



HERSTORY 6



Kiree

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Her Story6

Indigenous women breaking biases for a sustainable tomorrow.

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112 Moo 1, Tambon Sanpranate, Amphur Sansai,

Chiang Mai 50210, Thailand

Tel: +66 (0) 53 345 539

Fax: +66 (0) 53 343 540

www.aippnet.org

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Written by: Nina Sangma

Produced by: Pragyaa Rai

Layout by: Lanchenba Sagolsem

Artwork by: Themreichan Kasom

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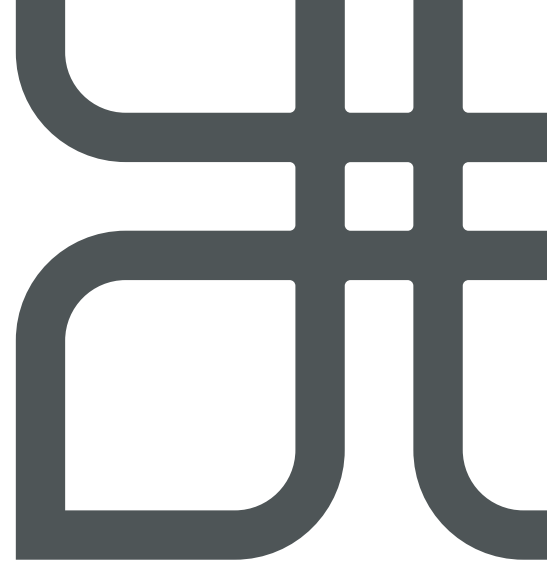
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We applaud Elina Horo, Tripta Lungeli Magar, Chinimaya Majhi, Jyotiprava Larma, Anne Lasimbang, Kakay Tolentino, Su Hsin, Kanako Uzawa, Luong Thi Truong, Khamla Keovongphet and Malina Lopaying for their courage, commitment and sacrifice to stand up for Indigenous women's and peoples' rights, take up leadership roles and lead Indigenous women movements. They are a role model for other Indigenous women, including the younger generation, to pass on knowledge, voice their rights, break through stigmas and reinvent traditional practices to cope with new challenges.

Finally, AIPP acknowledges and expresses gratitude to Oxfam for the financial support to make this publication possible.



Foreword

The HerStory series have been a significant part of AIPP's journey in celebrating achievements and strengthening voices of indigenous women across Asia. Each series of HerStory, has been narration of joy, struggle, victory, dreams and reality of indigenous women of Asia in their voyage of life. These compilations of stories have been source of motivation and encouragement to all the indigenous women and girls to assert their rights and dignity.

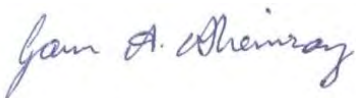
Marking International Women's day 2022, AIPP would like to express solidarity towards "Gender Equality today for sustainable tomorrow" through official launch of HerStory Sixth Series. HerStory series 6, encompasses stories of indigenous women from different walks of life reflecting on their struggles, and barriers as being an Indigenous and woman. Likewise, it embraces their achievements, success and aspirations for their indigenous women right movement.

This book features the stories of eleven prominent indigenous women and an indigenous woman with disability from East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia and Mekong subregions. Through this series, we aim to highlight the hardships endeavored by indigenous women and their connections to Earth, Water, Fire and Air. The elements so dear to Indigenous Peoples and its significance to maintain balance and harmony can be deeply experienced in these eleven stories. At the same time, applaud over the victories and triumphs of indigenous women leaders who have been significantly contributing towards Indigenous Peoples rights.

It is to be marked that indigenous women have been playing substantial role in Indigenous Peoples' movement. That is why, HerStory beholds great importance to constantly inspire us with their stories of perseverance, hardship, and success.

Lastly, would like to express my gratitude to all the indigenous women who have shared their personal stories in this series; and all those who have put in their contribution to shape up this series.

In Solidarity,



Gam A. Shimray



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EARTH



Elina Horo

“Mostly women are pushed in front to face the brunt. Women are part of the crowd but unfortunately neglected as a part of decision-making bodies. Most women leaders are encouraged till a certain level and then are restricted from further engagement. Being women, they are excluded, or forced to work in hostile conditions, are left behind or forced to leave man made conditions for engaging in any movement; most of the times, internal management of the movement and power is controlled by a few men or even a few women (exceptional) but larger power dynamics are controlled by men leaving behind women and other genders with their potentialities.”



Elina Horo shows a remarkable and acute self-awareness when asked about her journey as an activist and advocate for the rights of indigenous women, “Yes, my present work of activism is by choice not by chance! Adapted advocacy is a necessary tool for social change. When I was aware of my own Injustice or discrimination at a personal level, it stimulated me to connect with other women for solutions. I realized that it’s just not me, I saw a larger context seeing and witnessing how indigenous women are treated facing different forms of discrimination within families, communities and public spaces, in the work spaces, within the movements, within various people organizations, within the various institutions and so on which made me upset and angry. “

Women are often told not to show their anger or are valorised for their tolerance which is often interchanged with strength. The quiet tolerance and stoic silence of women is necessary for patriarchal systems of oppression to function like a well-oiled machinery. It is in fact how society continues to thrive, built as it is on the backs of women’s labour.

And so, in expressing political rage women tend to become the agents of gender justice. Elina says that anger at injustices towards women stimulated her and gave her the motivation to, “Engage strategically to bring change with an understanding that the



"personal is political" and to be able to connect with a larger group from where I got inspiration and strength to fight for my own rights as well as for other women from my own community and later on for the larger groups."

