

HERSTORY5

Indigenous Women Championing and Changing The World



Published by
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact

Publication name

Herstory5.
Indigenous Women Championing and Changing The World

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Indigenous Peoples in Asia are living with dignity and fully exercising their rights, distinct cultures and identity, and enhancing their sustainable management systems on lands, territories and resources for their own future and development in an environment of peace, justice and equality.

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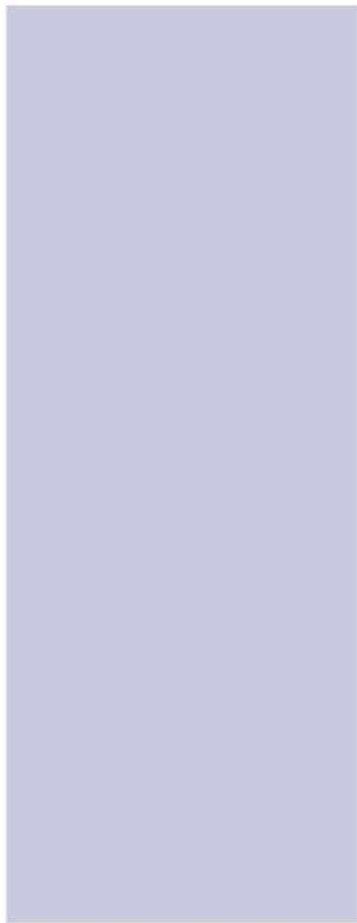
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Foreword

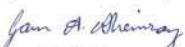
The HerStory series have become a landmark in AIPP's journey to reminisce, acknowledge, and celebrate Indigenous Women's achievements, struggles and contributions in various spheres of their life. These compilations of Indigenous Women's stories published in a book form have supported the Indigenous Women's movement in their endeavor to possess additional perspectives of events or personal accounts. Through highlighting "her story" instead of "history", important accounts are being rectified to include the perspectives, struggles and invaluable contributions of Indigenous Women. At the same time, different volumes of HerStory series have served as a medium to raise the voices of women and make them more visible, not only for the past but also for the present and future.

Although the voices of Indigenous Women have been getting stronger and gaining gradual global attention, they are still relatively marginalized, underrepresented, discriminated against and dis-empowered at all levels. Their stories, as an integral part of the women's and Indigenous Peoples' movement, still remain faint. It illustrates the urgent need to further strengthen Indigenous Women's organizations and institutions, as well as their leadership and effective participation, in all matters that concern them as women and Indigenous Peoples.

"Her Story" reflects the conditions and struggles Indigenous Women are facing on the ground, as told by Indigenous Women themselves. They shed light onto the diverse identities that exist among Indigenous Women and how intersecting issues related to ethnicity, gender, class, age, disability or socioeconomic status are affecting their lives in similar, yet different ways. The HerStory series have proven to be an effective way to ensure that the stories, struggles and triumphs of Indigenous Women across Asia are raised, shared, heard and documented.

With this fifth volume, AIPP would like to continue on the same path of amplifying further the voices and struggles of Indigenous Women in the Asian region. This year's series has compiled inspirational stories of Indigenous Women advancing and protecting Indigenous Women's and peoples' rights and lands rights, defending gender justice and equality, demanding indigenous knowledge protection, promoting women leadership, developing coping strategies to deal with new challenges such as climate change or the COVID-19 pandemic.

This book features and celebrates the stories of 15 exceptional Indigenous Women or women groups who are in the hearts and minds of their community because of their suffering, struggles, sacrifices, commitments, dedication and lifetime achievements in advancing the dignity of women and Indigenous Peoples. Their shared aspiration for "equality and dignity for all" needs the support of everyone. After all, the world will only be truly just if women and Indigenous Peoples are equal to the rest of society and cultural diversity is respected and promoted.


Gam A. Shimray
Secretary General
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact

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ACRONYMS

ADHOC	Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association
AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines
APF	Armed Police Force
AIPP	Asia Indigenous People Pact
AMAN	Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara
APF	Armed Police Force
ANVIK	Alyansa ng Novo Vizcayano para sa Kalikasan
BIWN	Bangladesh Indigenous Women's Network
CAMA	Compassion and Mercy Associates
CARE	Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CB-IMCI	Community Based Integrated Management of Childhood Illness
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CIPO	Cambodia Indigenous People Organization
CIWWG	Cambodia Indigenous Women Working Group
CLC	Community Learning Centre
CRNP	Crocker Range National Park
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DENR	Department of Environment and Natural Resources
DGSICC	Constitution of District Gender Sensitization and Internal Complaint Committee
DMIC	Delhi–Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project
EC	Executive Council
EED	Estimated Date of Delivery
FRA	Forest Right Act
FTAA	Financial and Technical Assistance Agreement
FWC	Family Welfare Committee

GMC-APEC	Guidance Management Corporation – Aragorn Power and Energy Corporation
GDA	Gender Development Association
HBLSS	Home-Based Life Saving Skills
IBPA	Infantry Battalion Philippine Army
ICC	International Cooperation Cambodia
ILO	International Labor Organization
INNABUYOG	Alliance of Women's Organizations in the Cordillera
IP	Indigenous Peoples
ISAWN	Inter State Adivasi Women's Network
IW	Indigenous Women
IWGIA	International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs
IWON	Indigenous Women Organization of Nepal
JKK	Jawatan Kuasa Kampung
JOAS	Jaringan orang Asal Semalaysia
LAHURNIP	Lawyers' Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples
LCH	Love Care Home
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex people
MADRE	Mothers and Daughters Raising Expectations
NACWR	Nagaland Alliance for Children and Women Rights
NCR	Native Customary Rights
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NIWF	National Indigenous Women's Federation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NRW	Non-Revenue Water
NSUC	Naga Student Union
NWHH	Naga Women Ho Ho
PACOS	Partners of Community Organizations in Sabah

PBB	Parti Bumiputra Bersatu
PBI	Police Bureau of Investigation
PC	Philippine Constabulary
PEMA	Persatuan Masyarakat Adat (Alliance of Indigenous Peoples)
PEREMPUAN AMAN	Persekutuan Perempuan Adat Nusantara (Alliance of the Indigenous Women of the Archipelago)
PESA	Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act
PJR	People Justice Party
PLV	Para-Legal Volunteers
PNP	Philippine National Police
POINT	Promotion of Indigenous and Nature Together
REDD+	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
RLS-NY	Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung – New York Office
RNCF	Reform Naga Christian Fellowships
SAPAKMMI	Samahang Pang Karapatan ng mga Katutubong Manggagawa at Magsasaka Inc (Association for the Rights of Indigenous Workers and Farmers)
SBFBUSH	Shahebgonj-Bagda farm Bhumi Uddhar Songram Committee
SMK	Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan
SPKS	Serikat Petani Sawit (Alliance of Oil Palm Farmers)
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRIP	The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UP	Union Parishad
US	United States
WVI	Wahana Visi Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

Indigenous Peoples make up 6% of the global population with the estimated figure of around 370 million people globally, with about 260 million people in Asia alone. Indigenous Peoples have a collective ancestral bond to their land and natural resources where they live which have inextricable linkage to their identity, culture, lives and spirituality. Indigenous Peoples are often the ones with no formal recognition of their land, resources and territories with minimal access to basic services and infrastructure, and experiencing numerous barriers and discrimination in accessing justice, and fully participating in formal economy, political processes and decision making. They are threatened with extinction and face alarming rates of poverty, crime, health problems and human rights abuses; rendering them part of the poorest of the poor, most politically disempowered and culturally and socially discriminated against. Indigenous Women constitute more than 50% of the total Indigenous Peoples' population and are even more discriminated and marginalized on the basis of the intersectionality of their gender and ethnicity. They face persistent inequalities and stigma, yet the lack of information on Indigenous Women often renders them invisible, making them even more disadvantaged, and raises the barriers to address their issues.

The practice of customary laws prevails in many indigenous communities across Asia. The gender inequality has been part of customary practices and beliefs of Indigenous Peoples. Patriarchy is dominant in many Indigenous Communities and their customary institutions and practices. Customary practices and laws often do not consider women as equal to men in almost all aspects which have negative impacts in regards to access to their rights, advancement of their leadership, and their equal participation, and representation. Despite, women have been provided high social position and status but are often excluded in governance systems.

Realizing Indigenous Women's voices, struggles and contributions are less visible, insufficiently recognized and have hardly been documented, AIPP endeavors to bring the stories of Indigenous Women forward through 'Herstory'. The past four series of HerStory, Her Story of Empowerment, Leadership and Justice (2013); Rewriting HerStory: A Collection of Essays by Indigenous Women (2014); Championing Community Land Rights and Indigenous Women's Leadership in Asia (2015); Struggles and Successes: Indigenous Women's Voices and Perspectives (2019), have successfully captured the struggles, bravery and courage of Indigenous Women in fighting for their rights to lands, territories and resources; their pathways to empowerment, leadership, endeavors for indigenous knowledge promotion and protection, and their exceptional role in building indigenous movement and peace processes. These have been narrations of joy, struggles, victory, aspirations, dreams, and the harsh reality of Indigenous Women across Asia in their voyage of life. They have been reciprocated positively and constructively by academicians, well-wishers and different stakeholders who are working for or interested in Indigenous Peoples and the intersecting adversities they face.

AIPP would like to continue to rejoice Indigenous Women's insights and efforts across Asia through documenting and publishing their personal and community experiences. Through this, AIPP hopes to raise the voices of Indigenous Women and their rights, draw global attention on their issues and concerns, enhance the visibility of their contribution, and promote solidarity and collective actions. This HerStory5 volume focuses on powerful stories of Indigenous Women promoting gender equality; reducing gender-based violence and discrimination in customary traditional practices; improving participation in social and political institutions; standing up for their Indigenous Women's and peoples' rights and their rights to lands, territories and resources; preserving traditional knowledge and applying traditional practices to deal with contemporary challenges; and their role in coping, responding or adapting to the COVID-19 pandemic which has severely affected Indigenous Peoples worldwide. These different topics are overlapping as in their fight against violence, to protect human rights or empower their community, Indigenous Women are often breaking gender barriers and clearing the path for other women to take up leadership roles. While doing so they inspire other Indigenous Women to raise their voices and stand up for their rights.

These stories have been forwarded through much of ardor from our partners and friends from indigenous communities in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Northeastern India, Nepal, Myanmar and the Philippines. Many of the forthcoming stories have been narrated in the storyteller's indigenous language, translated into the national language, and then translated again into English. In order to protect the integrity of the stories and in respect for the authors, the majority of the text has been directly translated with minor technical editing. The stories have been through many years to end at this publication, and we admire those women who have participated, for their courage and commitment in sharing their stories.

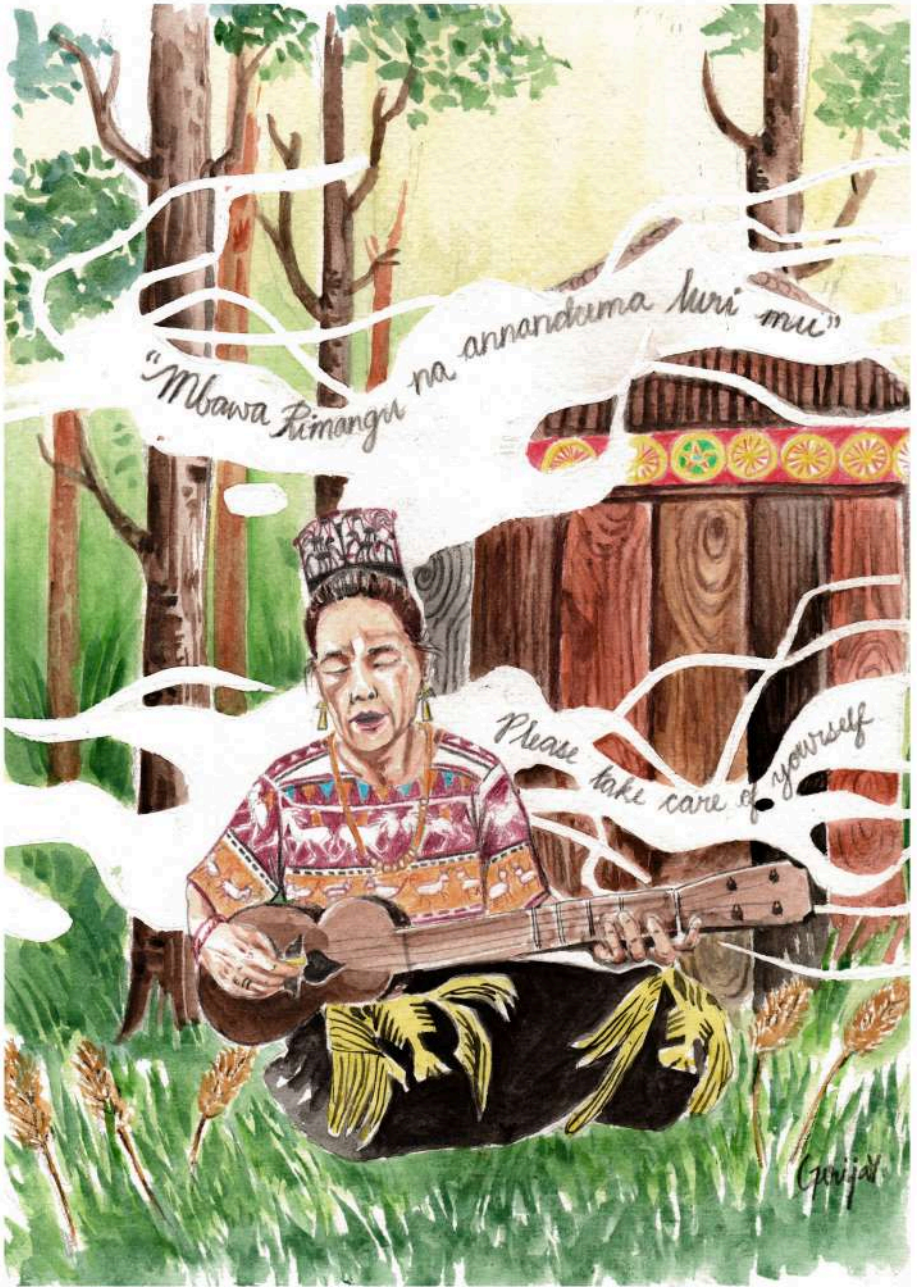
This publication reflects the hard work and contribution of people involved in the Indigenous Women's movement in Asia. We sincerely hope that this collection of stories will empower and promote solidarity among all Indigenous Women; increase recognition of the rights of Indigenous Women, both within their communities and outside; and serve as a tool for advocacy at all levels.



FIGHTING AGAINST PANDEMIC

Story 1. Ata Ratu
Story 2. Mai Pan Yee





"Mbawa Rimangu na anandama huri mu"

Please take care of yourself

Gwijal

ATA RATU



ETHNICITY: MARAPU

LOCATION: EAST SUMBA, EAST NUSA TENGGARA PROVINCE,
INDONESIA

Indonesia is one of the most multi-lingual nations in the world, with over 700 languages (almost half of which are now considered endangered). The Indonesian Government often uses songs as a communication tool to raise peoples' awareness on personal hygiene and health such as vaccinations and the danger of using illegal drugs etc.

Amongst various communication tools used to disseminate health and safety messages during COVID-19 pandemic, very few were contextualised or translated in the local language. This made it extremely challenging for the health and safety recommendations to reach the remote areas.

Kahi Ata Ratu, 56 years old woman is a well-respected traditional musician from Palanggay Savannah, East Sumba in Indonesia. She has been performing since she was 14 years old and is known in East Sumba as the "Queen of the Jungga" which is the name of the four string instrument she plays. She used to play the Jungga and perform poetic couplets with a group of four other women. When the others were married, they were forbidden by their husbands to continue to perform, Ata Ratu continued following her career as a singer.

She belongs to the Marapu indigenous community. Marapu translates from the Kambera language as "ancestors", and refers to the indigenous religion and the people that practice it in Sumba. The Marapu community have long been discriminated against by the Javanese dominated central government. Since independence, the government has forced citizens to identify with one of the six major religions, making it difficult for the Marapu people to express their rights, register marriages, and access civil administration services. It was only recently, in 2017, indigenous religions were officially recognized under the blanket term "Native-faith followers" by the Indonesian government.

