

Putting Together a Picture of Asian Indigenous Women

The stories of Asian indigenous women about their lives and problems are as varied as they are numerous. Written accounts of indigenous women in Asia are found in a number of sources. These include news and feature articles, proceedings of conferences on women where indigenous women themselves are able to tell their own stories, special issues on women of indigenous peoples' publications, and other assorted books and articles. In most publications on indigenous peoples, indigenous women are hardly ever mentioned as a special sector. Even publications on the situation of women in general seldom tackle the added dimension of indigenous women. Available materials on indigenous women are nowhere as substantial or comprehensive as we would like. However, they are sufficient for us to be able to draw a picture in broad strokes, or to come up with an initial overview of certain patterns and trends that tie together the complex situation of the indigenous women in Asia.

It is clear from the start that Asian indigenous women occupy an extremely disadvantaged position in society. They are victims of multiple forms of oppression because of the fact that they are indigenous and they are women, added to the fact that majority of them are farmers or workers belonging to the most exploited classes in society. In Taiwan, for instance, indigenous women are called "third class citizens" because of their inferior status in relation to men and in relation to non-indigenous people, those belonging to the dominant Han culture in Taiwanese society.

Women who are at the same time indigenous people, experience discrimination and racism from the dominant culture and nation state. On one hand, their status as indigenous people is not recognized by the state within which they find themselves. On the other hand, it is their distinctness as indigenous people which is used as justification for government policies of assimilation, integration, resettlement, transmigration, or militarization. These policies are used not only as a means of erasing their existence as indigenous peoples but also to dispossess them of their rich ancestral land which is the basis of their culture and survival. In the most extreme cases, these state policies amount to cultural genocide or ethnocide as in the case of the indigenous peoples of Nagaland, the Chittagong Hill Tracts and Burma.

In addition, indigenous women find themselves living within traditional and largely patriarchal societies which dictate that the woman is subordinate to the man. From birth, females are considered inferior to males. An indigenous woman is viewed as being there to bear children, to serve her father, her brother and later her husband and her family, including her in-laws in some cases. In most cases, women do not have any property rights, or if they do, they cannot inherit these rights. In the few matriarchal or matrilineal societies such as the Lahu and Karen in Thailand, the hill tribes of Cambodia or the Amis in Taiwan, the women generally have more control over property, resources and production, and there is a fairer division of labor between the sexes. However, these women eventually lose their relatively egalitarian status as a result of the erosion of traditional indigenous culture. Conversion to Islam or Christian religion has further weakened the position of women and reinforced their subordinate status in relation to men.

Indigenous women are often excluded from roles of political leadership both in indigenous socio-political structures and in structures imposed by the state. Seldom are they consulted on political matters concerning the community, much less are they involved in actual decision-making which is usually done in structures or institutions dominated by men such as in the traditional village council. Women are not allowed to hold positions of leadership at the village level which is usually passed down from father to son.

Women play a primary role in production in indigenous communities in Asia which are largely subsistence agricultural communities. Indigenous women in Asia engage in swidden farming or plough cultivation in settled, irrigated or terraced fields. Women usually bear the brunt of the work in the fields such as hoeing, transplanting and weeding. Farming by indigenous women is usually augmented by other productive activities such as foraging, fishing and handicrafts like weaving, knitting, basketry and embroidery. In hunting and gathering societies, it is usually the women who forage for food and other forest products while the men do the hunting.

There is also now an increasing number of indigenous women migrating to urban centers in search for work as laborers in the formal and informal sectors. As farmers or as laborers, indigenous women are exploited by the propertied classes. The mere fact that they are women aggravates the oppression and exploitation they experience as members of the working classes and as indigenous peoples. In addition, almost all household chores and child-rearing work are done by the woman.

It is against this backdrop of discrimination and oppression of indigenous women that the phenomenon of globalization has come in to further complicate the problem. Globalization has encroached in varying degrees into the local economies of the different countries in Asia. Nevertheless, pressures of the global market are felt even in the most remote communities of indigenous people, with profound and intense impact on the indigenous women.

Globalization seeks the removal of national barriers to allow multinational corporations (MNCs) maximized profits through free and open access to natural resources. In most cases, the land on which indigenous peoples live is where much of the world's remaining natural resources are still found. Sadly, it is this natural wealth in indigenous peoples territories which has now become the target for exploitation and commercialization by MNCs.

On the ground, globalization comes in the form of mining and logging operations, dam construction and other energy projects, agriculture for export, inflow of imported goods and crops, tourism development projects such as national parks and golf courses, agricultural plantations and industrial estates, among others. While MNCs are clearly the winners in the process of globalization, there are also clear losers - among them the indigenous peoples whose land and resources are ravaged in the globalization race.

The particular impacts of globalization on the indigenous women of Asia are profound and far-reaching. Globalization impacts on women in the various roles they play in life: as productive forces in society, as child-bearers and rearers, and as vital members of indigenous communities.