At a personal level, she says, "My own social experiences of discrimination for years was internalized and I felt inferior without my realization, which affected me at physical, mental and psychological levels and resulted in health issues, lack of confidence due to few advantages at family level to community level, at different fields and sectors such as education, health, work opportunities etc. The body, mind and soul find ways to heal in their own way and time. One of the most common challenges was the lack of encouragement and support, from family and society. I was expected to accept all the patriarchal norms being a woman and to be a good woman by sacrificing self for others. Once this was realized, small steps were taken to become self-reliant."

As a part of strategies, she started organizing women's groups at various levels, village to state and state to interstate level, connecting with other women or women's groups in itself to build a strong movement. She goes on to say that, "Women need solidarity which builds confidence and gives hope to live and continue our fight for our rights. Engaging at CSOs level with a vision to empower indigenous women was at the beginning a dream, but in reality, it didn't work, so I had to quit such organizations and at a larger level connect with various women who had the same experiences of discrimination and who wanted to life free from any discrimination and have an independent life with dignity. But it's not easy at all to think and achieve!"

Indeed, the path to self-actualization for women, especially indigenous women, within the larger movements has lots of barriers from inside and outside aimed at puncturing their spirit. In her personal experience of having worked with various groups and stakeholders she recalls her time saying, "Had ups and downs, some people will motivate, some groups get geared up and sometimes some escape or betray, but nevertheless if we have a positive mind then will have a positive result in moving forward with a motto "learning by doing"."

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The seeds of critical thinking are often planted when one is faced with adversities early in life. For Elina, who belongs to Munda Community from Jharkhand, Central India, patrilineal practices within her community meant that she was exposed to gender inequalities and biases which made her question status quo.

The Munda communities have twenty-two major clan-based communities, with mostly clan exogamy and tribe endogamy. Its social structure is patrilineal but women have been given the right to access land, that is, until they are married to or go to another clan. That means they cannot have ownership of the land nor have inheritance rights to it. And like most systems that perpetuate gender gaps, even though both women and men participate in all the household chores, women generally have more responsibilities with added reproductive roles apart from the other social-cultural and agricultural work.

Munda communities have their self-governing

system called "Parha Vyavastha" which is a collective decision-making body at the village cluster level and village level. They have Hatu Sabha or Gram Sabha (Village Council) where both men and women participate, though the ratio of women's representation at decision making bodies is still less.

Elina elaborates saying, "Women are considered the custodians of the culture, they are the ones who transfer the knowledge through daily life style, there are songs, dance, rituals for different occasions to convey stories, struggles and messages of ancestors imbibed within songs and tales. Collective participation, co-existence and co-responsibility are some of the main values of the communities."

Mundas are a martial group and have been fighting for their rights. Birsa Munda, the most famous of the ancestors fought for their ancestral rights. Women such as Maki Munda too were known to participate in the struggle for rights and were known for their bravery. The struggle was mainly to protect the natural resources- Jal, Jangal and Jameen (Rights of Water, Forest and Land). By nature, Mundas may be martial but they also love peace and harmony. They are inclusive and co-exist with other tribes and cultures which has both positive and negative impact. After years of exploitation by outsiders, their land resources are extracted to fulfil capitalist greed

which has proved detrimental to their existence, leading to environmental, economic and ecological degradation pushing their culture to the verge of extinction due to Sanskritization, which is the dominant caste based patriarchal and hierarchical Hindu culture that does not recognize Indigenous Peoples as part of any of the major caste groups.

Like indigenous women globally, indigenous women in mainland India too face triple discrimination. Elina's organization, Adivasi Women's Network was formed with the objective and commitment to address, sensitize and bring awareness of gender-based injustices faced by Adivasi Women within and in a larger context.

Speaking from her vast experience in movement building Elina stresses on the importance of including indigenous women in decision making roles since they have historically always actively been a part of movements, "Mostly women are pushed in front to face the brunt. Women are part of the crowd but unfortunately neglected as a part of decision-making bodies. Most women leaders are encouraged till a certain level and then are restricted from further engagement. Being women, they are excluded, or forced to work in hostile conditions, are left behind or forced to leave man made conditions for engaging in any movement; most of the times internal management of the movement is controlled by a few men or even a few women (exceptional) but larger power dynamics are controlled by men leaving behind women and other gender with their potentialities."

Resilience is second nature to indigenous women having faced more than their share of challenges when navigating spaces where dominant cultures assert themselves. Elina says, "As an Indigenous woman I had to go through various challenges. Socially and culturally our identity and personality has been less valued and respected by non-Indigenous people or the dominant classes and they take advantage of our personalities. Based on our skin colour, look and attitudes, which is different from the majority, we are not accepted. I was shamed many times but our politeness or humbleness and respect for other people were seen as weaknesses or a sign of being inferior."

In India the dominant, mainstream culture is rooted in the socio-cultural systems of caste and class. indigenous women learn to resist this and keep their values intact and earn respect.

The way forward is clear and full of hope. Elina says as indigenous women, "We need to have great respect for our values and culture, now that the world knows that adivasis have life sustaining values. On the other hand, we should also learn to resist for our rights which are rooted in Nature and natural resources. We need to feel proud of who we are and practice and learn the values which are important for humanity at large. Past decades of women's empowerment activities have brought qualitative leadership at the community level.