In 2018, she has responded to an indigenous land rights protest and controversial agribusiness land leasing deal in East Sumba with a song called "Daningu Anda Monungu" that expressed the sentiment of the local people and activists opposing this action. The purpose of her new song about COVID-19 was to give health recommendations and advice to the East Sumbanese language speaking community. The song also revealed an important aspect of this pandemic during its early stages: the inability of stranded migrant workers to return to their home villages because of the travel restrictions due to COVID-19.

Ata Ratu directed her song to this Sumbanese diaspora who left their community to look for work or study opportunities in Bali, Jakarta and Jogjakarta. Such opportunities are unavailable in Sumba which is one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in Indonesia. The migrant workers could no longer return to Sumba because of the domestic and international travel restrictions during the early stages of the pandemic. Many of these Sumbanese people lost their jobs and were experiencing economic hardship and psychological stress from this situation.

Her song's title is "Mbawa Rimangu na annanduma luri mu" (Please take care of yourself) , and hereunder are extracts from her song:



*Aiha dama ni dunjaka angu la kota
bali a ai.e angu la jakarta angu ni*

My friends who are in Bali and in
Jakarta
I remember you all and urge that
you be careful when travelling,

*Ai hali nggunya nu mi ana mbawa
rimangu nu ha ba ninggai ha la
tana tau ma aka nu*

As you are in the land of another
people where there is a
dangerous situation my friends

*Ai ninda la hidu eti biaka nu bata
pamalirungu nu ha rimanya na
nduma luri amu ka*

We are in a state of heartache
because we are far apart, please
take care of yourself

*Ai ambu mbawa luangga mai dupa
nu ha jiwa ningu nu lambabu
ndapngu*

Don't go back and forth in a place
where there is a large crowd

Ata Ratu's songs are written in traditional poetic couplets called Lawiti. These couplets come from the fast-paced ritual speech spoken by priests and ritual speakers (wunang) that accompany all Marapu rituals, such as funerals, marriages, and prayers for an abundant harvest or to ward off sickness. Ata Ratu strings together appropriate successions of poetic couplets spontaneously, in line with the specific purpose of a song. Her songs are in effect as improvised selection of appropriate couplets.

Songs are a common and appropriate medium to disseminate information in the Marapu community. By presenting the current COVID-19 issue to the local community in the local language through the medium of song, Ata Ratu has created a contemporary context for traditional music that is relevant to protecting the health and wellbeing of the East Sumbanese Marapu community and diaspora during this pandemic.

Ata Ratu's song was released via her YouTube channel. Since then, the video has been viewed over 2800 times in both English and Indonesian translations. The song has been distributed from cell phone to cell phone via Bluetooth sharing or file sharing applications. The song has also been used by the East Sumbanese government to accompany public health videos. The audio has been downloaded from YouTube and is being played on the public address systems of local markets around East Sumba. Her songs are also distributed physically via memory cards at local market hubs.

The song has thus become a bridge for the East Sumbanese Marapu community to directly communicate and receive information, address other issues raised by the pandemic and convey relevant health recommendations in the local language, and in a culturally familiar and appropriate context for East Sumbanese people. Ata Ratu's songs show that traditional local culture is a contemporary and very effective medium to communicate current global and domestic issues to minority language communities or marginalized groups.

Written by Fendi Widiyanto, Martha Hebi and Joseph Lamont

* Ata Ratu's song "Mbawa Rimangu na annanduma luri mu" about COVID-19, with English translations:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R38A0g-mm8c>

* Atu Ratu's song "Daningu Anda Monungu" about an indigenous land rights protest:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vAfUNN_SVjs



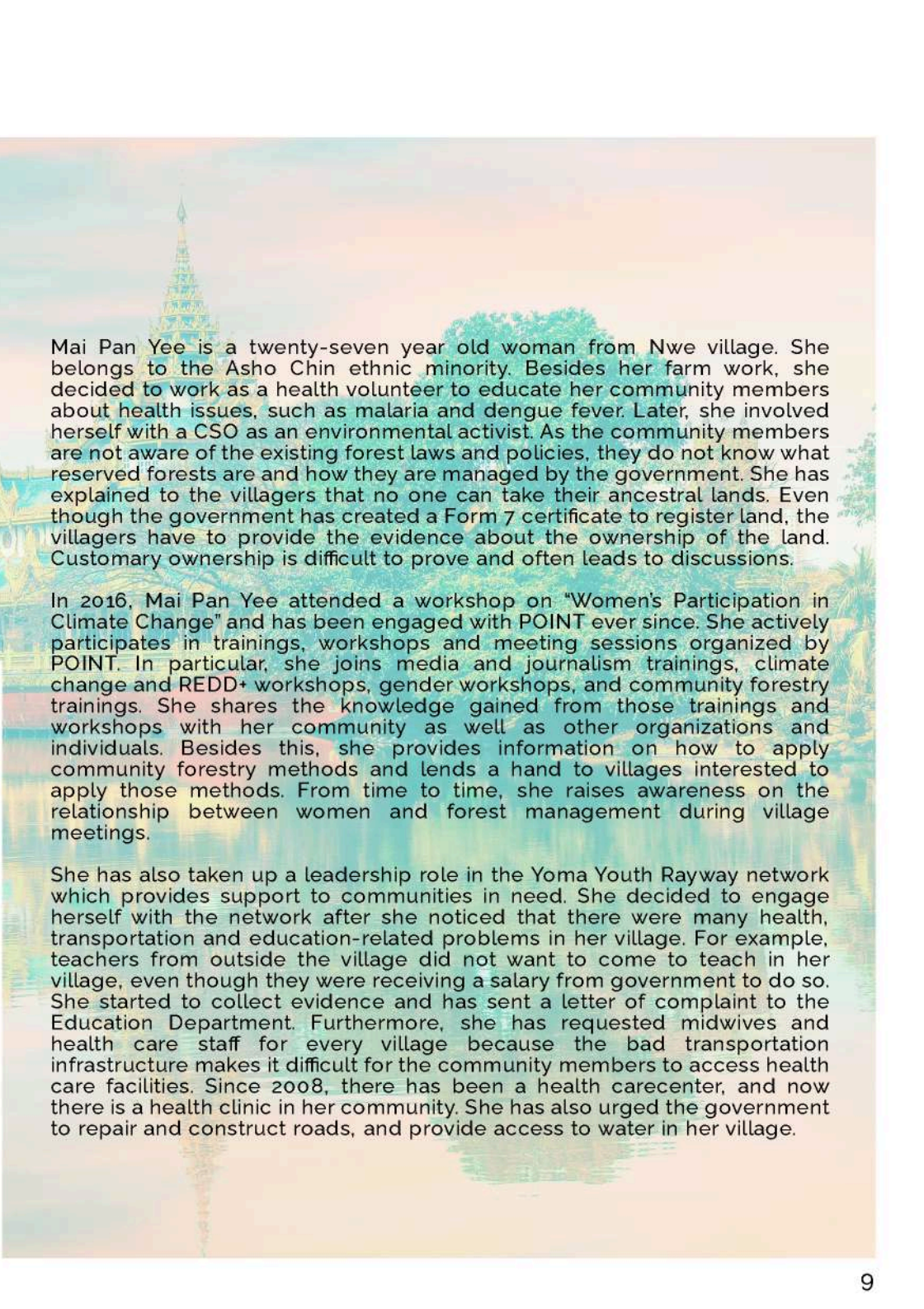
MAI PAN YEE



ETHNICITY: ASHO CHIN

LOCATION: NAG PHE TOWNSHIP, MAGWAY REGION,
MYANMAR





Mai Pan Yee is a twenty-seven year old woman from Nwe village. She belongs to the Asho Chin ethnic minority. Besides her farm work, she decided to work as a health volunteer to educate her community members about health issues, such as malaria and dengue fever. Later, she involved herself with a CSO as an environmental activist. As the community members are not aware of the existing forest laws and policies, they do not know what reserved forests are and how they are managed by the government. She has explained to the villagers that no one can take their ancestral lands. Even though the government has created a Form 7 certificate to register land, the villagers have to provide the evidence about the ownership of the land. Customary ownership is difficult to prove and often leads to discussions.

In 2016, Mai Pan Yee attended a workshop on "Women's Participation in Climate Change" and has been engaged with POINT ever since. She actively participates in trainings, workshops and meeting sessions organized by POINT. In particular, she joins media and journalism trainings, climate change and REDD+ workshops, gender workshops, and community forestry trainings. She shares the knowledge gained from those trainings and workshops with her community as well as other organizations and individuals. Besides this, she provides information on how to apply community forestry methods and lends a hand to villages interested to apply those methods. From time to time, she raises awareness on the relationship between women and forest management during village meetings.

She has also taken up a leadership role in the Yoma Youth Rayway network which provides support to communities in need. She decided to engage herself with the network after she noticed that there were many health, transportation and education-related problems in her village. For example, teachers from outside the village did not want to come to teach in her village, even though they were receiving a salary from government to do so. She started to collect evidence and has sent a letter of complaint to the Education Department. Furthermore, she has requested midwives and health care staff for every village because the bad transportation infrastructure makes it difficult for the community members to access health care facilities. Since 2008, there has been a health care center, and now there is a health clinic in her community. She has also urged the government to repair and construct roads, and provide access to water in her village.



MAI PAN YEE

Besides this, she acts as an intermediary for land issues and gives advice on how to solve land issues. She assists villagers to get their land back, and facilitates reconciliation in case of problems. She also prevents and restricts illegal logging and transport of wild animals such as the Auk Chin bird (a bird valued by the Chin peoples). Even though she has been threatened by the loggers, she continues to hand over the wrongdoers to the Forest Department. Mai Pan Yee explains, "Without the forest, we can do nothing, so we will protect the forest as much as we can." This is not the only challenge she has faced. Her culture does not accept women in leadership roles. From 2012 to 2015, her community did not allow her to attend any meeting, and even when she did attend, her voice was not heard. Already when she was a young girl, she had faced discrimination, but now she knows her rights. She does not accept discrimination anymore and has been brave to protect not only herself, but also others. Recently, she has been invited to the community meetings and now they come to consult with her.

She is also a human rights defender promoting gender equality, and stands with women who face domestic violence and the rape victims. In her community, people do not go to court because they cannot afford a lawyer, contact legal aid or lack support to do so. She therefore advocated with the regional government and approached the relevant government bodies to ask for help and financial support. She has called on lawyers to provide free legal advice and assistance during court proceedings for child rape and domestic violence victims. If they are not supported, the victims would end up with a compensation of about 100,000 to 150,000 Kyat (\$700-10,000). The victims of child rape would be looked down upon by their community if the criminal is not convicted.

Another big issue in her community is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been a big challenge for indigenous peoples around the world, including Asia. In Myanmar, the pandemic has impacted many different ethnic groups, however, indigenous peoples have responded with their own strategies. At the entrance of her village, a gate made of large trees has been set up. In this way, the flow of people into and out of the village is restricted and controlled. Moreover, the gate alerts people of the need to prevent the virus from spreading into the village. She urged the community members to not go outside, and to wear a mask and wash their hands often. She also monitors the cars coming into the village. As the villagers were not used to this, there have been some difficulties though. Some people did not want to follow the rules by saying, "these are useless for us."

Mai Pan Yee helped to sensitize all responsible persons so that everyone would abide by rules. They have urged to be united as a community and to not go out unnecessarily. The community members eventually agreed and made rules that everyone could accept in order to protect each other. An all-inclusive, collective agreement was made among the community members. They agreed to not go outside without a specific reason, to wear masks and wash hands frequently whenever they go outside, and to stay home in quarantine for seven days after coming back to the village.

On a positive note, the community does not have to worry about hunger or scarcity of food during the pandemic. The villagers can collect fruit and vegetables in the forest; and fish, prawns, snails are found in the rivers and streams. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reduced the logging operations in the area, which is good news for the indigenous communities.

Written by POINT





INDIGENOUS WOMEN RECLAIMING FREE PRIOR INFORMED CONSENT:

Story 3. Bidya Shrestha Maharjan
Story 4. IW of Didipio Village
Story 5. Yurni Sadariah



BIDYA SHRESTHA MAHARJAN



ETHNICITY: NEWA (NEWAR)

LOCATION: NEPA MANDALA,
NEPAL

The ancestral land of the Newa Indigenous Peoples is located in central Nepal and is called Nepa Mandala, nowadays known as Kathmandu Valley and Banepa. Until 1990, the Newa were the majority population in Nepa Mandala. From the seventies onwards, the government encouraged migration to Kathmandu from every district in the country which has led to a huge population explosion. This has caused many Newas to lose their lands and settlements to the migrants. The rising population, along with the increased numbers of private and public vehicles on the streets of Kathmandu Valley since the nineties, has impelled the government to launch a road expansion project in 2011 to ease the traffic jams.

Bidya Shrestha Maharjan is one of the Indigenous Newa victims of this road expansion. She is a social worker and teacher by profession. At first, she was unaware of the problems caused by the project that was started in Lazimpat, Yen (now known as Kathmandu). One day, she watched the news on TV showing an old woman crying while government officials were bulldozing her house and turned it into debris in just a few minutes. A picture of the incident also went viral on social media. When she saw this, her attitude towards the government changed. She felt that it was her responsibility to work for the victims, who are also Newa people like her, to get justice and stop the violation of their collective rights. She therefore decided to engage herself in a movement against the government's road expansion project.

Soon after her involvement in the movement, and through working together with the Lawyers' Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples (LAHURNIP) and other leading Indigenous experts and leaders, she realized that the road expansion was not only illegal, but that this development aggression against the Newa Indigenous Peoples would lead to a cultural genocide and ultimately, an ethnocide. The project was carried out without obtaining free, prior and informed consent from the Indigenous Newa. In total, there are about 150,000 people and 30,000 households affected. A study carried out by the LAHURNIP revealed that 92% of the affected people are Newa Indigenous Peoples of the valley, among which 8,777 men; 8,746 women; and 4,121 children. Moreover, the 200-year old Newa heritage, ancient settlements, monuments, and stone taps are in danger of extinction.

Newar people, like Bidya, who either lost or could lose their ancestral lands also perceive the project as a cultural genocide and have refused to be displaced from their ancestral land. The government, which has always been dominated by the Bahun people, encouraged non-Indigenous Peoples to settle in Nepa Mandala as the area has been the capital, and political and economic powerhouse for centuries. Under the name of "development", the government has tried to displace the Newa from the area. Other examples of such development aggression is the construction of an army's parachute landing zone; a Fast Track from Khokana, which is an ancient historic Newa settlement, to Nijgadh in Terai; a Smart City; and high voltage electricity transmission lines. Also, the announcement of the government's bill that would destroy Guthi, a customary self-government system of the Newa, is another indicator of the lack of consideration by the government for the Newa Indigenous Peoples' way of life.

Bidya and many other young Newar formed a struggle committee to stop the road expansion from Kalimati to Nagdhunga. Later, another 32 local struggle committees were formed in Kathmandu Valley, and a central committee was established to coordinate the local-level committees. They have not only been struggling to stop the illegal road expansion, but also the Smart City and Fast Track project which is currently being constructed by the Nepalese Army. Next to holding dialogues with the army, the committee has filed a lawsuit in Supreme Court through the help and support of LAHURNIP. They demanded to stop the road expansion, compensate the victims and find alternative ways to cope with the traffic jams. The Court gave a verdict in favor of the struggle committee. They argued that the demolition of houses and displacement of people should only be carried out as a last resort, and due compensation should be given. The effect of the Court's decision was so profound that the road expansion projects all over Nepal were stopped. The government claimed they were unable to expand the road or build new roads as they did not have enough resources to provide the compensation as required by the Court's decision. Bidya and the other struggle committee members have taken the case to the international community through the help of LAHURNIP. For example, the Madhesi Telecom Trade Union, which works closely together with LAHURNIP, helped them to file a complaint at the International Labor Organization (ILO). The ILO is now assessing the violation of the Indigenous Peoples' rights through a tripartite review of the case.

