

First Asian Indigenous Women's Conference
"Sharing Commonalities and Diversities,
Forging Unity Towards Indigenous Women's Empowerment"

hosted by Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center, Inc.

"To enable Asian indigenous women to come together to share their situation among themselves, understand more fully how global developments are impacting on them, and collectively define what they can do to address their common concerns."

Background

Indigenous women play very vital roles in ensuring the continuing existence of indigenous peoples, cultures and biodiversity. They are the main food producers in subsistence economies which persist in many indigenous people's communities. Their reproductive roles of bearing and rearing the future generation are done amidst situations of poverty and dire lack of health and social services.

They are capable resource managers and protectors of the environment. The maintenance of environmental integrity is directly proportional to their effectivity as producers and reproducers. Resistance against environmentally destructive "development" projects included them as major players.

However, in spite of such crucial roles, they remain one of the most marginalized, discriminated, and oppressed sections of society. Capitalist-patriarchal systems and ideology has reinforced further the patriarchal aspects of indigenous traditions and culture. The mainstream development paradigm with economic growth as its be-all and end-all, sidelined subsistence economies which are sustained by indigenous women.

They are in the margins as far as decision-making is concerned. Their multiple burdens in production and reproduction are rendered invisible so much so that services and technology which can help lighten their burdens are inconsequential.

Asian indigenous peoples compose the main bulk of the indigenous all over the world. Out of a total of around 200 million indigenous, 150 million are found in Asia. In spite of this number, they are lagging behind in terms of projecting their own issues and having the governments and non-government organizations address their concerns. Their participation in international conferences are networking even among themselves is extremely limited. The very few who get to be heard are the indigenous men.

The women suffer a bigger disadvantage because most of them do not have or are not part of organizations which articulate or address their issues. There is a high rate of illiteracy among them and their multiple burdens virtually tie them down such that they can hardly find time for other involvements. Their leadership potentials are not harnessed. They are victims of stereotyping and discrimination not only because they are indigenous but also because they are women.

It is important to provide opportunities for them wherein they talk about their situation and understand more deeply what brought them into this. This is what the "First Asian Indigenous Women's Conference" is all about. It is an initial attempt to enable women who have rarely been heard, to be together and gather strength from each other.

In the frantic search for alternative development models which are sustainable, indigenous women who

have developed and nurtured sustainable agricultural practices may have something to offer. This conference is not just going to be a sharing of issues and concerns. It will also be an opportunity to listen to what Asian indigenous women can say about their own small-scale, sustainable development practices. It will be a chance to understand their spiritual relationship with nature which undergirds their sustainable practices. It will be a chance to hear what they are doing to bring about changes in their situation and their society.

There are major international events which also make this gathering very important. 1993 has been declared by the United Nations as the International Year for the World's Indigenous People. In 1995, ten years after the culmination of the UN Decade of Women in 1985 (Nairobi conference), the Fourth World Conference on Women will also be held in Beijing, China. If the Asian indigenous women will be successful in building linkages among themselves, they may have a better chance of becoming visible.