Women have increased their capacity with various skills with gender sensitivity and by taking the lead at various levels. Some are actively part of local governance and some are socially active to mobilize the community and are legally aware of how to file cases and get justice.”



Tripta Lungeli Magar



“We need to be at the table to make our own decisions and to express concrete issues and actions that are affecting our lives but this does not happen often so there needs to be investment for these groups from all levels including Indigenous Peoples’ organizations and constituencies. My wish is to raise collective awareness and active engagement at the national and grassroots level in order to bring a collective and collaborative approach to raise the issues that indigenous women with disabilities face not only within the indigenous women’s movement but also beyond it.”

Tripta’s story is an ode to the power of the human spirit, a study in true grit and determination, in her refusal to live life in half measures. Tripta Lungeli Magar was born on 10 June 1962 A.D in Dehradun, India when her father was working in the Indian army.

The second of four daughters and four sons, tragedy struck at the age of two when she contracted polio, which paralyzed half her body and damaged her legs for life. She was five when her family came back to Itahari Municipality in the Sunsari district of Nepal after her father’s retirement.

The move back proved traumatic for Tripta. Rural Nepal was hardly the place where a young child with a crippling disability could flourish. Poverty further exacerbated her struggles, most significantly when as a seven-year-old, she had to start school which in itself was a rarity considering most Indigenous Magar girls at the time were not sent to school. What was even more uncommon was a child with a disability being sent to school. Tripta’s mother played a crucial role in her going to school making her the first Indigenous woman with a disability to start a formal education at a local primary school near her home along with her siblings.

Disability continues to be seen as a stigma in Nepal triggering ableism in people. “Karma” or the perceived sins of one’s past life are attributed to misfortunes in this life. Considered cursed, like many people with disabilities, Tripta experienced the entire spectrum of stigmas such as negative and hostile behaviours, exclusion, and discrimination.

She recalls how those impacted her in school, “I still remember how my neighbour and school friends used to underestimate me and exclude me from school curriculum activities because of my disability.”

People around her said that she was cursed because of the “sins” she had committed in her past life. Frustrated at not being able to jump and run around like other children, she would beat her hands on the ground and scream in despair. However, her mother Rana Maya would always be around her to comfort her and boost her morale and motivate her. Rana Maya instilled the belief in Tripta that she could do anything her siblings could do. She learned the power of determination at a young age when she crawled with her hands on a dusty gravel road in the scorching hot weather of the Terai to reach school drenched in her own blood, sweat, and tears. There were times when she would almost pass out from dizziness.

But the so-called “cursed” one proved people wrong. She completed her seventh grade, no doubt surprising her worst critics. The next challenge was to get to the high school near the town of Itahari. Calling it a challenge is putting it mildly; carrying her books behind her back to crawl to the bus stop to get onto the crowded bus, Tripta’s limbs were bruised by the other commuters stepping on her hands and feet. This is when she was lucky enough to have boarded the bus, which in some cases was not allowed by the bus conductor.

But as they say, when the going gets rough, the tough get going!

Those bitter experiences prompted her to do something meaningful to prove her worth. Constantly underrated, she proved her detractors wrong once again when she completed S.L.C from Itahari Janata High school. Never one to sit idle, she worked as a typist in Dharan Saguri Typing Center during the six-month break between her exams and results.

Itahari proved too small for her big ambitions and after secondary school, Tripta mustered up the courage to move to Kathmandu to get a college degree. She joined Padma Kanya college in 1988 after overcoming various societal and financial hurdles. Here too, she was the subject of curiosity for the other students who would follow her around and tease her making derogatory remarks. But her positive outgoing nature and spirit soon won her many friends. At the end of her second-year final exams, Tripta received a wheelchair from a senior student, Asha pun, whose father was a major in the British Gurkha army. The wheelchair became Tripta’s wings! Or at least an armour to fight the long battle of lack of meaningful representation and basic fundamentals rights like education, social and financial inclusion and employment as a disabled Indigenous woman.

Like any ambitious young woman, Tripta wished to earn her own living and be economically independent. She applied for the position of typist at the Purwanchal Gyanchakshu School for the visually impaired in Dharan.

Initially, the interviewees were sceptical of her physical state. They asked her questions about whether she could handle the professional responsibilities and manage to use the restroom unassisted, even asking her questions about how she would be able to commute daily to work. But Tripta's confidence and qualifications won in the end and she was selected for the position, going to work for five years with the school.

In addition to her responsibilities as a typist, she would read the morning papers to the students. Dambari Yonjan, the principal, encouraged her to apply for a government position in the education sector as a result of her dedication and capabilities. Tripta was appointed a teacher at the Gyanodaya Secondary School in Dharan. After working there for two years she went on to work at the National Higher Secondary and the National Federation for the Disabled. While working at the federation, Tripta got to meet and interact with people living with disabilities from all over Nepal where she learned about their daily challenges and empathized with their pain and frustrations which made her realize the need for an organization especially centred around women living with disabilities.

That was the turning point and it was only a matter of time before her vision of establishing such an organization came true, when she along with seven committee members established Nepal Apanga Mahila Utpidit Samaj in 1995 in Lalitpur.