During the course of the movement, Bidya has participated in many peaceful rallies, demonstrations and protests against the government's development aggression. She engaged in a lot of activities to stop displacing Newa from their ancestral lands in order to preserve their traditional ways of life. She went on a 21-day hunger strike and signed many petitions to the government. She has also been greatly involved in all legal processes, including the trial in the Supreme Court of Nepal.



Her activism resulted in harassment by and painful confrontations with the Nepal Police, Armed Police Force (APF) and Nepal Army. During a Valley close down by the struggle committee to protest against the illegal road expansion, she was arrested while she was walking in Layeku (Basantapur). The police kept her in custody for a whole day without any reason. Moreover, during a peaceful rally at Febokhayoa (Maitighar Mandala), her right hand was broken because the police had hit her with their batons. Until today, she still has problems with her hand.

An even more painful incident happened on Wednesday March 28, 2018, when about 20,000 Newa had gathered for a peaceful demonstration in Febokhaya (Baneshwor) near the Parliament building and Singha Drabar, the central secretariat in Yen (Kathmandu). They started at 11am by playing traditional Newa cultural musical instruments. All Newa women, including herself, were wearing Hakupatasi, a traditional Newa cultural dress. At around 1pm the area suddenly turned into a battlefield when about 1,000 riot police officers intervened with arms and a water cannon. Altogether, 19 protesters were arrested and 100 were injured. Some of them were severely injured and had to go to nearby hospitals. Bidhya was with another Newa woman from Jalawhoal (Harisiddi), who inspired her to fight against injustice. They stood in the first row when about 100 Indigenous Newa Women were blown away by the water cannon from the police. Most of them could escape, but Bidya had problems breathing as she had received a severe blow from the water jet. On top of this, the police used tear gas. She suddenly became unconscious and was rushed to a nearby hospital. She received treatment, recovered and was discharged.

Bidya during a clash between the police and protestors at Baneshwor.



Up until today, she often receives threats from the government to give up the movement; however, she is determined to continue her struggle to protect the lands, territories and resources from the Newa Indigenous Peoples. For Bidya, the struggle is about defending Newa's human rights, Indigenous Peoples' rights, collective rights and women's rights. It is also about her ancestral land which was inherited from generation to generation. She believes that it is now her generation's responsibility to hand it over to the next generation. The new movement to protect their ancestral lands led by young leaders, like Bidya, has inspired many young people and other Indigenous Peoples' movements which gives the hope that Indigenous Peoples should protect and promote their collective rights enshrined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Young Indigenous Women like Bidya have succeeded to give a clear message to the younger generation of Indigenous Women that they should fight for their collective rights, because their collective rights matter.

Written by Yasso Kanti Bhattachan National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF) & Bidya Shrestha Maharjan

IW OF DIDIPIO VILLAGE

ABOUT: INDIGENOUS WOMEN OF DIDIPIO VILLAGE

ETHNICITY: IFUGAO

LOCATION: Nueva Vizcaya province,
Cagayan Valley region, PHILIPPINES

In search of a better life, particularly lands to till, some Ifugao indigenous families migrated to the mountainous village of Didipio in Cagayan Valley region. It is bordered by the Cordillera Administrative region where Ifugao province is located, and from where the Ifugao people originated. According to the Ifugao elders, they have been living in Didipio for about two generations. Since then, they have been cultivating the land and have constructed houses and simple roads. They have also been taking care of the nearby forests where they get additional food. Even though Didipio has become their home, they still observe their indigenous practices and traditional knowledge which includes rituals and traditional ways of farming like *uma* (the planting of vegetables in the mountains), and *batares* (a farming community support system).

During the 1960's, around the time when the Ifugao were migrating, various small and medium sized mining companies using underground mining methods started to operate in the community. These mining companies were replaced in 1994 by OceanaGold, a large-scale Australian-Canadian mining company which uses the open-pit mining method. The Ifugao men used to be at the forefront during the struggles against the mining companies and the women supported them in the background. In earlier times, the men made all the decisions and took the lead in the community's struggles, while the women focused on the livelihood of their families, such as farming and operating small businesses whilst taking care of the children.





Before the struggle against the OceanaGold mining company escalated, the majority of the women had a limited role in the decision-making process. While some of the women had been elected as barangay (village) officials, which is a part of the Local Government Unit of the country, they still had limited power in the decision-making and usually followed the decisions of the barangay chairmen.

Since 2014, the role of the Ifugao women has changed significantly because of the establishment of the Ifugao organization SAPAKKMMI (Samahang Pang Karapatan ng mga Katutubong Manggagawa at Magsasaka Inc. – Association for the Rights of Indigenous Workers and Farmers). The community realized that they needed to officially form an organization in order to have a stronger voice and representation, especially for legal purposes such as submitting petitions and complaints. Through this organization, the women gained more confidence to speak up about the situation of their community and were able to express their opinions, even to the male village leaders. Since its establishment, the elected chairperson has been a woman. As a result, the Ifugao women have become the leading force behind the community's struggles against the OceanaGold mining company.

The women were pushed to strengthen their collective actions when they personally felt the effects of the violations committed by OceanaGold. They experienced the destruction of their environment and natural resources, the depletion of their water resources for drinking and farming, the pollution of the air and rivers, and the demolition of their houses to give way to the mining operations. They also faced threats, harassment and intimidation by the company when they spoke up or fought for their rights. Most importantly, they saw the impact of all this on their children as they were suffering from diarrhea, lung diseases and stomach aches due to the air and water pollution. The women were concerned about the future of their children if the destruction of the environment would continue. They would lose their farms, which is their main source of livelihood, their forests and their new home if the mining operations would continue.



In leading the struggle to stop the mining operations, the women faced various challenges. In the beginning, it was difficult to create unity among the community members due to differing opinions and stands regarding the mining operations. There were some residents who believed that the mining would help to boost their economy, while there were others who were hesitant about the leadership and goals of SAPAKKMMI regarding the anti-mining struggle. The management of the mining company was also deaf to the pleas of the community. They did not want to conduct dialogues with the leaders of the community to discuss the community's complaints and demands, even if they were summoned by the Municipal Local Government Unit. The company only answered through letters addressed to individuals with specific complaints. Moreover, they did not receive a lot of support from the wider public because they had limited access to social and mainstream media. Only a few leaders were willing to speak in public due to their low confidence, and fear from the possible retaliation from the company. The local government officials did not provide clear support either, despite SAPAKKMMI's petitions.

When the struggle against the mining operations started to escalate, the women and other leaders of SAPAKMMI faced harassment and intimidation through being red-tagged or politically vilified by the armed forces of the Philippines. Their names and organization were publicized through flyers distributed in various communities in Nueva Vizcaya province. They were portrayed as supporters and members of the Communist Party and its armed group, the New People's Army. This endangered their life since such vilification could lead to arrest or even murder by the Philippine Armed Forces. They also saw this vilification as a threat to back down their struggles, and a means to discredit them as community leaders and make the public fear them.

Despite these challenges, the women stood their ground. Their children's future became their inspiration, and they were further encouraged by the growing support of the community and wider public, including some local government officials in key positions such as the Provincial Governor. They also received support from various progressive organizations that enhanced their capacity as community leaders, such as speaking in public, writing petition papers, and bringing forward their issues and demands through creating opportunities to speak to the wider public.

Through their determination and commitment in advancing their rights, they were able to gain support from the wider public and even pushed their local government officials to support their struggles. They continuously voiced their opinions and demands for their right to land, life, natural resources and culture in various forums and during public rallies, including social and mainstream media. They also linked their struggles with progressive organizations and like-minded individuals, and organized public information-education campaigns to engage the wider public in their demand to stop the mining operations of OceanaGold. They participated in different seminars, workshops and trainings to strengthen their capacities and organization. They also relentlessly lobbied local government officials and formed an alliance with officials who have become supportive of their struggles.

After the leaders were politically vilified, they successfully engaged the Commission on Human Rights to conduct an investigation into the human rights violations of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and Philippine National Police (AFP-PNP). They also submitted a petition to various government offices such as the Provincial and Municipal Local Government Unit, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), the House of Representatives and even the Office of the President of the Philippines to stop the mining operations in their community. The unity among the community members and other nearby villages was growing and resulted in the formation of a broader alliance, called the United People of Nueva Vizcaya. In this way more people became involved in the anti-mining campaign and struggles, however, the Ifugao women of Didipio are still at the forefront.



All these efforts have led to the recent decision of the Philippine Government to suspend the mining operations of OceanaGold. In July 2020, the Supreme Court of the Philippines rejected the renewal of OceanaGold's permit to operate for another 25 years. This permit, also called a Financial and Technical Assistance Agreement (FTAA) which is a state agreement for large-scale mining projects in the Philippines, had already expired in 2019.

Despite the expiration and rejection of the FTAA renewal application, OceanaGold still continued its mining operations, even during the COVID-19 lockdown. Since 2019 the anti-mining community members, led by the Ifugao women, have formed a people barricade near the mining area to prevent the company from bringing equipment to the mining site. On April 6, 2020, the people barricade was dispersed by the Provincial Philippine National Police (PNP) of Nueva Vizcaya when they tried to prevent the entry of two oil tankers. One of the leaders was arrested and later released on bail. Instead of respecting the rights and position of the people, the PNP filed cases against the other residents who had formed the barricade. According to the police, these residents had violated the guidelines related to COVID-19. Charges against two of them were dropped because their family name was not spelled correctly by the PNP. The other 13 residents who were charged were Ifugao women, including the chairperson of SAPAKMMI – Mrs. Minda Dummang and the IW council member of Punganay – Mrs. Remedios Nagangi.

The attack against the community leaders did not end there. The PNP and military forces from the 86th Infantry Battalion Philippine Army (86th IBPA) have been deployed in their community under the pretext of preventing the spread of COVID-19 and conducting an anti-insurgency campaign. The military forces claimed they had received reports about the presence of members of the New People's Army in the area. According to the community, there are no rebels in the area. The villagers believe that the presence of the military is to monitor the movement and activities of the anti-mining residents. This has been validated shortly after, when the 86th IBPA conducted house-to-house interviews among the active members and leaders, the majority of whom are women. They asked the leaders about their involvement with and linkages to other progressive organizations, including the national and provincial environmental networks which have been actively helping the community with their struggles. They advised the community leaders not to partner with these organizations as they are considered terrorist organizations, and also urged them to dismantle the people's barricade. However, the community leaders, especially the women, stood their ground and even defended their alliance with other networks of environmental defenders.



Violent dispersal by the PNP of the anti-mining activists who prevented the entry of OceanaGold's oil tankers on April 6, 2020 (Source: Julie Simongo).

In this tense situation, with OceanaGold continuing their mining operations despite the rejection of their FTAA renewal and the militarization in the community, the struggles of the Ifugao women and their community are far from over. The community, with the women at the forefront, are relentless in their campaign to stop OceanaGold and want to hold the company accountable for the damages it has caused to the community. Their people barricade is still up and manned on a rotational basis, even though a case has been filed against them and the army is present in their community. They are doing all this whilst also fighting for their livelihoods. Recently, they have revived their batares system and demanded OceanaGold to open their gates so the people can pass through to reach their farms and tend their gardens, instead of having to make a large detour.

Other Indigenous Women in Asia may help the Ifugao women and their families through demanding accountability from OceanaGold, the halt of the mining operations, and the removal of the military presence in their community. As long as there are violations happening in their community, the Ifugao women will continue to assert their voices, defend their rights and their community.

Written by Marifel T. Macalanda Punganay
(Cagayan Valley Indigenous Peoples Alliance) - BAI





YUMI SADARIAH



ETHNICITY: RANGAN

LOCATION: KALIMANTAN TIMUR PROVINCE,
INDONESIA

My name is Yurni Sadariah and I belong to the Rangan Indigenous Peoples from Indonesia. Most of the people from my community used to be traditional farmers, growing vegetables and rice. However, the government started to introduce large-scale palm oil plantations and encouraged the farmers to become palm oil cultivators. Even though there are some benefits from palm oil plantations, there are a lot more negative impacts. The financial gain that can be made is exclusively reserved for people who own a large plantation field. There is no significant profit for people with small plots of land. These farmers are suffering from unstable prices as they mainly depend on the world market price. The maintenance cost of these small plantations is quite high; hence, their income does not cover the production cost.

Furthermore, the plantations have caused environmental damage. The rivers have become polluted because of the pesticides used in the farms. Water springs and rivers are running dry during the dry season; whereas these water bodies used to store water for months after the rainy season comes to an end. Ever since the plantations were introduced, our people have faced scarcity of water. They are now forced to buy drinking water, but this does not solve the scarcity problem for people who do not have enough money. Water, something that has always been there for us, has now turned into a luxury product not everyone can afford. Not only do we need to walk far to get clean water, we also need to queue for hours to get it. Additionally, because the rivers are now shallow, they are not capable of holding a lot of water anymore which causes floods during the rainy season.

Many people were tempted by the propaganda and offers from both the government and corporations, and voluntarily shifted to palm oil cultivation which has led to the large-scale erasure of the forest. The sacrifice of an entire forest to be a monocultural plantation has taken a lot away from us. When the forest was still taken care of, our people always went in a group to collect honey and fruit. Now, it has become an impossible mission since the plantation seized a big area from the forest and has destroyed a lot of trees and plants that were important for the Rangan people. There are almost no more big trees in my village. It makes us desperate since the lack of trees results in a shortage of timber. If we need to build a house, we now need to have cash money to buy the wood. When the forest disappears, so do the social relations among the people. The tradition of cooperation during rice planting, open field and other activities have vanished as we now hire people and give them a proper wage in return. It does not only happen in my village, but also in other villages as well. Also, the traditional livelihood resources and the knowledge systems have disappeared, as well as the local custom of weaving plaited mats, the traditional rites, herbal medicines, and the traditional methods of cultivation.

As most people have become palm oil cultivators, there has been a massive change in the livelihood of the Rangan people. Some also depend on nearby plantations or work as blue-collar laborers in factories in order to survive. There is still a small number of Rangan people who are farming their land though, but they now face severe attacks from monkeys, rats, squirrels and birds. They need to spend extra money to solve these biological problems which discourages people from planting anything but oil palms. These pests also attack cattle and houses. Throughout 2016 and 2017, more than ten snakes have preyed on people's cattle, and monkeys have invaded houses to steal food. The palm oil plantations have destroyed the animal habitat in the forest, hence, they come to peoples' settlements to search for food. There is no more space for these wild animals in the forest. The loss of trees is not only a deprivation for humans, but also for animals. The expansion of the palm oil plantations has resulted in aggressive attacks from these animals, and their invasion into people's fields and farms.

Born and raised in the area of palm oil plantations has made me sensitive about what is actually happening and what is changing. The changes could easily be spotted through the changing human behaviors. The socio-cultural system of my community has been disturbed, and the knowledge system, traditional rites, food and water sources have disappeared. Convinced that I wanted to help my people, I began to discover the world of social movements in 2002. First, I was invited by AMAN (Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara – Alliance of the Indigenous Peoples of the archipelago) for a documentation training and workshop. After this, I was asked to join PEMA (Persatuan Masyarakat Adat – Alliance of Indigenous Peoples), a local organization operating under the supervision of AMAN.

When I was working for PEMA from 2002 until 2012, I was the only female staff. No other woman was involved during these ten years. Based on my gender, I was assigned a financial administration position. My colleagues had the stereotyped belief that women make the best administrators because they are more meticulous and neater. At first, I was happy when I received the position, however, I soon felt like I could not grow. Eventually, the job made me uncomfortable and I asked if I could go to the field as an assistant. Even though they allowed me to do so, the financial tasks still stayed a part of my job. It became a heavy burden when I had to combine it with other activities, such as mapping or organizing the villagers. I also needed to walk long distances on roads full of mud. However, I was glad to be in direct contact with the people.

