonged militarisation that has paralysed or marginalised both development initiatives by the State as well as traditional occupations where women are chief players. Lack of opportunities to education, employment and other alternatives to sustain families and their own lives, young women have become easy targets for traffickers. Customary laws and practices that uphold and protect women's rights are gradually if not systematically eroded due to the imposition of dominant economic and socio-cultural systems on indigenous peoples' since colonisation. These include, among others, the practice of equal distribution of inheritance between women, passing down to daughters the properties of the mother and of fathers to sons among the Kadazandusun of Sabah, Malaysia, the right to participation in decision-making on equal terms with men in many indigenous communities of Sabah, Malaysia and Ngato Toro in Indonesia, the roles of women as priestess, healers or social specialists, and women's role in dispute settlement among the Ata-Manobo and the Higaonon in Mindanao, Philippines. We assert that these must be retained and strengthened. On the other hand we recognise and keep in mind the words of UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences (UNSRVAW) Yakin Erturk, that the marginalisation of indigenous peoples from the socio-economic fabric of 'mainstream' society as well as the prevailing patriarchal culture that permeates indigenous cultures increases the vulnerability of indigenous women to violence and discrimination. We affirm the need to address patriarchy in culture and will continue to define and design strategies and approaches that ensure gender equality without prejudice to collective interests. We take on the challenge posed by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, Chairperson of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues to bring the human rights norms to local communities and deconstruct religions and culture. In our battle against discrimination based on our gender, identities and social status, we take as our inspiration the words of UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous Peoples, S. James Anaya on the need to strengthen indigenous women's voices so that they can articulate their concerns and priorities. On the occasion of the 16 days of activism to end violence against women, we stand firm on our rights and strongly denounce the different forces of neoliberal economic globalisation, development aggression, militarisation, fundamentalisms and the global war on terror which continue to impede the realisation and enjoyment of our rights and full development as women and as indigenous peoples. We uphold the following recommendations at the 15-16 October 2008 Asia-Pacific Regional Consultation on Violence Against Indigenous Women in Delhi, India -- a gathering of 25 indigenous women, along with 36 women working on the issue of violence against indigenous women from 26 countries (Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Cook Islands, Fiji Islands, Guam, India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Kyrgyz Republic, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Switzerland, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey and USA). The women brought their specific cases from their respective communities and countries to the UNSRVAW, Yakin Erturk and the UN SR on the Situation of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of Indigenous People, S. James Anaya.

a.. As part of their obligations to international human rights law, States should recognise indigenous peoples, adopt in national laws and ensure effective implementation of international standards such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination Against Women. States should be accountable to the people by ensuring that the activities of international finance institutions (IFIs) and transnational corporations over which they exercise influence or control are not contradictory to these established human rights norms and standards.

a.. For the UN Special Rapporteurs on violence against women, its causes and consequences, Yakin Ertürk and the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, S. James Anaya to come out with joint thematic reports or studies, that address the intersectionality of discrimination and violence against indigenous women which should facilitate bridging the gaps between national and international standards. The participation of indigenous women in the whole process should be ensured.

a.. International financial institutions, corporate and non-state actors should respect indigenous peoples' right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and all other internationally recognized human rights standards in the conduct of development projects in indigenous lands and territories.

a.. For civil society to ensure full involvement of indigenous women in negotiations, consultations and decision-making processes and enable access by indigenous women and their organisations to resources for their development and empowerment, and to programmes that build the capacity and skills of indigenous women and their organisations.

Finally, we would like to enjoin everyone to the 16 Days of activism to end violence against women, create local actions, make our voices heard through public statements and rallies, share your stories as we raise the awareness of women and the public towards the elimination of violence against women in communities, farms, workplaces, public places, homes and everywhere. Let us share these to our networks! Signed by: Innabuyog

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