After working as a chair for twenty-three months, she was able to provide informal education and skill development such as sewing and cutting, training ninety women and women with disabilities. This spurred her on to establish the Nepal Chelibeti Apang Samaj (Nepal Disabled Women and Girls Society) in May 1998. Recognizing the need for women's economic empowerment, the Nepal Chelibeti Apang Samaj launched its own savings and credits group. The savings and credits group enabled women to start their own small businesses by providing them with low-interest loans. This made it possible for the women to earn, save and plan for their future. Along with progress came prosperity and trust in the local community. With trust came support from organizations like Plan International, Nepal, and the village development committee. The Chelibeti Samaj was able to construct its own office building with its savings and support from various individuals and supporting organizations.



The Magar Indigenous community to which she belongs, is one of the fifty-nine groups of Indigenous Peoples of Nepal, recognized by the government as Indigenous Nationalities having their own distinct language, culture, rituals, and history. As per the 2011 census, Magar is considered the third largest ethnic/caste group in Nepal representing 7.1% of Nepal's total population.

She also established Purwanchal Apanga Ra Asahaya Brida Kendra in 2015 to provide homes for homeless elderly people and children with disabilities making Tripta not only a community leader, but a role model for many women with disabilities who were still confined within the four walls of their houses.

Tripta's mission is to preserve Indigenous knowledge and traditions that are fast disappearing with modern advances by involving the newer generations. She says, "For Indigenous Peoples, their culture and identity are essential and crucial to who we are, who we belong to, where we came from, and how we interact with one another. Therefore, traditional knowledge and culture must be transferred to the younger generation with dialogue and debate."

She has advised young indigenous women to value cultural identity, as culture has the power to transform entire societies, strengthen local communities and forge a sense of identity and belonging for people of all ages.

Magars are Nature worshippers who also believe in ancestor worship or more specifically, the worship of forefathers (kul) which includes various religious ceremonies such as the Baraju Puja, Kul Puja, Mandali puja etc. The rituals of Magars such as birth, marriage, and death are observed by their own kin. Maghe Sankranti that falls in mid-January is one of the major festivals of Magar Indigenous community in Nepal. Unfortunately, these ethnic cultures are assimilated and co-opted by the dominant Hindu culture which has led to language death as most Magar do not speak the Magar language and instead follow the rituals of the majority Hindu religion which threaten the survival of their Indigenous culture, tradition, and rituals which are on the brink of extinction.

As an Indigenous woman with a disability, Tripta wishes for meaningful and effective participation of indigenous women with disabilities which is crucial at all levels,

“We need to be at the table to make our own decisions and to express concrete issues and actions that are affecting our lives but this does not happen most often so there needs investment for these groups from all levels including Indigenous Peoples organizations and constituencies. My wish is to raise collective awareness and active engagement at the national and grassroots level in order to bring a collective and collaborative approach to raise the issues that indigenous women with disabilities face not only within the indigenous women’s movement but also beyond it.”

With the establishment of the Nepal Chelibeti Apang Samaj (Nepal Disabled Women and Girls Society) in May 1998 in Sunsari, Tripta was very clear about the objectives of the organization. It laid special focus on informal education and skill development training for women and girls living with disabilities. The organization also promoted the importance of disability-friendly infrastructures and provided ID cards to four hundred and thirty-six people with disabilities. The office organized various activities where they made it mandatory for at least one member from each household to participate. They promoted local crafts like weaving wicker baskets and stools. Tripta also wanted to ensure that the aged and people suffering from dementia and Alzheimer’s received proper care. Her dream of creating a home for children with disabilities and the elderly materialized in 2015 with the establishment of a home called Purwanchal Apanga Ra Asahaya Brida Sewa Kendra.

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GANDHI PEACE FOUNDATION NEPAL



Email: gandhipacefoundationnepal@gmail.com
Bagbazar, Kathmandu, Nepal
Ph : +9779869613218



S.No. 269/21



**CERTIFICATE
OF APPRECIATION**



Nepal

This certificate is honored to **Hon. Tripta Lungelee Maga** for his/her outstanding contribution in Social Service against devastating COVID-19 (CORONA VIRUS) lockdown in the world as **HUMANITY**. We appreciate your unselfishness mankind during this critical period where the whole world is in isolation.



Dr. Lal Bahadur Rana
Founder President
Gandhi Peace Foundation Nepal



Hon. Ansh Helen Edwards
General Governor for Australia- GPN
Int'l Anti-Corruption Leader Australia



Dr. Julee Maya Nagewari
South East Asia Governor General
Malaysian Corruption Watch Member