Indigenous movements are a male-dominated space. As a woman, I always need to perform extra work. The stigma that Indigenous Women lack knowledge and are unable to understand development work is still very present; not only with outsiders, but also within my community. I really have to prove that I can do it, even without being facilitated by the organization. I have to carve out the way by myself, and find my own chances. I feel that the greatest challenge I have ever faced is to be ignored just because I am a woman. I have experienced how women are considered weaker and not capable of exceeding the skills and capacities of men. However, I had no choice but to make peace with myself to accept this situation if I still wanted to be part of the organization. Besides this, I also had to endure stigma in my community because I sometimes had to leave my family at home or I returned home late at night, which made the villagers believe I was mingling with other men.

These challenges did not prevent me from my mission to help my people. In 2007, I established a palm oil farmer-based organization, the Alliance of Oil Palm Farmers (SPKS, Serikat Petani Sawit), together with some colleagues. In SPKS, I am both a member and a part of the committee. We organize and bring farmers together from various palm oil plantations from many districts in the area where I live. The goal of this organization is to assist the farmers, both in managing the farms and in following the regulations.

In 2012, I joined PEREMPUAN AMAN (Persekutuan Perempuan Adat Nusantara – Alliance of the Indigenous Women of the Archipelago), which is a wing organization of AMAN. When I joined, no one in my village was interested to take part, so I was alone in the organization, without any friends. I tried three times to organize the people from my village under the supervision of the organization, but I always failed to do so. After an enormous effort, I finally managed to establish the local chapter of Paser (PHD Paser). I had to overcome my shyness and learn to express myself. Moreover, the women were not interested to organize themselves or get together at first. They did not see the benefit of it because it did not provide any income for them. Most of them were already earning money from the oil palm plantations. When the local chapter eventually started to run, I also struggled to unite all the various interests of the members.

Due to my low communication skills, people often ignored me, moreover I did not possess much self-confidence. However, PEREMPUAN AMAN provided me training to boost my capacities, such as writing and documenting indigenous knowledge from Indigenous Women. I, along with the National Secretary of PEREMPUAN AMAN, have been interpreting and analyzing the data that I have gathered from indigenous communities. We are writing about the communities and mapping indigenous territories, using a participatory approach. This activity began in November 2016 and is still ongoing up till now. The writing training and participatory mapping have also brought many benefits. One of them is the mapping of the economic potential in indigenous territories. We started mapping Rangan in August 2019, and it gave us the impression that there is economic potential in the region. It also led us to propose the protection and management of the indigenous mangrove forest in Rangan which has almost disappeared due to the oil palm plantations. We realized that if we will not start to protect our forest and ourselves from now on, the fate of our children and grandchildren will be uncertain.

Coming from this far, I would like to recommend other Indigenous Women to also take the courage to express their views and interests about indigenous territories; to actively participate and get fully involved in the decision-making process at various levels; and to dare to run for village leader, as well as other strategic positions in the village or at other levels. On the other hand, I would also like to highlight that Indigenous Women need more support to build their capacity. Indigenous Women should also help each other through sharing their experiences and lessons learnt which will strengthen the networks of Indigenous Women from the community level up to the national, regional and international level.

Written by Yurni Sadariah
PEREMPUAN AMAN





PROTECTING COMMUNITIES BY PROTECTING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Story 6. Fatimah Bah Sin
Story 7. Muna Anak Getor
Story 8. Terian Village



FATIMAH BAH SIN



ETHNICITY: SEMAQ

LOCATION: MARAN DISTRICT, PAHANG STATE,
MALAYSIA

Fatimah Bah Sin, is an Orang Asli (Indigenous Peoples) woman from Malaysia. She comes from the Semaq Beri ethnic group in Kampung Mengkapur, Maran District, Pahang. She is a mother and a housewife, as well as a prominent community leader who has shown the importance of women leadership. Next to being actively involved in the protection of her community land, she is a member of the People's Justice Party (PJR) through which she has been elected to work for the Orang Asli Women's Development Division at the district and state level. The main focus of her work is on Indigenous Women's issues and development.

In 2020, the villagers of Fatimah's village found a notice pinned on a tree about logging activities taking place in a part of the forest that belongs to her community. The notice stated that the loggers had received approval from the government to enter their customary land and territory. However, they did not inform or obtain permission from the villagers. In total, about 405 hectares of land has been alienated for the purpose of oil palm cultivation. Actually, a lot of Orang Asli communities are struggling to gain control over their land. Even though most village leaders are concerned about their villages, some leaders have been blinded by the money offered by logging companies. These companies sometimes use the excuse that their indigenous land has not been recognized by the government, so they do not have the right to claim the land.

Fatimah decided to mobilize and lead a group of 82 Orang Asli families affected by the logging activities. Together with her mother, Yebet Saman, she has been one of the pioneers in this struggle for customary land claims. Fatimah is a brave and courageous woman, deeply concerned about the challenges faced by her community. This inspired her to stand up against the loggers and land grabbing issues. Although her husband fully supports her, it has not been an easy journey. There are still a lot of prejudices in her community against women in leadership roles. They believe women are not as capable as men, and that only men possess the power to influence others. As a result, her community did not support her in the beginning. Only a few villagers were willing to follow her in this fight, which resulted in strained relationships in the community as there was no unity among the people.

In the beginning, her family was also worried about her safety because she is a woman. They feared she would be attacked by someone who disagrees with her. Moreover, as she needs to travel frequently to meet with people outside her village or to attend workshops, she has limited time to spend with her family. It is one of the sacrifices she has to make to defend her land and village. On a personal level, Fatimah has to overcome the challenge of being illiterate due to her lack of education. She had started school, but was unable to complete her education. Being the eldest child, she had to help her parents to care for her seven younger siblings and two foster children. Her family was also poor and could not afford her education fees. Furthermore, most women in the Orang Asli community were not allowed to go to school in the past because of the traditional mindset that women are only meant to work in the kitchen and nurture their children and family.

Fatimah persevered and did not let these challenges stop her from fighting for her people. She is happy that her friends and family members are always willing to help her. She has also looked for external support through networking with NGOs and lawyers. She has acted as a mediator between her community and the experts among the NGOs and lawyers. She has invited these experts to assist her village with the mapping work necessary to claim back the grabbed land. She also tries to attend any workshop to build her capacity in order to help the villagers. The community now trusts her as they see her desire and commitment to fight and protect their land.



In 2012, Fatimah and the villagers filed a lawsuit against the sub-contractor, Foong Kwai Long of LKPP Corporation Sdn Bhd, who wanted to plant oil palms on their land. They also filed a lawsuit against the Pahang State Government, the Director General of the Orang Asli Development Department, the Director of the Land and Mines Department (Pahang) and the Malaysian Federal Government. The High Court in Kuantan rejected their case, claiming that they did not have enough proof to claim their land.

Fatimah and the community have worked very hard and put a lot of effort to make sure their land would not be taken from them. It has taken them six years to make the case and gather evidence through documenting their sacred places, herbs from the jungle and old tombs, and drawing a community map. Even though the area where their village is situated has been their customary land for a really long time, the villagers were forced to relocate by the government for "emergency and security reasons". Fatimah and her community did not give up, and they filed for an appeal to claim the area as their customary land and territory. The Appeal Court finally confirmed that the Indigenous Peoples in the Peninsular have the legal rights over their inheritance.

Fatimah stresses that this achievement was not possible without team work, external support and unity among her people. As they were successful in demanding the recognition of their rights, the case served as an inspiration for other Indigenous Women to stand up for their rights, get involved in planning and field work, and contribute to the documentation process to provide evidence. Indigenous Women are crucial in this fight and the documentation process because they possess extensive and unique knowledge about the forest. They know where to collect handicraft materials, medicinal plants and vegetables, and where suitable places are to do farming. She stresses the importance of empowering women in rural areas through involving them in any event or workshop that can serve as a platform to share experiences and knowledge with others.

After Fatimah and the villagers won the case in court, Fatimah has set up an association in her village, known as Persatuan Semaq Beri Kampung Ponpesal, to preserve the Orang Asli tradition in her village. Through this association, Fatimah organizes awareness programs on human rights, training, workshops, and other activities in her village. Fatimah has also started a project with the community members, including the youth, to document the traditional ingredients, history, gardens and old graves found in their forests and to map everything. This association serves as a platform for the residents to be jointly involved in monitoring and managing the forest, and to prevent encroachment activities by the government and/or private companies. This collaboration among the villagers also ensures that their customary land is continuously taken care of, and that their traditions and culture will be preserved and passed on to the future generations.

Fatimah indicated that her mother was her main source of inspiration to continue her journey as a female activist in her community, and to put her effort into preserving the cultural customs and traditions. Fatimah explained that her mother was a single mother and had separated from her husband when her children were still young. Her mother learned the meaning of struggle in life as she had to raise her children alone and had to ensure they were not hungry, had shelter and were protected from harm. Fatimah's mother believes in the importance of preserving their cultural traditions and knowledge. She has passed on the traditional knowledge to her children by bringing them to the jungle to find herbs and food. She also reminded her children about the importance of their cultural customs and traditions because it is a part of their lives and identity. Her mother has always encouraged Fatima. She believes that women should be more independent and not only depend on others or on men. According to her mother, women also need to master the skills that are necessary during difficult times. Fatimah added that her mother was also skilled in all work traditionally done by men.

As a woman who has learned to appreciate and is passionate about the customs and cultures of her village, Fatima has instigated other Orang Asli women to advocate for what is right by speaking out and taking up leadership roles. Fatima also would like to give three pieces of advice based on her experiences. First, and foremost, women must rise up and have the courage to come forward and voice their concerns. Women should be emotionally, physically and mentally strong to face challenges and encourage one another. Secondly, women need to be sensitive about the current situation and be confident enough to take a stand. As activists, women should also be a good example and uphold good values such as being respectful and not be corrupted. Thirdly, women need to take the initiative to improve themselves by gaining more skills and knowledge. On the other hand, they should not underestimate themselves and their abilities, even if they are not highly educated.

Fatimah believes that everyone has equal rights, and that women should continue to fight for equality and oppose any form of oppressions in their nation or society. She says, "Let us continue to encourage and empower other indigenous women in their struggle and advocacy work, because the hands that rock the cradle rule the world."

Written by Ita A/P Bah Nan
Malaysian CARE



MUNA ANAK GETOR



ETHNICITY: BIDAYUH

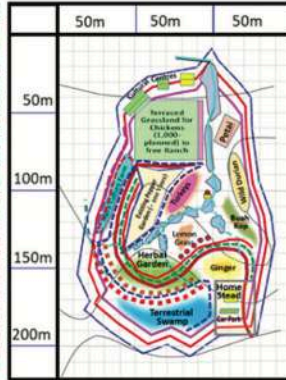
LOCATION: KUCHING DIVISION, SARAWAK STATE,
MALAYSIA

I am Muna Anak Getor and belong to the Bidayuh ethnic group. My home town is Kampung Tringgus Matan Nguan, located in Bau, Kuching division, Sarawak State. I have finished my secondary and pre-university education at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan (SMK) Lake. I participated in numerous extra-curriculum activities and did pretty well in tennis, hockey, football, badminton, table tennis, track events, javelin, shot put, and sepak takraw. Other activities I was involved in during my school years were camping, fishing, swimming and organizing cultural activities. I was also actively participating in various forums concerning indigenous issues, problems and solutions. In my community, the women usually do not get involved in such activities. Through all my extra-curricular activities during my school years, I have broken this tradition. In 1993, I was also the first girl to enter grade 6. I have proven that women can do the same things as men, and should have the right to do so.

Upon completion of my pre-university education and due to family commitments, I entered into politics and became a Secretary of the Sarawak political party, known as Parti Bumiputra Bersatu (PBB). I led the women division and took on issues about encroachment and land rights, deforestation of tropical forests, pollutants from palm oil plantations that kill in-situ aquatic life in rivers and streams, lack of quality water, rapid erosion of food biodiversity, and the destruction of the food production on land that indigenous peoples rely on for their livelihood.

After 22 years, I left the political party and took up a government job. I worked as a chief clerk for the ministry of education. In the hope to help my people through collaborative efforts with the government, I conducted research on how to empower our women, involve them in village activities and government programmes, and engage them with NGOs. I used my weekends to conduct my programmes, and gave talks or training to big groups of women and children. These efforts have garnered mixed results. As a government servant it was not easy to get involved with NGO activities. In the beginning, I also got problems with the headmen of the villages and even a group of women because women are considered as second-class human beings in my community. As the women are usually not exposed to the public, I decided to make a small programme where I only invited a few women, and I used my own money to run that programme. Due to this programme some women now have their own farm, and some have become a leader in their community or even got involved in politics. Moreover, as a government servant, it was easier for me to get help from the government to supply the villagers with hen, vegetables seeds and fish. The women could improve their life and more girls were able to get education.

The biggest challenge I have faced in my life happened in March 2011. I was attacked by a group of gangsters in Kuching town after I had stopped a timber company from taking wood from our forest. However, all these challenges have never stopped me from being socially active and empowering our women and peoples. I continue to lead and contribute to my community through my involvement as a chairwoman for the women group in the organization Biro Wanita KTMN, and as a committee member in the Jawatan Kuasa Kampung (JKK). The latter is organised under the flagship committee of Ketua Kampung (village chief), Mr. Maeh Anak Akui. The committee has a men's and a women's division and serves about 500 indigenous peoples, known as the Bidayuh Bangun. They live in the Krokong area, and their ancestral homeland is situated at Bangun Matan, near the Kalimantan Border.



LEGEND

- ■ ■ ■ Sago
- - - - Sugar Cane
- - - - Avacado
- - - - Willow Trees
- - - - Edible Bamboo
- - - - Functional Bamboo
- - - - Moringa Oleifera
- - - - Sugar Cane
- - - - Farm Road
- - - - Homestead Compound
- ● ● ● Black Stingless Bee
- Streams
- Fish Ponds

Over the years, I have also networked with other indigenous groups in Malaysia to find ways to help indigenous peoples at the grassroot level. In 2019, for example, I attended the "International Conference of Indigenous Peoples" in Kuala Tahan where about 50 international professors from various countries were presenting papers concerning issues indigenous peoples face. I represented Jaringan Orang Asal Semalaysia (JOAS) at the venue, and gave a presentation about the activities of indigenous communities in Malaysia and the issues they are facing.

Through all of these experiences, I realized that every country has issues at the local, national and even regional level regarding the domestic sphere or family unit. Over the years, it has dawned on me that a showcase example at the family level is needed. Hence, I had the plan to create a farm model where women are able to use their ideas to address universal recurring themes about food production, nutrition, education in farm science, and available clean water. I especially focussed on women because they are concerned about these three areas of human livelihood in order to take care of their families. These basic needs are systemic in every country. Through a permaculture farm model, I aim to incorporate the existing biodiversity, and to restore the richness of nature and its vibrant food system. Trainings and courses will be provided to those who want to learn more about permaculture. As indigenous peoples are mostly very poor, they will have the possibility to work and learn at the same time.

From the money I had saved as a government servant, I have bought a 4.5-acre plot of Native Customary Rights (NCR) land. NCR means that the land belongs to the government, so I do not have the right to plant or develop the land without the permission from the government. The plot I have bought has already been surveyed by a surveyor and endorsed by the headman of the community where I live. These documents have been sent together with my application letter to the land and survey office of the government to seek official clearance and approval. I have sent my application in September 2018, but until today I have not yet received approval.

In between my work and taking care of my five children aged between 12 to 23, I have devoted all my free time over the weekends and public holidays to work on my farm. I have only used traditional manual farm tools. To date I have a pepper garden, a vineyard bearing about 200 berries, a plot of lemon grass, and many different kinds of fruit trees. The vegetables that I have grown here and there on the farm supply all the organic vegetables needed to feed my family.

The permaculture farm is designed in a specific way so that each produce has its allocated place. This produce is grown for food, and over time the excess can be sold. Meanwhile, I am also organizing the infrastructure on the farm. This includes the farm road, chicken coops, fish ponds, mini-hydro power station, cultural amenities and so on. The idea is to bring together the elements of the food production and water supply in a scientific way. As these elements are interdependent, it is aimed to attune them to each other as much as possible in order to succeed.