The loss of land due to incursions by MNCs, government projects or settlers into indigenous

territories is crucial in deciding the fate of the indigenous women. Displaced from their ancestral territories and their production base, the affected indigenous peoples are economically and culturally dislocated. With the loss of their land, women lose control over the natural resources which have been the source of their survival since birth. Indigenous women are marginalized from their integral role in agricultural production.

Agricultural production was traditionally very much in the hands of women who spent most of their time working in the fields to produce food for their family's consumption and other needs. Now, production of crops for export in plantations is tightly controlled by the managing MNCs and businessmen. Women are transformed into contractual workers on these plantations. For example in Malaysia, the mushrooming of big monocrop plantations using mechanized methods, chemical fertilizer and pesticides has displaced rural women from their farms. Aside from agriculture, other means of subsistence livelihood are likewise affected such as fishing, foraging, hunting, livestock raising and small handicrafts, still to the disadvantage of indigenous women. From being important productive forces, they are reduced to being dependents of their husbands or menfolk.

Production of food for export, monocrop production of high value crops for the market, and importation of food staples in line with the policies of globalization have had the overall effect of degrading the environment and threatening the food security of the people in the rural areas, most especially, indigenous peoples and women. The effects range from the loss of soil fertility, massive land erosion, the pollution of water aquifers, loss of natural enemies to pests and the loss of biodiversity due to the use of fewer certified seed varieties. As a result, indigenous women who are primarily involved in agriculture are unable to produce the food needed by their families and fall into the trap of commercialized agricultural production for export.

Poverty, dislocation from their ancestral land and marginalization from subsistence agriculture have pushed thousands upon thousands of indigenous women to migrate to urban centers, in search of other livelihood opportunities. Some try their luck as migrant workers or overseas workers, while others cross national borders as refugees retreating from the armed military repression in their homelands.

In the cities, indigenous women have difficulties finding employment because of the prevailing discrimination against indigenous people and women, and the inherent lack of employment opportunities in underdeveloped countries in Asia. Some are able to find low-level jobs in the formal economy as workers in plantations, factories, hotels or other establishments. Others are not as fortunate as to get regular employment. They survive mainly through the informal economy, making do with odd jobs when they can find them, working as domestic servants, waitresses, sales girls, laundry women, pulling rickshaw, construction workers, etc. Most end up underemployed, or unemployed, living below-poverty lives in the city slums.

As workers, indigenous women are exploited by the capitalists in terms of wages, benefits and working conditions. In addition, they experience discrimination in the workplace based on the fact that they are women and indigenous. They easily fall victim to flexible labor practices of capitalists which increase their exploitation. In the plantations, indigenous women workers usually receive lower wages than the men.

Many indigenous women are forced into prostitution in the cities. Unscrupulous people out to

make money by exploiting the poor women engage in sex-trafficking of women and children. A particularly serious case is that of the refugee indigenous women of Burma who have fled the excessively abusive military operations in their homeland and have gone to live in Thailand. These women have lost everything and have nothing with which to earn a living. They easily fall prey to traffickers who make them prostitutes in Thai brothels. Many prostitutes in Thailand come from Burma, an estimated 90% of whom have HIV/AIDS. The numbers of prostituted indigenous women in the different Asian countries are astounding, reaching hundreds of thousands in countries like Thailand, India, and Taiwan.

Rising prostitution is largely a result of the poverty and landlessness of indigenous people in areas which have been taken over by exploiting multinational corporations, settlers or hostile government forces. In the countryside, it comes as a result of the influx of male workers into indigenous peoples lands. Men who have come to work in the plantations, logging companies or mining operations usually leave behind their wives and families back home and look towards the local women for sexual services. In Kalimantan, Indonesia, it is clear that prostitution arose with the coming of the logging company into indigenous territory.

An additional impact of the loss of land, marginalization of women from subsistence agriculture and the destruction on environment is the heavier workload taken on by the indigenous women in the home. The loss of water and forests due to mining, logging, plantations, or the declaration of parks and forest reservations make it difficult for women to maintain the needed supply of water and fuel in the home. They are forced to walk long distances to fetch heavy pails of water or to line up for many hours with other women in the few remaining natural water sources. Wood from forests is no longer available and they are forced to look for cash to buy commercial fuel. In addition, the lack of basic social services which are supposed to be provided by the government makes it more difficult for the indigenous women to maintain the welfare of the family.

There is a prevalent neglect by the government of the welfare of indigenous people as seen in the inadequate provision of social services. Health care, education, roads, communication networks, and utilities like water and electricity are usually the concern of the women in the community. Indigenous people generally have poorer health and less medical services available to them. For example in Burma, the indigenous peoples have the highest infant mortality, lowest levels of income, highest illiteracy rates, no access to basic health, education and social services in the country compared to other Burmese. In relation to men, women are also at a disadvantage healthwise. For instance in Nepal, life expectancy of females is 53 years which is 3 years lower than that of males.