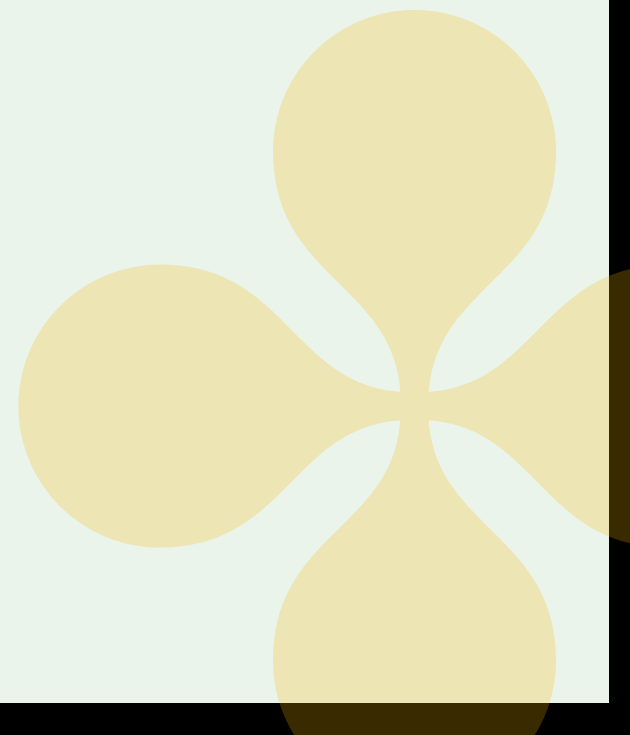
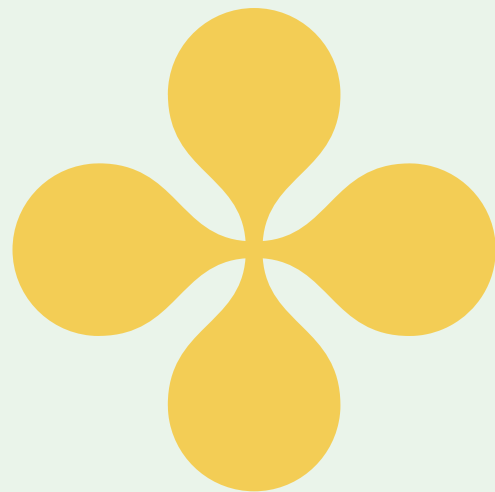
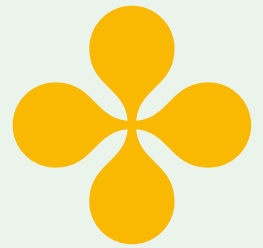
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Today, the home helps elderly people who have no place to call their own. She was able to raise awareness and funds for a 24-hour ambulance service for the elderly. She is a member of the National Indigenous Disabled Women Association Nepal (NIDWAN) since 2016 where she participated in several events and activities of NIDWAN and raised the voices of indigenous women with disabilities at the community level. Her contribution was acknowledged by NIDWAN as an Indigenous woman with a disability representing the central committee member in the National Federation of Disabled Nepal (NFDN) from 2015-2018. Since then, she has been raising the voices of Indigenous Peoples and women with disabilities in Nepal.

With her initiation, she also formed the province-level network of NIDWAN in province number one with nine committees and has remained as a province-level committee member. As an Indigenous woman, she realized from her experiences that most indigenous women do not have access or an enabling environment for grooming and learning, which makes it challenging for them to be in a decision-making positions, “We are always followers of others and told to follow them which means we are not aware of our rights as women, as Indigenous, and as persons with disability.”

Alongside establishing centres and homes for children with disabilities and the elderly, Tripta accomplished her dream of acquiring a Bachelor’s Degree in Education. Her long list of accomplishments has not gone unrewarded. Acknowledged for her work by many different organizations in her hometown and nationally, she has received a letter of appreciation from various organizations including Sunsari Mahila Bikash in 2010 presented on International Women’s Day. Her work was also appreciated on International Disability Day in 2005 and also by Manokantri Balbikash, Itahari in 2006. Many of her accolades include a letter of appreciation from Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities presented on International Day of the World’s Indigenous Peoples in 2008. She is also the recipient of awards from various organizations like the Lions Club of Itahari in 2011, National Senior Citizen Association Nepal in 2012, Akhil Nepal Mahila Sangh in 2012.

She has also received a certificate of appreciation from Gandhi Peace Foundation Nepal for her outstanding contribution in social service during the devastating lockdown as a result of COVID-19. Despite her huge list of achievements, Tripta feels that nothing comes close to fulfilling her dream of establishing her own organization, the Purwanchal Apanga Ra Asahaya Brida Kendra.



Chinimaya Majhi

“I have been arrested twice before: once, during the conflict between Gorkha land and the Indian central administration and also, in Chitwan during the mass movement of 1990 in Nepal. You see, working for excluded Indigenous communities is always a challenging task. Financial scarcity is a constant obstacle; just meeting the costs of running the office on a daily basis is a challenge. People of these communities are often illiterate and poor. Raising their awareness of the different issues is always a lengthy and frustrating job. We need to go to remote places, because they cannot afford to come to the city or urban centers to receive training. They mostly live in the remote villages of Sindhuli, Morang, Ramechhap, Dhankuta, Sarlahi, Sindhupalchowk, Jhapa, Sunsari, Makwanpur, and Kavre districts, with only a small number live in Chitwan district. I find that Majhi communities are traditionally and culturally disoriented and I am often met with barriers when I try to intervene and promote positive change.”

Chinimaya Majhi learnt the art of negotiation early on in life, by making an offer people couldn't refuse! Starting with her parents when she was given the job of looking after the family's livestock while her brothers were sent to school. Despite asking them to send her to school, the only way she realised she could drive a bargain was by refusing to tend to the goats!



Born to a social worker and customary Gaurung or customary Vice Headmen of the village, Chinimaya grew up among two brothers and three sisters in the Kavre district of central Nepal. Seeing her father help the community by writing official documents despite him not having a formal education must have made an impression on the young girl. Her parents were subsistence farmers in a village where infrastructure was poor to say the least. Like all marginalized communities, access to modern amenities were scarce. But the exclusion went deeper with the Indigenous Majhi community to which she and her family belong, being discriminated against while being shunned from mainstream development.