I believe that this exercise of building an integrated permaculture farm model can serve as an impetus for the indigenous women's movement building. It creates a space to share experiences and lessons learned in order to better themselves and their families. At the same time, it strengthens their networks with people who share the same goals and core values of protecting their land and environment, and it provides a sustainable livelihood. I also believe that this small integrated permaculture farm will strengthen the indigenous women's capabilities and capacities, so they can showcase their role as leaders in developing and maintaining a sustainable social economic landscape.

This farm model could be carried forward by other indigenous women and indigenous women's organizations through identifying the needs that must be addressed. With more hands, the model could be completed in a shorter time and the methodology could be made available sooner. In this way, the indigenous women would be able to reap the benefits of the model sooner.

Written by Muna Anak Getor
MUNA PERMACULTURE

INDIGENOUS WOMEN OF TERIAN VILLAGE



ETHNICITY: KADAZANDUSUN

LOCATION: PENAM DISTRICT, SABAH, MALAYSIA

Terian village is one of the nine villages upstream of the Papar River, at the foot of Crocker Range National Park (CRNP). It is located along the "Salt Trail", a famous tourist attraction among local and international tourists. The name of the village is derived from the Dusun word "miri-tiri" or "tirian" which means "drip". It refers to a historical moment when dripping water was discovered in a rock crevice by a villager. Long time ago, the village was badly hit by a long and severe drought, threatening the livelihood of the villagers. In order to solve the water crisis, the village head had called upon the villagers for help. A brave villager walked a whole day without any food or water to search for water. His discovery of the water dripping in the crevice was a blessing for the whole village and has since helped the village to sustain their livelihood. The journey to search water indicates the resilience of the Terian villagers, and their strong connection to the river and their sacred land as a part of their ancestral and spiritual bond, oral history and identity.

The villagers belong to the Kadazandusun ethnic group. The village has existed for many generations and is a self-sustaining community. Some elders indicate that the Kadazandusun already inhabited the land well before the Japanese occupation in 1941. In the mid-1980s, the villagers have applied to obtain Native Customary Rights (NCR) to their land, which is regulated under the Sabah Land Ordinance. The recognition of the NCR land ownership is based on evidence or signs of early inhabitation or occupation of the land. Until today, they are still waiting for approval.

The facilities in the village have been built by the community itself, or have been subsidized by the government and non-government organizations. The village has a Community Learning Centre (CLC), school, solar power station, and micro-hydro dam for electricity purposes. Terian also has a water catchment area of 180 hectares, formed by two main water sources – the Bunsadan I and Bunsadan II river. The people of Terian village rely on the water catchment for three main purposes: general household use and consumption supplied through a gravity feed system, generation of electricity through a micro-hydro dam, and irrigation of their rice paddies.

For the Kadazandusun, life revolves around three fundamentals: family, land and its resources. Their food comes from nearby rivers, the forest and crops they grow, such as rice and fruit. Their houses and the CLC have been built out of timber and bamboo from the forest, the windows are open or covered in mesh, and the kitchen consists of a fire pit for cooking. Education plays a key role in the children's lives. Terian has its own school and the CLC buildings also have small classrooms. Even though the facilities are basic, the children are among the best students in the Penampang region. While formal education is very important to the community, the villagers believe that traditional education is the most important. Next to the formal curriculum, the CLC educates the children, youth and elders through an informal process of side activities that takes place spontaneously and without structure. Through everyday activities at work, school or at the place of recreation, traditional knowledge and skills are acquired, and attitudes and views are formed.

The women play an important role in ensuring that traditional knowledge and cultural values are transferred to the next generation. In fact, the women are important in every aspect of the community's life as they hold the knowledge and are the key persons to access and take care of resources. They are priestesses, healers, astronomers, agriculturists, meteorologists and educators. They possess knowledge on traditional medicine, crafts, rituals, agriculture and hunting traditions. They also practice cultural customs on natural resources management like the Gompì Guno concept, which means "use and care". It underpins a resource management system that ensures continuous availability of resources through sustainable practices in their daily life.

Indigenous communities depend on natural resources such as land, forest, rivers and wildlife for their livelihood. As such, great care is taken to ensure that the natural resources can be used indefinitely. Traditional agricultural practices are often seen to be in conflict with forest conservation, but are in fact very dependent on the availability of forestland for its continuation. To ensure the forests are kept healthy and productive, unnecessary clearing and cutting of trees are prohibited. The opening of farmland is usually on a small scale and restricted to secondary forest. When the fertility of the land is reduced, a fallow period is observed to give the land rest and restore its fertility. Similarly, to ensure that wildlife continues to exist, selective hunting is practiced, whereby only matured animals are killed.



View of the Terian river
(source: Rojieka Scarlett).

Besides this, the head of the village and the community members collaborated to create a community protocol for the water catchment areas to ensure its lifelong use for the current and future generations. The management of the water catchment creates awareness among the village members and enhances their knowledge about land and forest management in dealing with, and assisting the country in addressing the effects of climate change and unplanned or commercial land clearing. The community also tries to promote their management practices.

However, the villagers also face some challenges. The primary forest that functions as a water catchment area for the Terian river is partly located in the CRNP and is partly privately owned. Even though the community got permission from the Sabah Park authorities to use and protect the water catchment, the community has not yet received a written acknowledgement. In the past, there have also been incidents with outsiders who entered the community forest to profit from the sale of agarwood and exotic animals. The villagers try to cope with this through their continued cooperation with Sabah Park to care for and protect the CRNP area, including reporting any illegal collection of valuable wood and exotic animals, and illegal fishing upstream of the Terian river.

In Terian, the women have applied the Gompri Guno concept to the management of the watershed, which is very important as many communities rely on gravity-fed water systems for sustainable and clean water. Through applying Gompri Guno, the forest resources will not go extinct and electricity is generated for the community in a sustainable manner. Moreover, in order to ensure that the traditional knowledge and practices on management and protection of natural resources will not get lost, their heritage and available resources have been documented.

The biggest challenge or threat for the community is the proposed construction of the Kaiduan Dam (now known as the Papar Dam) which was announced in 2009 by the government. The communities in the Ulu Papar valley, including Terian village, not only face the risk of being forcibly displaced, but also to lose their customary land, customs, culture, and traditional knowledge when the connection of the communities to their land and its resources is severed. The community has already taken several measures such as installing generators for water supply, rainwater harvesting, improving and increasing water intake plants at the Papar and Mandalipau River, as well as decreasing high non-revenue water (NRW) which is a water supply system that incurs a high loss of water before researching its destination. Besides this, the community has also erected blockades and held demonstrations, sent memorandums, held workshop with NGOs and dialogues with government agencies to lobby and share the views and suggestions from the community.

Another challenge is climate change, which is hard to predict and affects the agricultural yields such as paddy, fruit and commercial crops like rubber. Additionally, it is feared that the Kaiduan Dam project will aggravate climate change and also destroy biodiversity. The community has therefore worked together with NGOs, academic institutions and government agencies, such as Sabah Park, to conduct a bio-cultural and biodiversity research in Ulu Papar to document the relationship between community life and nature. The outcome of the research has contributed to the recognition of Ulu Papar as a World Heritage Site in 2014. The community's effort in protecting natural resources through their traditional knowledge is their main weapon in their struggle against the construction of the dam.

To overcome these challenges, leadership in the community is needed which is the key to get organized and do advocacy and lobby work. Leadership also helps to build a network through different agencies such as the government, NGOs, lawyers, academia and other relevant actors. Even though the women are the pivotal figures to protect and sustainably manage natural resources through their traditional knowledge and application of customary practices, it is still a challenge for the women of Terian to be elected as leaders. There is still a lack of recognition for the role of women because the men, who are considered as stronger, dominate the community. As women are more responsible, concerned about safety, and focused and sensitive to their environment, they could strengthen advocacy and lobby work, and contribute considerably to the decision-making process.



Kadazandusun IW peeling betel nut
(source: #SaveUluPapar).

Despite these challenges, the villagers and the women have also received some opportunities. One such opportunity is that Terian, together with another nearby village, has been elected for a community-organizing programme by PACOS. This implies that the village has become a field work area for NGOs, activists and academia to help highlight the issues of the community. The villagers are closely working together in order to promote learning from each other. The programme also aims to enhance the villagers' awareness of the importance of preserving their traditional knowledge and to pass it on to the next generations. Besides this, the programme creates an opportunity for the involvement of women in advocacy, lobbying and decision-making. Through the implementation of activities in terms of ideas, opinions, fieldwork, information and data retrieval, and meetings with outsiders, the women are becoming more confident and firmer in their stances, whilst also being careful in their decision-making.



Environmental conservation campaign on World River Day, along with a protest against the dam construction (source: #SaveUluPapar).

As for now, the community hopes that Sabah Park will give their trust to and cooperate with the community to protect and manage the water catchment area that is included in the CRNP. They also hope that the Sabah Park authorities will continue their Community Use Zone initiatives in Terian, which involves cooperation between the community and the government agencies to protect and preserve forest areas nearby the community. The government should also understand and recognize the importance of indigenous knowledge in the management and protection of biological resource diversity as stated in the UNDRIP, CBD, ILO 169 and other mechanisms that can tackle climate change. Hence, the villagers believe that the Papar Dam project should be cancelled because it will be a main contributor to climate change and the destruction of biodiversity. Lastly, women should be given more opportunities and (financial) support to attend any training and exposure to enhance their capacity.

Written by Diana Sipail
Taskforce Against Kaiduan Dam



CHANGING GLOBAL AGENDA WITH MOVEMENT BUILDING:

Story 9. Viengmany Lournatou
Story 10. Yasso Kanti
Story 11. Kirti
Story 12. IW of Gobindagonj
Story 13. NK Keny
Story 14. Rashimoni
Story 15. Ina Alupa



VIENGMANY LORNAOTOU



ETHNICITY: HMONG

LOCATION: VIENTIANE,
LAO PDR

Viengmany Lornaotou, was born in 1977 in Vientiane, the capital of Lao PDR. She belongs to the Hmong ethnic minority group, who originated from China and then migrated to Vietnam and Laos. She grew up in an urban setting in the Laolung neighborhood, where she was exposed to different ideas than her community's beliefs and norms. She got married in 2003 with a man from the same ethnic group as her cultural tradition does not allow her to marry others. At present, she works at Gender Development Association (GDA), and focuses on gender-based violence and gender equality. Also, she is a member of the Gender Development Association and Bamboo

She was motivated to work for gender equality due to her own experience in her family and community as a whole. One example was her parent's decision to adopt a boy child to continue their lineage and culture. Despite being educated, they still strictly follow the Hmong traditions. Her culture and community prioritize men over women to lead, represent and make decisions at the household and community level. She says that women are not given equal respect and opportunities in spite of their education, skills and capability. In her culture, women are not provided any platform or space for leadership and decision-making, which she considers as a big obstacle for the women of her community to come forward and have their voices heard. She says, "men and women should be equal and women should serve the same roles as men." She feels that women should value themselves and explore their opportunities. She emphasizes that women should fight for their rights.

Hmong communities usually live in the mountains as they want to be close to forest for their food, medicines and herbs. Over the time there has been a lot of deforestation to turn forest into farmland. This deforestation, together with changes in the climate, has caused the community to face water problems. Such scarcity of water has affected the livelihood and workload of women. Women now have to walk further to fetch water, adding to the drudgery of their everyday life. Viengmany remarks that gender inequality still persists in her community and culture. Girls generally have to work from nine years old and a gender stereotyped role is assigned to them through the example of their mother and grandmother.

The Hmong believe that once a girl is married, she does not belong to their community anymore. They use the girls' labor till they marry at the age of fourteen or fifteen. They also have the tradition to receive money from their son-in-law or his family when they give their daughter. After marriage, the daughters are told to not return under any circumstance. In case of separation or divorce, they are not allowed to go back to their house. The head of the village are mostly men and even at the household level, men are the leaders and decision makers; whereas the women are confined to their household chores and carry the heavy workload of executing household and farm work. She states, "women have almost no voice or opportunity to instill positive changes." She also remarks that there is a high early marriage rate in most of the ethnic minority groups due to the culture of forcefully "catching" a girl to marry her. She says that even though things have improved over the time, much more still needs to be done.

In 2015, she started to work with the ethnic minority communities through collecting and assessing information about their traditional practices and gender-based violence. During her work with communities in Nonghad district, she experienced that women still have limited access to fundamental rights like education, and healthcare in terms of reproductive health, family planning and information. She says that women's limited access to basic services, under-participation and representation is caused by cultural barriers and patriarchal settings. "For example," she explained, "most of the men take part in agricultural trainings, but the knowledge is not transferred to women who are the actual workers in the field."

In 2017, twelve young women from the Hmong ethnic minority, including herself, engaged themselves to set up the "Bringing Heart to Share Happiness" project. The team was formed through a common interest in helping Lao women with their collective development. The main purpose of the project was to provide an opportunity to women to rejoice and value themselves. The focus of the project was to empower women through the development of women support groups and mentoring programs, and to ultimately improve the lives of women throughout Lao PDR, especially in the ethnic minority regions.

Within the team, there was a strong representation of Hmong women which was recognized by the group as a valuable asset to connect with ethnic groups in the villages and facilitate planned interventions. The group also recognized the matriarchal strength of the Hmong women which was used to extend the scope of the project work. Their first activity was a village-based intervention where they distributed donated cloths and educational materials. The program was supported by the efforts from the team of young ethnic Hmong women, and generously donated materials by Akido Center, Sakavy Company, Helping Poor and Vulnerable People in Laos Association, friends and relatives.

The main challenges the project has faced were securing regular funding, and shifting the mindset of the Hmong women to overcome the barriers of deeply embedded cultural norms. Their project came to an end because the team members had less time to engage themselves due to various other commitments. Yet, in the future Viengmany hopes to continue the project as she perceives the immense potential for change within the Hmong community. She aspires to build a new team and register an organization, through the support of some funding, to promote gender equality, advocate equal roles among men and women, encourage civic engagement and civil society development, facilitate economic empowerment, and improve the women's knowledge on governance and legislative rights. Till then, she wants to continue supporting Hmong women through sharing her experiences and knowledge on leadership skills, education, health and economic empowerment.

Written by Viengmany Lornaotou
Gender Development Association



YASSO KANTI BHATTACHAN



ETHNICITY: THAKALI

LOCATION: THASANG,
NEPAL

Yasso Kanti Bhattachan is a prominent Indigenous Woman, academician and activist from Nepal. She belongs to the Thakali Indigenous Peoples. Her ancestral land is Thasang, which is located in the trans-Himalayan region of Nepal, at the border with Tibet. She married her patrilineal and matrilineal cross cousin who also belongs to the Thakali Indigenous Peoples. In the last four decades, she has been studying and conducting research on gender and Indigenous Peoples, and has been advocating for Indigenous Women's rights. She is also actively engaged in various international and regional forums and networks to advance the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

She embarked on her journey of advocating for the rights of Indigenous Peoples and women when Nepal was under the autocratic partyless Panchayat regime, which upheld the idea of "One King, One Nation, One Language and One Attire." She realized that such a belief was a threat to the Indigenous Peoples' collective life, including their customs, tradition, religion, culture and language. As a result, she and some other Thakali youngsters initiated and established the Thakali Youth Family in 1977. During that time, she also participated in programs conducted by the Thakali Welfare Committee which fueled her aspiration to serve her ethnic community. As she was very aware of her identity and culture, she did her Master's thesis on the socio-cultural aspects of her own community.

After her marriage, she accompanied her husband to the United States of America for his studies. During her six years' stay in California, she learned about the issues and movements of Native Americans, and the African-American, Latino and LGBTI community, which instigated her to reflect on the multi-cultural, multi-religion and multi-language population in Nepal. When she came back in 1993, various indigenous organizations had unified and established an umbrella organization, called the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), to advocate for their rights and identity. She decided to participate in NEFIN's movement and activities.