In this era of globalization, the most common health problems encountered by indigenous women include inadequate health and medical services, miseducation and problems with western medicines, loss of indigenous medicines, promotion of expensive drugs leading to added expenses for the family, forced sterilization of women and other family planning operations, rise in the mortality of women and children due to hard physical labor even in times of pregnancy, and the health problems related to the use of toxic agro-chemicals in plantations and commercial gardens.

Cases of violence committed against indigenous women are also rising. Rape of women and children is a common and widespread occurrence, particularly in areas torn by war or armed conflict. The rape of women in war is as much a part of war as the killing of soldiers. The

general perception is that rape is a natural, normal or inevitable outcome of war. Among indigenous women, rape has come to be used by soldiers or even settlers as a weapon for the systematic repression and dislocation of the indigenous people.

Another aspect of violence is that committed against women migrant workers. Thousands of cases of physical, sexual, verbal and emotional abuse committed by employers against women migrant workers have been reported while even more remain unreported. The worst cases are those of women who have sold their land and properties to be able to pay their fare and placement fee to the recruiting agency, and who come home a lifeless corpse, a victim of abuse. In the Cordillera, Philippines, there is hardly a community now which does not have an overseas contract worker or migrant worker coming from their area. Stories of abuse and violence experienced by the indigenous women migrant workers of the Cordillera are common.

A particular concern at this point is the impact of globalization on the children of indigenous peoples. Among the most significant impacts are child malnutrition due to poverty, growing consumerism among the youth due to the creation of new needs, lack of education opportunities in the school and at home, loss of traditional and natural areas for children's recreation, neglect of children by parents who are forced to work in distant places, and child labor. In Thailand, for instance, many mothers are forced to find work in the city. They are taken out of the home and away from daily contact with their children. The mother's absence from the home leaves a large gap in the children's knowledge of traditional culture which is usually passed on by the mother through her practice. The break down of traditional cultural practices contribute to the breakdown of the family system with many marriages ending in separation or broken families. Children are growing up with many problems as a result of this difficult family situation.

The breakdown of traditional culture and beliefs of the indigenous people is a direct result of their integration into the dominant culture and the globalized market economy. Problems like immorality, drug addiction, alcoholism, opium trade, and suicides are on the rise in indigenous communities where traditional culture has been weakened. Traditional cultures of indigenous peoples are not only weakened but even commercialized to make money and to promote tourism. For the women, this has meant a loss of control over their culture. Traditional crafts made by women which used to provide them with a sense of pride and some income are taken over by businessmen who mass produce traditional designs and crafts for a profit.

Traditionally, indigenous women often act as healers or spiritual leaders in the community. They carry with them a wealth of indigenous knowledge about agriculture, herbal and traditional medicine. For instance, women have knowledge of indigenous seed varieties of rice and other plants. They know what kind of seeds and plants are necessary for ensuring a bountiful harvest, for providing the nutritional needs of the family, and for healing simple illnesses. The increasing control of biotechnology corporations over seeds used in agriculture is marginalizing the indigenous peasant women from this important role in the community.

The trends in the situation of Asian indigenous women outlined above clearly reveal a pattern of violation of the rights of indigenous women. Rights of women and indigenous people contained in several international human rights instruments are systematically violated in a myriad of ways. International instruments and conventions in relation to women include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Nairobi

Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. When it comes to indigenous peoples' rights, the United Nations Charter and other instruments like the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights declare that "all peoples have the right to self-determination." In addition, Conventions 107 and 169 of the International Labour Organization recognize the right of indigenous and tribal peoples to the control and ownership of their territories and lands.

It is precisely the experience of being violated, oppressed and exploited that has been the condition for an indigenous peoples movement to take shape. In Asia, indigenous peoples, including indigenous women, have waged life-and-death struggles against ethnocide, land dispossession and national oppression. They have set up organizations at all levels, from local to international, and have launched various activities in the defense of their land, life and resources.

The indigenous women have done their part, through participation in general community struggles as well as through setting up their own women's organizations and networks, locally and internationally. Worth mentioning are the Asian Indigenous Women's Network (AIWN) founded in 1993, the Innabuyog (Regional Federation of Cordillera Indigenous Women), the Indigenous Women's Network in Cambodia, the Naga Women's Union of Manipur, Naga Mothers' Association, the Indigenous Women's Forum in Jharkhand, the Karen Women's Organization, the Jhumma Peoples Network of the Asia-Pacific, the Ghumusar Mahila Sangathan, among others. Forms of action utilized by the indigenous women have ranged from political and confrontational protest actions to petitions, pickets, litigation and local self-help socio-economic projects.

The situation of the indigenous women of Asia today could not be farther from the picture of equality and human dignity envisioned in existing declarations of human rights, women's rights and indigenous peoples' rights. Indigenous women remain among the poorest, most violated, most oppressed, most scorned and most exploited sectors in society. Their situation is a dark picture of human misery painted by the powers-that-be who covet indigenous peoples' land and who would do anything to control power and profits in the global economy. The redeeming feature in the picture are the struggles of indigenous peoples themselves who have persevered despite the odds against them. Their struggles as indigenous people and as women for self-determination and equality are a ray of light for the future of humankind.

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