The Majhi community are predominantly Nature worshippers for whom water holds great significance throughout the cycle of birth and death, connected as they are to fishing and rivers for their livelihood and sustenance. An important cultural aspect is marked by the Ladi or water puja or religious ceremony. Despite the festival holding importance for the community and though celebrated by a few local governments, it is yet to be recognised by the Nepal government as an official holiday. It is not just the lack of recognition of traditional celebrations but also the refusal to acknowledge the customary institution called Majhe Sabha that poses a huge barrier to self-actualization as the institution is responsible for cultural processions, conflict management and also social issues rendering it almost extinct, though the Sabha is partially conducted in Ramechhap district. It is not just State policies that have not included the Majhi community but also cultural assimilation into the dominant Hindu society that continue to threaten their way of life and self-expression.

This structural inequality and lack of representation has trickled down to the granular level meaning that within the social-cultural context in Nepal, privileged castes pose hindrances in the career development of an individual from any marginalized community, such as Chinimaya's. Indigenous women continue to experience a triple discrimination based on their

sex, social status, and ethnicity making it thrice as hard to achieve what women from mainstream cultures can with relative ease. Having won the battle at home to be allowed to study, Chinimaya excelled at school graduating at the top of her class. It also helped that she had a godfather in Mr. A.D Smith, a British national who sponsored her education till she completed higher secondary level schooling. She feels a debt of gratitude she feels she can never repay.

A keen reader, she would often read books that she had access to, ones that her brothers were reading in school. Thanks to her brothers who noticed this interest in her, her desire to go to a school was supported by them, who convinced their parents to educate her formally. No mean feat in itself and a departure from the norm since girls from the Majhi community are not sent to school. Like they say, it takes a village to bring up a child and everyone from her brothers, to her godfather A.D. Smith to her school teachers and people from the wider community also encouraged her to study hard by providing cash prizes several times. The only girl student from the Majhi community in her school, all Chinimaya dreamt of was to be a great woman having earned the respect of everyone.

Having completed her School Leaving Certificate from Shree Khairahani Higher Secondary School in 1988, she struggled to find the resources needed for further study. Chinimaya married in 1991, and after the marriage, the environment became even less conducive for higher study. However, regardless of this, she managed to join college for an Intermediate level course in Management, but couldn't complete it. Not one to give up easily she participated in different developmental and educational training programs, including Organizational Capacity Development Training, Leadership and Capacity Development Training provided by the National Foundation for Developmental Indigenous Nationalities, and Women's Role in Peace Building Training and Gender Equality for Peace Building Training in 2005 which she could complete thanks to her supportive husband and family.

But while the support from home was forthcoming, Chinimaya wasn't always welcomed in other spaces facing discrimination as a Majhi woman, a stigma that followed her everywhere for being part of a fishing community. Teased with names of fish like "balaute, katle" and called dirty, bigotry from dominant class people reared its ugly head from time to time.

Not only was it personal, it was professional as well, specifically, when working with women from mainstream societies who made her the target of their internalised misogyny.

She recalls an incident where the indigenous women network had teamed up with mainstream women for the preparation and submission of a letter of promise but during the submission her team was not allowed to put in their signatures. That is why, she says, "Equity is just a saying; when they talk about women rights, they take a blanket approach disregarding the intersectionality within women."

Her youngest daughter was just two months old when she started to work for the National indigenous women Federation (NIWF), a voluntary service-oriented job. One that was an introduction to gender and her extensive work in the field. She is now the Chairperson of National indigenous women Federation which is an umbrella organization for forty-three community based indigenous women organizations, seven provincial committees and sixty-one district level committees. NIWF advocates and lobbies for the issues of indigenous women's right and Indigenous Peoples movement. The work is hugely rewarding as sensitizing indigenous women with regards to their rights and building their capacities has provided an impetus to the movement at large. Chinimaya has been involved with Nepal Majhi Mahila Uthan since its establishment where she performs an advisory role as the Vice President of the organization. Through Nepal Majhi Mahila Uthan,

she has worked for culture and language preservation, leadership and empowerment of Majhi women while advocating for the rights of the whole Majhi community.

In an interview given to Liverpool John Moores University, she says, "Education has not been a priority in the Majhi community until now. The state has not addressed such problems of this group until recently. I have been working for women's empowerment since 2000. My work is not only concerned with the Majhi community but also all the under-privileged Indigenous communities; especially focusing on women's participation in decision-making and equitable sharing of the benefits of development. From 2000-2005, I served as the General Secretary of the Majhi Women Upliftment Association, where I had to develop, plan and implement several programs for various levels. Similarly, from 2004-2006, I worked as the Secretary of National indigenous women Federation (NIWF). I had the responsibility of organizing training, meetings, workshops and maintaining contacts with agency officials and professionals. Through NIWF, we regularly launch programs aimed at increasing people's levels of awareness of their rights. I am Former Chairperson of Majhi Women Upliftment Association and was responsible for strategic decision-making as well as monitoring and reporting program accomplishments to the authorities concerned. And also, as the Chairperson,

I had to manage and organize the programs at the national level. Similarly, I also had to manage and organize programs or the development of women in leadership. In addition to this, I have also been the Treasurer of the Nepal Red Cross Society Chabhill Sub-branch since 2007, where I had the responsibility of fund management and the preparation of financial reports."

All this was possible because of a strong support system and mentors in her career. Giving credit where it is due, she says, "I also admire and appreciate the support given to me by the late Surya Bahadur Majhi, founder Chairperson of Nepal Majhi Upliftment Association; and to Mr Dhan Bahadur Majhi, the acting Chairperson of Majhi Association who always encourages me for my social activities."