At the same time, she also joined the Post Graduate Program on Women's Studies in Kathmandu, where she learned about women's right movements in Nepal as well as international women's movements. It made her realize that an Indigenous Women's movement was needed to ensure their identity and rights. The indigenous movement led by NEFIN was dominated by men and the women were just participants, their issues and identity were not acknowledged or noticed. To find space in the mainstream women's movement and within the Indigenous Peoples' movement, she, along with four likeminded Indigenous Women activists formed an ad hoc Indigenous Women committee, called the Indigenous Women Organization of Nepal (IWON). They organized a mass meeting of Indigenous Women from different districts, including Kathmandu Valley. During the meeting, they decided to establish a coalition to forward the Indigenous Women's movement within the Indigenous Peoples' movement. In 2000, they successfully registered the National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF) which encompasses different Indigenous Women's organizations and represents 59 Indigenous Peoples formally recognized by the government.

Since then, they have been moving forward through expanding their network via District Coordination Committees in order to reach out to more Indigenous Women's organizations. Now there are 43 affiliated organizations, 61 district coordination committees, and coordinators in 7 provinces. She says that over the years, more Indigenous Women's organizations have been established, and they have been collectively working towards Indigenous Women's movement building, advocating on Indigenous Women issues, and raising their voice on intersectional issues in Nepal. She, along with other Indigenous Women alliances in Nepal, was part of the second people's movement in 2006 to demand the end of the absolute power of the King and the writing of a new constitution by an elected Constituent Assembly. At the same time, they also demanded the recognition of Indigenous Peoples' rights including self-determination, autonomy and identity-based federalism. They had launched a song which was used during the movement in order to keep the spirit of Indigenous Women high to defend their rights and fight for their identity, lands rights, participation and representation, and to eliminate the criminalization of Indigenous Women's knowledge, skills and practices.



CEDAW Pre-session in Kathmandu (source: NIWF).

Yasso explained that the Beijing Conference of 1995 had contributed substantially to the Indigenous Women's movement in Nepal. It made them aware about the specific Indigenous Women's rights and the necessity to establish those rights in Nepal. She explained that three major actions have taken place. First was the establishment of an organization for collective movement to raise awareness about Indigenous Women issues and their cultural, political, legal and social needs. Secondly, the Indigenous Women movement in Nepal has been fighting for an inclusive and meaningful participation and representation at all levels of decision making, and the ratification of conventions, including ILO Convention No. 169 and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Thirdly, they have put forward demands related to Indigenous Peoples and women, the identification of Indigenous Women's rights, equal and easy access to public services and racial discrimination against Indigenous Women. She said that the Indigenous Women's movement had collaborated with the mainstream women's movement in the past, but there still exist gaps in the realization of Indigenous Women's rights and a lack of acknowledgement by the mainstream women's movement.

According to Yasso, the Indigenous Women's identity and issues are still not recognized by the constitution or in state policies, laws, plans and programs in Nepal, nor has the intersectionality among women been acknowledged. She thinks that such a blanket approach has made Indigenous Women invisible in laws, policies, plans, and programs. She also believes that Indigenous Women are underrepresented in public spheres, both in politics and public services, which has pushed them further into marginalization.

She recalled an experience of 2011, during the submission of the CEDAW shadow report. Nepal had been allotted 18 minutes to present their issues. Six different themes would be addressed for three minutes each. She planned to speak about the Indigenous Women of Nepal, however, the women rights activists from Nepal tried to convince her that the issues of Indigenous Women fall under the category of minorities and disadvantaged groups. They told her that these issues should be addressed under the theme of disadvantaged women, instead of having a separate theme for Indigenous Women. She refused their proposal on the ground that Indigenous Women's issues and rights are entirely different from other women's issues and rights, so it could not be merged into the category of women or disadvantaged women. Hence, she has talked about the Indigenous Women's issues and concerns for the full three minutes. Her statement on the situation of Indigenous Women of Nepal has been a historic game changer in the context of women's movements, and especially Indigenous Women's movements.

Yasso has been a voice for the voiceless Indigenous Women of Nepal at national, regional and international platforms, and has been advocating against racial and gender discrimination. She also remarked that the recent CEDAW shadow report has brought about a huge achievement for Indigenous Women of Nepal. She was part of the Nepali team to prepare a shadow report from the perspective of Indigenous Women in which they included fifteen recommendations. Thereupon, on November 14, 2018, the UN has given recommendations to the government of Nepal to amend the constitution to explicitly recognize the rights of Indigenous Women, and in particular their rights to self-determination in line with UNDRIP. She also indicated that she has a very high appreciation for MADRE, RLS-NYC, IWGIA and AIPP for their full support to the cause of Indigenous Women in Nepal, because without those organizations she would have not been able to come this far.

Besides this, Yasso firmly believes that Indigenous Peoples are the custodians of climate justice, however, they also bear the negative impacts of climatic change, and struggle to adapt or mitigate the changes. She has worked on climate justice with the Bankaria, Chepang, Pahari and Thami indigenous communities, and produced a research report in which she has presented the issues of climate change and highlighted the role of Indigenous Women in adapting to climate change. She has also been advocating for climate justice internationally through attending various summits, seminars, workshops and side events on climate change all over the world. For example, she has participated, together with MADRE and other global Indigenous Women leaders, in a climate justice demonstration in Washington D.C. She has been a panelist in a High-Level Panel Discussion on "Challenges and Opportunities in Achieving Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Indigenous Women and Girls", and also during a recent interaction with US Congresswoman Debra Haaland, organized by MADRE.



She strongly believes that protecting and promoting the collective way of living, along with ownership and control of land, territories and resources by Indigenous Peoples through their customary law and institutions, is the only way to save Mother Earth and to save human beings from going extinct. Through her efforts, along with other indigenous experts, activists and journalists, the endangered Bankaria Indigenous Peoples, who live in Musedhap in the Parsa National Park, have been able to receive citizenship certificates and a 20 year-lease of the land they inhabit.

She says, "I have a dream of seeing equity and equality in Nepal on the basis of gender, caste/ethnicity, language, religion, tradition, culture, region and class. We know that there is still a long way to go before we can fully enjoy our rights. I believe that discrimination against women must end, and discrimination among women must also end. I strongly believe that by blending academic and activist work, we can reach our destination soon."

Written by Yasso Kanti Bhattachan & Richa Pradhan
National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF)



Yasso during a 3-minute presentation at a CEDAW session in NY (source: Yasso Khanti Bhattachan).



Street protest in Kathmandu (source: NIWF).



Climate Defenders at Washington DC (source MADRE).

KIRTI NEELESH VARTHA

My name is Kirti Neelesh Vartha. I was born in Dahanu Tehsil in Palghar district, Maharashtra state which is the border with Gujarat state in the western part of India. My parents belong to different indigenous communities; my father is Varli and my mother Dhodia. As I was brought up in a mixed culture, I can speak Varli, Dhodian, Hindi, Gujarati and Marathi since my childhood. I have a university degree in Commerce.



I grew up in a small town where most children were from the Gujarati dominant community. I did not have any adivasi (indigenous) friends in school or college. During my holidays or free time, I used to visit the village. I loved spending time with the old ladies, so I developed an attachment to them. From a young age I was interested in social work. I used to help the old and needy people through assisting them to go to the hospital, or help them with government papers.

Gender awareness programme in a school by Kirti (Source: Tanvi Vartha).

ETHNICITY: VARLI AND DHODIA

LOCATION: PALGHAR DISTRICT,
MAHARASTRA STATE
WESTERN INDIA

In 2003, I got married to Neelesh Vartha, a Varli man. Now, we are living with our daughters, Tanvi and Swarali, in Mahim, Palghar. In the Varli family and community, the women have different, yet important roles. For example, Savasin (married women whose husbands are alive), Dhavleri (widowed women), Soyin (healers and indigenous health practitioners) and Talanwali (performs rites and rituals related to death) have designated roles, particularly during marriage ceremonies, pregnancy, prenatal and postnatal care, and rituals after death. My mother-in-law, who is a Savasin, performs many rituals and ceremonies. She is knowledgeable of herbal medicines and indigenous health practices. I had the opportunity to learn about many things from both my husband and mother-in-law, I started to promote this knowledge in the community.

The establishment of Adivasi Shramik Mahila Mandal

One of my neighbors was an adivasi woman. She was educated and working in an office. One day her husband died of a heart attack and she became a widow. Her in-laws started to torture her, and blamed her for her husband's death. I wanted to help her, but was afraid the community would not support me. However, one day I took the courage to talk to some women in the village, and called for a meeting. We decided to form Adivasi Shramik Mahila Mandal (Working Indigenous Women Federation), through which we aimed to address many issues in the community.

There is a non-indigenous community next to our village. They are considered as a criminal community due to their engagement in stealing, attacking, looting and so on. When we registered our organization, we put up a big signboard at the entrance of the village. This gave a strong message to outsiders about the presence of a group of strong women. Even the non-indigenous men who used to gather at the village entrance to pass time or tease our young girls discontinued their misbehavior. And, the conflict between the two communities slowly disappeared.

With our progressive work, we had more women members joining organization. We started to assert our rights through monitoring and implementing developmental activities from the Gram Panchayat, a formalized self-governing system at the village level. In 2010, we took up the responsibility to build toilets in every household, construct roads, street lights and organize other community welfare activities which were primarily carried out by the men. During the process, I was associated with the Adivasi Ekta Parishad, a large platform of Indigenous Peoples' movements in western India. Through this platform, our women got the opportunity to be part of a big forum, engage in many activities, and learn from each other. We started to celebrate international women's day every year, and initiated an anti-alcohol campaign in the village.

One day, we came across a case of discrimination by a primary school teacher against indigenous female students. We went to the school to condemn the teacher and lodged a police complaint. Thereafter, we were determined to address the issues of that Indigenous children are facing at school. During our factfinding mission at the Ashram residential schools run by the government in Palghar district, we found out that the children were facing many issues such as sexual violence, suicide, and psychological problems. Thereafter, we developed a strategy plan and annually conducted a gender awareness program in schools and hostels for 15 days before March 8 (International Women's Day). We submitted a memorandum to the district collector and sat on a hunger protest to demand female wardens as there used to be only male wardens. Over the years, there has been improvement at residential schools. Young girls are aware of their rights and empowered to defend themselves. So, we have been successful in this mission.



Gender awareness programme in a school by Kirti (Source: Tanvi Vartha).

During this period, I had an opportunity to be associated with FIMI (International Indigenous Women's Forum, Peru), Dhaatri and the Inter State Adivasi Women's Network (ISAWN) and I am more aware about the rights of Indigenous Women. In 2019, I went to Cambodia, which was my first trip outside the country, to attend an international women's rights program. There were Indigenous Women from eight Asian countries. I also attended the Asia Regional Indigenous Women's Annual Exchange Program in Malaysia which was organized by AIPP. The event provided me international exposure, and learning experience. and opportunity to learn from other Indigenous Women leaders. Through the experience sharing during the event I realized that our issues are the same and it has empowered me.

Indigenous Women, land rights and movement building

In collaboration with the Adivasi Ekta Parishad, we are currently campaigning against the Delhi-Mumbai Industrial Corridor Project (DMIC). This is a mega industrial development project which was launched in December 2006 through a MoU signed between the government of India and Japan. It is one of the world's largest infrastructure projects with an estimated investment of US\$90 billion, and is aimed to be a high-tech industrial zone spread across six states. Our women together with Indigenous Peoples and farmers representing 24 organizations across Maharashtra and Gujarat states, have joined a movement to oppose the proposed showpiece project which includes a freight corridor, the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train, and the Mumbai-Vadodara expressway. The project will pass through tribal heartland such as Thane, Dahanu, Palghar, Navsari and Valsad district, and the union territory of Dadra-Nagar Haveli. Our stand is that we are not against the development, but it should not be at the cost of Indigenous Peoples' rights and lives. If the project will implement then we will lose our traditional land and livelihood. The area might progress through the big buildings, malls and factories, but the original inhabitants will be driven out.



Our people do not have the capacity to absorb these kinds of development. The project has violated the constitutional provision like the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act (PESA) and the Forest Right Act (FRA). The authorities are blatantly ignoring resolutions which was passed by local Gram Sabhas (village councils) against these projects.

Economic empowerment of Indigenous Women

We have also initiated a union of about 80 to 90 adivasi women who generate an income through selling vegetables, fruits and forest products. The municipality officials often harass them. They are not allowed to sell their products on the roadside reasoning it causes traffic jams. We have been lobbying with the municipality officials to provide us with a space in the public market to sell the products. We have continued to fight for our rights as all eight Tahsils (i.e. land and revenue administrations) in Palghar district are scheduled areas. This means that the district has a predominant indigenous population and is therefore subjected to a special governance mechanism as directed by the central government in safeguarding the cultural and economic interests of the scheduled ethnic minorities in the area.

Promotion of IW's role in indigenous tradition, art and culture

One of the unique things we are doing is the promotion of the Varli women who play significant roles in the community, such as the Savasin, Dhavleri, Soyin and Talanwali. In contrast to Indian society, where widowed women play very limited roles and face various social stigmas and societal norms, Varli widowed women play an important role in our culture to perform marriage blessings, indigenous health practices, and other life-cycle rites and rituals. We have collected the data of Dhavleri women from all over Palghar district, and are mobilizing them through making them aware of their important role in preserving our unique indigenous tradition and culture in this age of globalization. It has been a revolutionary step, as many Varli people have been influenced by the Indian dominant culture and religion. They are in progress in reverting back to their indigenous practices.



Our women union selling their products
(source: Kirti Neelesh Vartha).

We are also promoting the world famous Varli art and knowledge. For thousands of years, Varli women have been drawing paintings during harvest season and happy occasions, like weddings and births. One of the most popular themes in Varli painting is the spiral chain of humans around one central motif, which represents our belief that life is an eternal journey and has no beginning or end. Varli art is mostly designed in geometric shapes such as circles, triangles and squares to depict the life and beliefs of the Varli community which is centered around nature.

Wedding paintings such as Langna Chauk and Dev Chauk are auspicious and sacred elements of a Varli wedding ceremony, and are ritualistically drawn by Savasin women. Square shaped drawings, geometrical strips and outlines are drawn with rice powder paste onto cow dung applied to the wall of a house. Around this, drawings are made of different gods, goddesses, and sacred symbols. While the Savasin women draw the Chauk, the Dhavleri women sing specific hymns to invoke the presence of the gods, goddesses and ancestors in order to bless the couple. The Chauk depicts the nature, and the social and community life into which the newly married couple are going to enter.



Our women union selling their products on the roadside in Palghar city (source: Alma Grace Barla)

It depicts the rich knowledge and creativity that the Varli women behold. Moreover, Varli art is not just art, but also our script and identity. The paintings were exclusively drawn by women until the late 1970s, when a man named Jivya Soma Mashe started to paint non-ritual Warli art. With the influence of urbanization and globalization this art has been highly commercialized by non-indigenous outsiders and taken over by males which has caused great damage to our community.

Therefore, our team is promoting the role of the Dhavleri women and training the young generation to pass on traditional knowledge. We have trained about 99 girls in two schools in Lathane and Adivasi Ashram School, Palghar district with sole purpose of passing on indigenous knowledge to the next generation to preserve our cultural heritage. Besides this, we are strengthening Indigenous Women groups to support each other in every way possible, and to be self-reliant, confident, self-sufficient and educated.

During the course of my journey I have witnessed many challenges such as no cooperation from the government officials during lobbying and advocacy campaigns, receiving threats from construction agents, and being pressured by politicians and their parties. But, I have been fueled and inspired by support and encouragement from many people. They have helped me to prove myself, and to stand up for myself and society. A woman is still considered less important till the date in indigenous community. At social work women and men have equal role and responsibility and women with additional responsibility of raising a family is challenging at times. Despite the contribution of women, women's representation and participation in decision making processes within family and community is still not equal.



Dr. Vikrant Valvi's marriage being blessed by Dhavleri women. He also made a video to appeal to the youth to conduct their wedding rituals with Dhavleri women and revive the vanishing Varli culture. (Source: Chandan Dhak)

The whole movement has given me ample opportunities to utilize my knowledge and become a voice for the marginalized. I comprehend and address community's issues and problems by listening to their stories and voices. The movement has taught me to be patient and persistent to find a solution. If I lose patience, the movement would break. In this course, when problems are not addressed by dialogue then we follow the democratic process by submitting written complaints and memorandums to the concerned administration or government. If the government does not respond, we make use of printed, electronic and social media like WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and email, to create public opinion and pressure the government on the issue. We have adopted a non-violent path, like holding protests, silent protests, hunger strikes, and press releases.