When asked what her key achievements have been, Chinimaya is modest, saying she has had some impact in the upliftment of the Majhi community. The truth is that her achievement is quite phenomenal. A decade of advocacy and awareness raising on the importance of education and social development, the Majhi community has succeeded in establishing a strong network to raise common concerns and issues. Consequently, the representatives of this community are able to raise their voices in front of mainstream decision-makers.

In the same interview she goes on to say, “I feel that I can claim that I have made a significant contribution to helping the Majhi community become more outspoken to some extent. This community has started to revolt for equal rights to state power and resources. I was honoured to be able to visit the Philippines representing NIWF at the Second World indigenous women Conference. That was the first time I had been abroad in my life and it was an important event to me. Similarly, I was awarded with the Everest Foundation Nepal Award in 2006 which was the next major achievement in my life.”

Recalling her experience during the Maoist civil war (armed conflict between government of Nepal and Maoists) she says, “It was very challenging to work in the field. Also, during the Second People’s Movement II (Janna Andolan II) of April 2006, I was arrested by the Nepalese Army and charged with being a Maoist and I was subjected to serious mental torture. I was imprisoned in the Army camp, Bhairab Nathgan, Kathmandu, for a week, but thankfully I was freed due to the efforts of UN agencies, human rights agencies and other organizations, including the Nepal Majhi Upliftment Association. I was neither a cadre of any political group, nor the leader of such political forces at that time. I believe that I would have been killed by the army if I was not noticed by those agencies. So, I feel that the rest of my life is a second opportunity for me; you could say I feel I have been reborn.”

She goes on to say that her troubles were far from over, “I have been arrested twice before: once, during the conflict between Gorkha land and the Indian central administration and also, in Chitwan during the mass movement of 1990 in Nepal. You see, working for excluded Indigenous communities is always a challenging task. Financial scarcity is a constant obstacle; just meeting the costs of running the office on a daily basis is a challenge. People of these communities are often illiterate and poor. Raising their awareness of the different issues is always a lengthy and frustrating job. We need to go to remote places, because they cannot afford to come to city or urban centers for receiving training. They mostly live in the remote villages of Sindhuli, Morang, Ramechhap, Dhankuta, Sarlahi, Sindhupalchowk, Jhapa, Sunsari, Makwanpur, and Kavre districts, while only a small number live in Chitwan district. I find that Majhi communities are traditionally and culturally disoriented and I am often met with barriers when I try to intervene and promote positive change.”

Positive change is often incremental and Chinimaya is under no illusion about the task ahead. For one she says under the new Republic there are several questions as to the fate of the Majhi community such as, “What will be the position of Majhis in the new republic state of Nepal? How does the central government address the rights and equal participation of Majhis in different sectors of Nepal

are the current concerns for us. And we are now engaged in a mass campaign to get the issues of the Majhi community addressed by the new constitution. I want to urge the concerned authorities to minimize violence against women by addressing issues in the law and also pressure Nepal government to implement Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Convention ILO 169 and United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). Women from Indigenous nationalities should also be treated and recognized as having equal status to the mainstream castes. Participation in decision-making and sharing the benefits of state resources needs to be made proportional. The oppression and negative attitudes and insults against women from Indigenous nationalities should be stopped by all concerned parties and authorities. I want to advise all women to raise their issues at all levels from local to national to ensure equal participation of women in decision-making positions through the new constitution.”

Chinimaya believes in a more radical approach to getting rights saying a shift in focus is the need of the hour, from soft targets such as preserving language and culture and awareness building of indigenous women rights to the integration of the needs of indigenous women into national policies and plans. She continues saying,

“Development projects like hydropower, cement factories and conservation plans like expansion of national parks have displaced Indigenous people from their ancestral land which has affected their socio-culture and identity. In addition to it, they have been victims of violence and human right violations. indigenous women are unaware of their rights and are not getting enough legal aid. indigenous women’s movement lacks proper documentation which needs to be improved. IW’s representation at decision making at all levels has to be enhanced.”

The goals are multi-layered and intergenerational. That is to say there is a need for dialogue between generations and forward communication regarding traditional skills and knowledge from the community elders, who are the custodians of Indigenous knowledge and customary practices, to the younger generations. According to her, “There has to be immediate initiation in documenting our skills, knowledge and practices as most of knowledge is not documented and is just in oral form. To preserve our identity and reconnect youth with it, we have to impart our knowledge, skills, and leadership to them.”

And while the route map has been laid out for now, she is content to be part of the CEDAW process which has directed the amendment of the constitution of Nepal for IW's rights. Yet to be implemented, she stays focussed on lobbying with the government in order for it to become a ground reality.



Jyotiprava Larma

“Women and men are two parts of a society. If these two parts do not work together, there will be no progress in society. But currently we see that indigenous women are deprived and oppressed, not given their rights as women on the one hand and as an Indigenous person on the other. Indigenous women enjoy their rights in some cases as a woman, but in most cases their lives are confined to bedrooms, delivery rooms and kitchen rooms. Women are still being targeted by being deprived of their socio-economic, political, educational and human rights. Therefore, for the progress of society as well as the people, it is essential that women also get equal rights and dignity in all social spheres. The country will progress if equal rights of men and women are ensured in the society. The ongoing inequality between men and women in the society is also affecting the movement. So, it is very important to eliminate this difference between men and women. There are many discriminations in our society between men and women and I will fight till my death to eradicate it. I believe equality will be established one day.”