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Translated by Alma Grace Barla



Widowed Priestess blessing a marriage (Source: Punam Chauré).



Savasin Women (source: Kirti Neelesh Vartha).

IW OF GOBINDAGONJ VILLAGE



The National Indigenous Parishad submitting a memorandum on July 17, 2019 (Source: BIWN).

ETHNICITY: SANTAL

LOCATION: GAIBANDHA DISTRICT,
BANGLADESH

It happened on November 6, 2016. Three Santal indigenous men were killed during a brutal attack at Sahibganj–Bagda farm in Gobindagonj Upazila, Gaibandha district of Bangladesh. On the same day, 30 people were injured, 30 indigenous leaders were jailed, more than 200 houses were burned down, and about 1,200 Santal Indigenous Peoples were displaced from their ancestral land. This land, which covers a surface of 1,840 acres, was grabbed from the Santals and Bengali in 1962 to cultivate sugar cane for the state-owned Rangpur Sugar Mill. The sugar mill went out of production in 2004, however, the land was not returned to the owners. According to the East Bengal (Emergency) Requisition of Property Act 1948 (No. VIII of 1948), "requisitioned land that is not used for the purposes of its requisition, must be returned to its original owner by the authorities". Instead of returning the land, the sugar mill officials leased the land to others, thereby violating the terms and conditions mentioned in the land acquisition documents.

As the land owners started to gather to claim back their land, cases were filed by sugar mill officials and police inspectors against the indigenous and Bengali farmers of Saibganj–Bagda farm. Eventually, an attack was carried out in an attempt to evict the land owners. Video-footage of that time, which was telecasted on several local television channels, including Al Jazeera, showed that police personnel and two sub-inspectors of the Gobindagonj police station were involved in the torching of Santal houses. Later, a police probe report also revealed the involvement of two policemen in setting Santal houses on fire, and another probe report from the Chief Judicial magistrate found that three police officers and some local people were involved in the arson attacks. Besides this, the Santal community leaders claim that two former lawmakers were physically present, and directing the local assailants and police to attack them. The Santals also claim that the planners of the attack include officials from Rangpur Sugar Mills Ltd., the Mills Labour Union, and the Union Parishad (UP).

Until today, the wives of the Santal men who were killed during the incident did not receive any help or support from the government. Only UNDP and other NGOs have provided them with rehabilitation assistance. Hence, the widowed women decided to join their forces to fight for justice for their deceased husbands. The three women are Prescella Murmu, Olivia Murmu and Trishna Murmu. The Santal culture is patriarchal, so it is not common for women to take up a leadership role in the community. The traditional roles of the women are to look after the children and take care of the household activities. The men are usually the leaders and at the front of protests and rallies.

When the police came to burn their houses, the men could not go forward to protest against the violence as they risked being shot or arrested by the police. As the men are often the main targets of the police, the women took a lead in the protest. The three women came forward to lead the other Santal women and men. As members of the Shahebganj Bagdafarm Bhumi Uddhar Songram Committee (SBFBUSC) they went from house to house to convince the men and women in the village to attend the human barricades against the land grabbing, to demand justice, and to fight for Indigenous Peoples' rights.



Protests at Sahibganj – Bagda farm (Source: Manik Soren).



Protests on Sahibganj – Bagda farm (Source: Manik Soren)

On March 3, 2017, hundreds of Santal men and women have held a big protest march, organized by Rabindranath Soren, President of the Jatiyo Indigenous Parishad. The three women helped to organize the community men and women to join the march. The protesters carried their traditional Santal bow and arrow, waved red flags, placards, banners and festoons, and marched from Sahebganj-Bagda farm to Gobindagonj municipality before staging protest in front of the Saheed Minar Premises to submit a seven-point demand to the government. The demand included the return of their ancestral land; compensation for the deceased and injured; withdrawal of the cases filed against evicted Santals and stopping police harassment; adherence to the East Bengal Requisition of Property act; arrest and punishment of the people responsible for setting Santal houses on fire and those who masterminded the attack; and taking legal action against the sugar mill officials who leased the Santal's ancestral land to others.

Since the incident took place, the women have formed human barricades and organized monthly rallies on the first week or last week of the month. During the rallies, the women have played a crucial role in the debate with the land grabbers and Members of Parliament for the return of their land. Gradually, they have become leaders in their village, and now the whole indigenous community supports them in this struggle. They are determined to continue until the villagers can get their land in Shahebgonj-Bagda farm back. It has not always been easy though. During their struggles, the women have faced a lot of challenges. They have been attacked while attending rallies and forming human barricades, roadblocks have been thrown up, and they have been harassed and threatened by the police and powerful persons in the ruling party. Moreover, after the loss of their husband, the life of the three women has become very difficult as they are now solely responsible for the care of their family and children. It is a huge burden they have to carry alone. However, they try to be strong and combine their farm work and household chores, together with their activism.

On July 17, 2019, the unified Santal-Bengali community assembled and held a sit-in programme in front of the Deputy Inspector General's premises in Rangpur. The president of the SBFBUSC, Philimon Baskey, presided over the demonstration and the three women were also present to support the assembly. A memorandum was submitted to point out that almost three years after the attack, the police has not yet submitted an investigation report. About 10 days later, the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) submitted a charge-sheet without naming any policeman, as well as local ex-Member of Parliament who are claimed to be the masterminds of the incident. Moreover, the PBI included 20 indigenous victims' name in the charge sheet. Hence, the Santal leaders argue that the charge sheet is biased and tries to hide the real accused. They demand to discard and re-constitute the charge sheet. The Santal people commenced their protest activities, held mass-rallies, set up a road-block, and filed a written petition on September 4, 2019.

Even though the PBI charge sheet did not meet their demands, there have been some successful achievements from their fight. They have successfully published the report of the attack in the national newspapers, thereby enhancing awareness about the attack and the dubious charge sheet. The attention to the case also instigated many national human rights organizations and CSOs to demand the return of the Santals' indigenous land, and access to justice for those who were killed during the incident. As not only Indigenous Peoples, but also Bengali families were affected by the land grabbing issue, the demand for the return of their ancestral land rights united both groups and enhanced cooperation to fight for the same cause.

In order to carry forward the movement started by the women, lobbying and advocacy work should be raised to the national and international level to get access to justice, and to fight against violence against Indigenous Peoples in Bangladesh. A strong statement should be made by the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council about the land grabbing and the brutal attack in order to pressure the government to return the land. Lastly, policy-makers should be lobbied to establish a land dispute commission that provides assistance to Indigenous Peoples to protect their land.

Written by Chanchana Chakma
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Protest rally during which a memorandum was submitted (Source: Bibuti Bushan Mahato).



Police trying to negotiate with the farmers and perpetrators (Source: Kapaeng).



N.K.KENY

ETHNICITY: SUMI
LOCATION: AKULUTO, ZUNEHEBOTO DISTRICT,
NAGALANG,
NORTH EAST INDIA

N. K. Keny comes from the very remote indigenous village of Alaphumi, Nagaland, North East India. She belongs to the Sumi Indigenous Peoples. She was born on January 4, 1969. Keny is the fourth child in her family and has nine siblings, four brothers and five sisters. She has completed her Bachelor in Divinity, Master in Theology, and Master of Arts in Philosophy.

Keny's father died when she was six. Her mother had to go through a lot of pain and hardship without her husband. The family has experienced shortages of food and other basic supplies. Even though Keny's mother came from a family of economically well-off merchants, she decided not to leave her husband's village when she became a widow. Instead, she stayed in the village with her nine children.

Helping her mother with farm work and taking care of her younger siblings was Keny's regular chore. Every day she had to walk three and half miles to go to school. After school, she had to run up the hill to go help her mother. They would go into the forest to search for food and other forest consumables, instead of asking others for help. During her childhood, she also witnessed the hardships her mother faced due to the lack of access to basic health facilities. All her younger siblings were born in the village without any medical assistance, and her mother single handedly raised all the nine children .

There were many challenges, but her mother stayed positive and never thought ill of anyone. Her mother taught them to be positive and serve the people who moved against them. Her mother and family are all hardworking, self-sufficient and resilient people. Her mother also works for the village , sharing traditional knowledge on preserving seeds, or informing the villagers about the best time to sow. Besides this, she weaves and makes organic colors out of wild plants and leaves. Next to the many traditional colors, she specifically focuses on the color red which is considered an auspicious color by the Sumi Indigenous Peoples.

Her aspiration for higher studies and social activities

Through all of her hard work, Keny became the first person in her family and even the whole village to finish class ten. After this, she left the village to continue her studies. As she had to support herself, her hands were always busy making handicrafts like knitting, weaving, cross sticks, cousin covers, table covers and so on. When her handicrafts became popular, she would save the money earned to pay for her studies or share with her family. Like any other teenager, she wanted to have fun with her friends and play around, but she refrained herself from such fun. She would stay in her room and do her handicraft work. She lived in a hostel during that time and was also given the responsibility to be the captain of 31 younger girls.

After finishing class twelve, her aspiration for higher studies made her leave for Chennai to study at the Hindustan College, which is very far away from her hometown. In order to support herself in the big city, she would work as a part-time secretary at two different places. From 3pm to 5pm she worked at the All India Nurses Fellowship, and from 5pm to 8pm she worked for a counseling magazine. With the minimum salary she received from both part-time jobs, she supported herself and her younger siblings.

During her time in college, she also felt the need to help her younger siblings to get an education. She brought them to Chennai and rented a room so they could go to school. They would hardly go home during their holidays as the expenses for the journey were too high. As a result of her continuous support, all her younger sisters were able to graduate and are now working for the government or involved in social work.

Furthermore, she engaged herself with the Naga Student Union (NSUC) and acted as a convener for the Social Action Committee during her college years. She would take care of the young Naga students in Chennai. If the students did not go to college, she would counsel them, inform their parents and as a last resort send them back home. That time, she also realized the need for spiritual food and the word of God. This is why she started the Reform Naga Christian Fellowships (RNCF) to gather young Naga people for prayers. She served for several years at the RNCF and was an advisor for five years.

In 1999, the year of her graduation, she helped to rescue indigenous children from North East India who were brought to Chennai, and then sent to different states in South India. These children were promised free education, food and shelter; however, they were put in an orphanage without any basic provisions and were physically and mentally abused. She continued her fight against human trafficking through her association with the North East of India Human Trafficking Rescue Team Chennai from 2000 to 2010.

Keny's journey to set up the "Love Care Home"

After her graduation, Keny went back home and continued to support herself through the income generated from her handicrafts. She would also support needy students from different indigenous communities in Nagaland. At a certain point, she was supporting seven children with their studies. They stayed at a private hostel as they came from very remote places and poor families, with some of them being orphans. There was no contact with their families, nor did their families try to connect with them.

In 2004, these seven children were sent back home by the wardens because they did not have the proper documents to prove their relationship to their family. Keny was informed by the hostel wardens and decided to take care of these seven children as they had nowhere else to go. This was the first time in her life that she took care of other children as if they were her own siblings. However, she struggled to find a home. She was verbally abused, and many house owners refused her because she was an unmarried woman with seven children. Finally, a widow gave her a house for rent. The house was in a bad condition as it used to be a chicken coop, but she had no other option. She continued making doormats, traditional cloths and cushion covers to support the children and pay the rent. She would also make and sell her traditional food made of fermented soybeans, called Axone, which she still sells up until today.

With the money she had saved for many years, she bought a piece of land in Dimapur. In 2007, she built her own hostel on the land and named it "Love Care Home" (LCH). It was a great challenge for her to live in Dimapur as she had to face many hardships, such as a lack of support from her community and not having enough resources, but she was resilient and continued to support these children.

Until today, she continues to welcome poor children and orphans at the LCH. Besides their regular studies, they are taught organic farming, handicrafts, cleanliness and so on. The children reunite with their relatives when they are 18 years old in order to preserve their indigenous birth place and identity. There are also many children in LCH who are pursuing their higher studies and are helping the younger children to continue their studies. Keny supports children and women, for both short stay and long-term rehabilitation.



Her aspiration to help women and children

In 2013, her community called upon her help as there was a rapid increase in violence against children and women in Nagaland. As she recognized the urgency of the problem, she felt the need to provide her assistance. She, along with like-minded people, founded the organization Nagaland Alliance for Children and Women Rights (NACWR). Their aim was to enhance awareness among the Indigenous Peoples about crimes against women and children, and to assist the victims to obtain legal justice. She served as the president until 2015, and was later appointed to the advisory board.

Whilst she was helping women and children in need, she realized that the village people in Nagaland were not aware of the legal laws or connected with formal legal institutions to seek justice. She therefore decided to join the Para-Legal Volunteers (PLV) team, which consists of people who help during legal literacy classes and camps in their respective village. She would assist legal institutions to connect with the Indigenous Peoples to create awareness on how to seek justice through their institutions. For example, there were many cases of women who would divorce through the customary laws. These women were denied child support from their husband. Moreover, the customary laws on land were discriminatory towards women in Nagaland. Upon the death of an Indigenous Woman's husband or in case of divorce, the woman would lose ownership of the land she possessed. Keny has helped many women to stand up for their rights and seek justice through formal legal courts.

Her support of IW and involvement with CSOs

Since 2015, Keny has also engaged herself with the Naga Women Ho Ho (NWHH) to empower Indigenous Women through lobbying, advocacy work and creating awareness. The customary law of the Sumi ethnic group, and many other groups in Nagaland, used to be patriarchal. They did not include women in the decision-making process, both in the domestic sphere and the community as a whole. Keny, along with like-minded people, would lobby the village elders and create awareness on gender equality. It has been a long journey as it was only after five years that two women were accepted into the Executive Council (EC) of her village committee. One of them was Keny. From then onwards, she has been actively involved in the decision-making on the village's welfare. In a meantime, a number of other organizations in Nagaland had opened up for women. Being in the EC, Keny also decided to take the opportunity to represent the Sumi Indigenous Women in different organizations such as the Woman in Governance North East of India, Naga Indigenous Women's Network, Indigenous Women Forum of North East India, and the Western Sumi Hoho.

Furthermore, she has involved herself to create awareness on other social issues in Nagaland. Keny and her team would cover 11 districts to enhance awareness in indigenous villages on land ownership. There were instances where Indigenous Women were married to non-indigenous men, and had transferred their land to those men out of love and because of the affection their parents felt for their son-in-law. The customary laws make it very difficult for the women to inherit this land in such a case. There have been many cases where Indigenous Peoples' land has fallen into the hands of non-Indigenous Peoples. It was often a well-planned strategy by the non-indigenous men at the expense of the Indigenous Peoples who were not aware of the set-up. Besides this work, Keny has also associated with a number of other organizations to preserve the culture of the Indigenous Peoples and fight against injustice.

Her acknowledgements as a social worker and a word of advice

In 2014, she received an award for being the best provider of PLV (Paralegal Volunteer) services by the Dimapur District Legal Services Authority. In 2015, she was acknowledged as being among the best PLV providers by the Nagaland, North Eastern States, and National Legal Service Authorities. In 2017, she received the LifeTime Achievement Award Naga Woman Hoho in Dimapur for her tireless contribution to uplift women. In the same year, she was also awarded the 1st Nagaland Red Carpet Social Award for her contributions towards building a better tomorrow. In 2020, she was offered the India Inspiration Women Award, Social Service for Child and Women Empowerment.

Despite all the challenges she has faced on her journey, Keny has always stayed positive. She says that, "whatever life throws at you, you should handle it wisely." To the young people she would like to say that "Life is full of challenges; take it, and make it a fruitful and meaningful one. The best thing in life is to contribute to your community. Life should be equal for everyone, so promote gender sensitivity and implement it. Women should also involve themselves in decision-making processes, starting from their home up to the state, national and international level."

Written by Khumtiya Debbarma
Indigenous Women Forum North East India



Activities with the children at the Love Care Home (source: Khumtiya Debbarma).



RASHIMONI HAJONG

ETHNICITY: HAJONG
LOCATION: DURGAPUR SUB-DISTRICT,
NATROKENA(MYMENSINGH), DISTRICT,
BANGLADESH

In general, women and children suffer the most from any movement or struggle. Despite contributing significantly to social movements, women have been enduring persecution, disgrace and slurs for ages. From the anti-British movement to the Bangladesh Liberation war, as well as in any other movement for self-determination, indigenous women have always played a pivotal role, along with their indigenous male counterparts. But who counts their contributions?

Alongside the Santal heroes Sidhu and Kanhu, their sister Fulmoni took an equal part in the Santal Bidroho (Rebellion of the Santals). There have even been instances where indigenous women single-handedly spearheaded a great movement. Hajong Mata Rashimoni has been such a unique example. January 31, 1946, is one of the most significant days in the history of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. On that day, Rashimoni Hajong, a great woman and leader of the Tanka Movement, became a martyr after she had been shot during a police encounter.

She was born in 1908, but there are two different stories regarding her birth place. Some claim that Rashimoni was born in Bogajhora village, Durgapur Upazila (sub-district); whilst others argue that she was born in a lower middle-class family in Ghailara Vedikura village, Nalitabari Upazila. Matilal Hajong, an indigenous leader, explained that she was married off at the age of 16 to a Hajong youngster from a neighboring village. Unfortunately, her husband died five years later. After the demise of her first husband, Rashimoni started to involve herself in various social organizations to encourage community peoples to work together to address their social needs. She was later married off to Panjiram Hajong of Bogajhora village, Durgapur Upazila.

Except for her childhood schooling, Rashimoni did not have the privilege to receive an institutional education. However, she was very stalwart, enthusiastic and independent since her childhood. As her second husband Panjiram was a professional Kabiraj (a traditional healing practitioner), she acquired some knowledge about traditional healing from him. She was also adept in pishogue and midwifery. She became popular in the area because of her healing power for minor diseases and birth delivery assistance, however, she was best known as a protester. As she lived in an area where anti-British sentiment was prevailing, the spirit of the anti-British movement rose in her from the very beginning. Accordingly, she learned to stand up against the unjust policies of shroffs and landlords, turning her into one of the prime leaders of the Tanka Movement.

The movement's name was derived from the word "Tanka" which means paddy tax. According to the Tanka custom, it was mandatory to pay a paddy tax to the owner of the land, regardless whether there was a crop or not. If there was no crop due to drought, or if the crops were damaged due to natural disasters, the farmers still had to pay the imposed tax. Consequently, marginal peasants in Hajong and other communities faced economic hardship. If the farmers failed to pay the imposed paddy, they were subjected to persecution and torture. Hence, the custom of Tanka was a curse for the farmers. To get rid of this custom, a peasant resistance movement was formed.

Under the leadership of Rashimoni, the Hajong community organized meetings in the villages to raise awareness about the adverse impact of Tanka. Rashimoni visited different villages and formed a female guerilla force. It is said that she and her guerilla force once invaded the then Lengura Eastern Frontier Camp and the Durgapur Police Station. At a certain point, the farmers unanimously stopped paying the Tanka paddy tax to the Zamindars (landlords). The farmers had been tormented by the Zamindars as they tried to exert their utmost power. Following this, the Hajong peasants engaged themselves in a movement to eradicate the custom. Initially, they embroiled in a clash with the Zamindars, the British government and the then government of Pakistan. Comrade Moni Singh was one of the leaders of this initial movement.

Even though it is said that the Tanka Movement was operating between 1946 and 1950, the movement was already formed and active in the region long before. On the first of January, 1946, when all the regions of Netrokona district were stirred up by the movement, the armed Eastern Frontier Rifle Force camp was erected under the supervision of a magistrate in Birishiri village, Durgapur. This armed force conducted raids at different villages and especially targeted rebel Hajongs and other peasants. On January 31, the Eastern Frontier Rifles Force conducted a raid at Baheratali village, located about four miles north of Birishiri. That day, the male and female rebel peasants were at a neighboring village to convince them to join the Tanka movement. Being unable to seize anyone, the enraged police force arrested Kumudini Hajong, the newly-wed wife of Langkeswar Hajong, and took her to the Birishiri Camp. Shortly after, the news reached Rashimoni and the other Hajong peasants. Over 100 Hajong men and women went out to block the passage of the armed forces.

Rashimoni Hajong, along with her cohorts, assailed the police and with her powerful voice, she pithily said, "Moi timaad, ekgra timaad huye moi, timaadla maan rokkha kuribo, na-te muribo, tura tumla nitee niya buiya thaak" (I am a woman. Being a woman, I shall defend the honor of women. I am ready to die for this, and the people who are not willing to engage in this struggle can keep their opinion for themselves). Immediately after, the others engaged in battle. The police force responded brutally and opened fire on them. Rashimoni was shot in the back and fell on the ground. Surendra Hajong, the leader of the male group was also shot and mercilessly killed when he tried to hold the injured Rashimoni. After the other indigenous members were able to overthrow the police force, they ran off and left Kumudini Hajong behind. Next to the Hajong martyrs, also two British police officers were killed during the battle. Kumudini Hajong was freed, but the life of Rashimoni Hajong was "merged with the flow of blood" on the soil of Baheratuli.

Sacrificing one's life as a woman for the sake of another woman is not frequently heard in history. Rashimoni Hajong was not scared to lay down her own life for the political and economic emancipation of her peoples, and to protest against any exploitation. For this very reason, Rashimoni Hajong is still widely acknowledged in the Hajong community as Hajongmata, or Mother of the Hajong nation. To keep her memory alive, a Shahid Hajongmata Rashimoni Smritisoudho (monument of Rashimoni Hajongmata) has been built near the place of her death through an initiative of civil society members and other dignitaries. Since then, the monument has been one of the symbols of the Tanka rebellion. Every year a seven day-long fair, called Rashimoni Mela, is held at the memorial through a collaboration between local indigenous peoples and the Bengali community. A mix of paying tribute, remembrance events, discussions and cultural programmes are organized and centered around the Tanka movement and the martyr Rashimoni. People from all walks of life, and from different parts of the country, come to attend the fair.

Bangladesh has been shaped by many liberation movements to free itself from British, Zamindar and West Pakistani rule. In every movement, the Indigenous Peoples have played an important role. Hence, the contribution of the Indigenous People in shaping the country is momentous, and Rashimoni Hajong is one of the glowing examples. The feat of Rashimoni Hajong will never be forgotten. Come what may, she will remain the pride of all indigenous and Bengali peoples, as well as all women across the country.

Written by Shohel Chandra Hajang & Mithun Kumar Koch



Rashimone Hajong Monument at Baheratoli (source: Wikimedia.org)



Inscriptions in Bengali and Hajong about Rashimoni at the Rashimoni Monument (source: Bangladesh Jatiya Hajong Sangathon).

INA ALUPA

ETHNICITY: UMA
LOCATION: KALINGA PROVINCE,
CORDILLERA REGION,
PHILIPPINES



In the Cordillera, a mountain range in the Philippines, indigenous women have played a significant role in the history of indigenous peoples' struggle for land, food and rights. Their high regard for life naturally drives them to be defenders of land, life and resources. They believe that life is only possible when they own, are in control of and have access to their ancestral lands and resources. For them, ownership, control and access are the key elements to fulfill and enjoy self-determination and dignity. The women of Western Uma, a mountainous village located in Lubuagan municipality, Kalinga Province, have demonstrated this.

Half of Western Uma is forested and the rest of the land is used for rice cultivation, orchards with coffee and fruit trees, and housing. The population consists predominantly of indigenous peasants and farm laborers. The villagers are part of the Uma ethnic group, which is a patriarchal society. The households and families are headed by men. In both the domestic and public sphere, the men are positioned and acknowledged as the leaders. The public sphere used to only encompass community concerns and affairs; but nowadays, the government system has been added, such as elected positions or government projects and services.

The tribal society in Kalinga province, which used to be a warrior society, has not been able to adjust its social roles when the warrior society disintegrated and lost its relevance. Even until now, the women are left with most of the household chores, including child care and food production. The roles of the Uma indigenous women are undeniably significant both in terms of production and reproduction as they do most of the agricultural work, from planting, farm maintenance, to harvest and seed selection; whilst also assuming most of the household management. However, the mindset where Kalinga men are considered as more important puts the women in the shadows of society. Even though there is a certain level of recognition for women, public acknowledgement is not yet present. The men are always the dominant and readily acknowledged figures, even during struggles.

As a typical rural traditional farming community, the people of Western Uma heavily rely on tilling their land, supported by the use of natural resources from forest and water systems. To augment their rice produce, the community engages in swidden farming, an indigenous practice whereby certain land areas within the community territory are cultivated and planted with a variety of vegetables and legumes. They are also growing water cress in the river which they fondly call "emergency vegetable" because they can harvest it any time of the year. It is a reliable vegetable and source of cash, especially during lean months. Other cash crops include sayote or chayote, which is a green pear-shaped type of squash and is cultivated as a vegetable, and pechay, a popular vegetable in the Philippines with dark green leaves forming a cluster similar to mustard greens. Coffee is planted mainly for consumption and only secondary for selling. Some families are also into hog raising.

Tiger grass is prevalent in the community and is harvested once a year. It serves as a cash source for the locals when made into soft-brooms. In the months of February to March, the women exert more efforts to finish the rice planting season quickly in order to harvest tiger grass. After the harvest, they dry the grass under the sun and clean it for the men to weave it with iwoy (rattan). This is the community's major source of cash, and has helped a number of parents in sending their children to school. At least 5,000 brooms are made and sold per year. It is precisely because of this source of income that indigenous women and the community are resisting the Kalinga geothermal project.

This project covers a land area of 25,682 hectares in the tri-border region of Lubuagan, Tinglayan and Pasil municipalities in Kalinga province. It started in 1976 with the Batong-Buhay Geothermal Energy Prospect by the Commission on Volcanology. After this, Caltex (a subsidiary of Chevron) made its own research which revealed that the earth temperature can go up to 200°C and has a geothermal power production of up to 100 MW. In 2010, Chevron has signed a farm-in agreement for the Kalinga geothermal project with the Guidance Management Corporation-Aragorn Power and Energy Corporation (GMC-APEC), a consortium of 14 investors from the Philippines, Australia, Spain and the US. Their agreement includes that Chevron will operate the power plant, and explore and develop the steam field for the Kalinga geothermal project.

The reasons behind the Uma indigenous women's resistance against the Chevron energy project, and also other forms of development aggression, are related to the impact of such projects, such as the loss of livelihood, displacement, environmental destruction and tribal conflicts. It reflects how much land, life and resources are valued by the women which is tightly connected with their tribal identity, honor and tradition of collective ownership. Western Uma is their home forever! However, the accounts of the Uma indigenous women tell an enduring story of militarization in the Cordillera region. This militarization has tempered them to become human rights defenders, because they know that the government will always resort to using force by deploying the military, police, para-military and intelligence units to secure corporate interests. Even more so when protests have already begun. Thus, they are on tenterhooks about military deployment which can occur at any time during their struggles.

The late Dolores Alicog, popularly known as Ina Alupa (Mother Alupa), is a shining example of women's leadership formed through the involvement in community struggles. She has died of old age on May 14, 2012, but she is still honored and well-remembered as an icon of defending the rights of the people since the Marcos dictatorship started in 1972. She has bravely confronted the Philippine Constabulary (PC) from the 70s until the 80s in defense of the community's human rights when the mining and energy projects started. She mothered and ensured supplies for young women and men who were imprisoned because of their involvement in the protests against the dam, mines, geothermal energy projects and militarization.



She was not deceived by the massive bribery by Chevron, such as promises of educational assistance, jobs, and infrastructure projects. Respondents say that these briberies have broken the community's integrity. The unity of the Uma Tribe has always been solid against development aggression, but this time, deceit has worked for Chevron.

A number of people in the community, even leaders, succumbed to their offers; but not Ina Alupa and those who remained faithful to their conviction of fighting for the betterment of the present and future generations. Ina Alupa was consistent in her position concerning programs that violate or imperil indigenous peoples' rights to land, life and resources. She emphasized to the women, young people and community leaders to watch the "divide and rule" tactics of the government and corporations. Her concern for tribal unity was paramount.

Beatrice "Betty" Belen, a noted leader of Innabuyog Uma and a member of the Barangay Council, narrated how Ina Alupa, despite her frail body, argued with the representatives of Chevron during one of the meetings. "Saan mi a kasapulan ti geothermal project ditoy ayan mi ta makadadael saan laeng iti aglawlaw no diket pati iti urnos ti ili" (We do not need the geothermal project in our territory because it will not only destroy the environment, but more importantly, it will destroy our unity as a community). Ina Alupa said these words in anger because there were community leaders who were already giving in to the company. Her words created a deafening silence, causing some of those who were in favor of the project to come back on their words by the end of the meeting. Betty said that the opposition prevailed over the very few who agreed.

The process of obtaining free, prior and informed consent was also fraught with deceit and bribery. In all affected communities in the tri-border region, only Western Uma in Lubuagan and the barangays of Lower and Upper Tinglayan did not give their consent. The respondents of Western Uma are convinced that the process has been manipulated as they have experienced in their case. "If it was not for Ina Alupa, our people might not have had the courage and strength to fight against destructive projects," stated Buscayno Bommosao, a local youth leader. She is the face of the community's resistance, recognized not only by the villagers, but also by the companies that came to Western Uma. During the wake of Ina Alupa, a small group in favor of the Chevron project had the nerve to say that the resistance would fade with her death. The group was wrong as the opposition became more vibrant.

A month after her death, on May 18, 2012, the women led a barricade to block the temperature test activities of Chevron. Women, men, young people and even children went out of their houses to join the human barricade. Their rage and readiness for a confrontation shows how high they value dignity and self-determination. The demonstration increased the profile of the women in the community and the Uma Tribe as a whole. Such a courageous action by the indigenous women lifted the pride of the Uma Tribe, and bestowed honors and dignity on the indigenous women.

Ina Alupa is indeed an icon in rights assertion, an exemplary woman leader and a respected tribal elder. Given the feudal-patriarchal culture that prevails among tribes in Kalinga, the indigenous women of Western Uma will continue to hurdle with this challenge in a more organized fashion. Succeeding generations are inspired by Ina Alupa and Innabuyog-Uma, which is an organization that helps to build the political power of indigenous women to assert their voices, have meaningful participation in decision-making, and to gain community recognition for their contributions to community development.

Interviews with the organization's leaders and members, as well as male leaders and elders in the community, affirmed that the presence of an alternative women's organization is an indication of a much-needed change in the community. The respondents agreed that community development would not be complete when almost half of the population is left out, not acknowledged for their productive and leadership contributions, or deprived of opportunities to be empowered.

Innabuyog-Uma has the greater purpose of changing the feudal-patriarchal mindset of the Uma ethnic group where women are considered inferior to men, a mindset which is also being reinforced by state institutions, schools and churches. In addition to this, Innabuyog-Kalinga, the alliance of indigenous women's organizations in Kalinga province which was set up in 1991, has the mission to change the overall tribal mindset in order to change the outlook for the Kalinga women and all other women. The Cordillera Women's Education, Action Research Center (CWEARC), formerly known as, Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center (CWERC) has been supporting the empowerment of Kalinga indigenous women's organizations since 1987 through organizational building, education, trainings, research and campaigns. Socio-economic services have also been provided, such as the setting up of multi-purpose community cooperatives, or rice mills that alleviate the stress for women to pound rice. The empowerment of the Uma indigenous women in Kalinga province is epitomized in their fights to defend land, life and resources, and in their struggles to make their community and tribe prevail over militarization and corporate interests.

Written by INNABUYOG



On May 18, 2012, the people of Western Uma, led by the women, formed a human barricade to stop Chevron from setting up their equipment in the territory of the Uma indigenous peoples (Source: Cordillera Women's Education Action Research Center).