Jyotiprava Larma spent most of her time in India as a refugee, returning to Bangladesh after it gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. Hers has been a life that will inspire many young indigenous women, in the numerous upheavals and personal tragedies she has overcome with sheer resilience,



starting with her inability to continue her studies beyond the eighth grade. A feat which was possible thanks to her father Chitta Kishore Chakma who established the Mawrum Secondary School in their village.

What is truly laudable is that after a gap of many years in her studies, she managed to take the secondary school certificate exam with her daughter and passed with honors!

The unfortunate suspension in studies was because of lack of funds and qualified teachers, as a result of which, the Mawrum Secondary School could not be upgraded to a high school.

The young Jyotiprava would have had to travel to the nearest town of Rangamati to complete high school. Not just that, she would have had to live in someone's house or hostel, which was hardly possible in those acutely patriarchal times. Making a promise to herself that she would complete her studies no matter what, she proved herself right many years later.

The eventual move to Rangamati in 1954 allowed her to complete the one-year teachers' training course from the Teachers' Training Centre of Rangamati after which she started her professional career.

It was around the same time she became involved in gender-based issues such as developing health, sports and treatment of the women of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The years were punctuated by frequent relocation and personal tragedies. Jyotiprava recalls saying, "In 1960 when the Kaptai Dam was built while our houses and lands were submerged in the Kaptai Lake and we were forced to return to Mahapuram village. In 1983 when my two younger brothers namely Manabendra Narayan Larma alias MN Larma and Subhendu Prabash Larma were killed, I engaged myself with Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (PCJSS) actively and strongly. In 1986 after a bloodshed war between our party PCJSS and the Bangladesh army, we were compelled to take shelter as refugees in India. Finally, after the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tract Accord on 2nd December 1997, we came back to Bangladesh."

The road to self-determination and realization of gender gaps started within her community, the Chakma Indigenous ethnic group. In her description of her community she says, "The Chakma are one of the multi-lingual Indigenous Jumma peoples in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Chakma society is male dominated and the social system of our people is a decaying feudal society. The Chakmas used to live independently at one time but have been subjected to colonial rule since their incorporation under British rule. The Chakma community has its own language and script and is ruled by the Chakma king who once ruled the Chakma kingdom. Chakma society is governed according to its own customs, traditions and practices. In this case, the responsibilities and role of the Circle Chief (Raja), the Headman of the mouza and the Karbari in the village are very important in society. Men and women have their own ethnic attire and houses." She goes on to talk about the focus on arts and crafts saying, "The rattan industry is very developed in Chakma society. The Chakmas have their own literature, music and musical instruments."

The Chakma people are dependent on agriculture and practice the traditional Jum or rotational farming which is practiced till today. However, at present, modern farming and gardening (plantation) of various cash crops is prioritised. A positive outcome of many years of working towards the upliftment of the Chakmas,

has been increasing levels of literacy. Awareness towards health protection has also increased. Chakma youth are making advancements in the fields of social science and technology.

Jyotiprava credits her father and uncles for being progressive forces in the community and her eventual entry into the movement, "My father and uncles were involved in the movement in continuation of the struggle started by my grandfather against feudal society. After that my own brothers also joined that movement. I continued to be inspired by the movements and political activities they created, and at one stage I became actively involved in the self-determination movement. Later I realized we should participate and contribute to the movement. As a result, I later joined the PCMS (Chittagong Hill Tracts Women's Association) and continued to co-operate with the party. When we joined the movement, the participation of women in society was very limited, and because of our movement, now most women are aware of their rights. Women are being educated alongside men today. As a result, the participation of women in the struggle for political rights is increasing. I must say this is a great achievement for me."

"The name of the organization from which I have been fighting for the establishment of self-determination of Indigenous Jumma people in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) including women's rights is called Parbatya Chattagram Mohila Samity (Chittagong Hill Tracts Women's Association).

Besides that, I am also serving as a Member of the M N Larma Memorial Foundation. The primary task of each member of the Mohila Samity is to convey the party's ideology and objectives to the people, to organize the women's society in the implementation of the objectives and goals of the Mohila Samity based on the party's ideology, to firmly protect the unity of the organization, to raise awareness about women's rights, education, culture and health in women's society and to take concerted action against unjust oppression and injustice against women and to join the movement for self-determination at the same time."

The question that begs to be answered, is that, can there be true progress in any movement for self determination if it does not include the rights of indigenous women? Her answer to that is, "Women and men are two parts in a society. If these two parts do not work together, there will be no progress in society. But currently we see that indigenous women are deprived and oppressed, not given their rights as women on the one hand and as an Indigenous person on the other. indigenous women enjoy their rights in some cases as a woman, but in most cases their lives are confined to bedrooms, delivery rooms and kitchen rooms. Women are still being targeted and being deprived of their socio-economic, political, educational and human rights.

Therefore, for the progress of society as well as the people, it is essential that women also get equal rights and dignity in all social spheres. The country will progress if equal rights of men and women are ensured in the society. The ongoing inequality between men and women in the society is also affecting the movement. So, it is very important to eliminate this difference between men and women. There are many discriminations in our society between men and women and I will fight till my death to eradicate it. I believe equality will be established one day.”

Jyotiprava was honored by the Chottogram Pretilota Trust, Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangha (BNPS) and Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum for her contribution to women's rights in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT).

Her parting words are for indigenous women, “It is my advice to the young indigenous women that the way the men are playing their role in the movement for self-determination of the Indigenous Jumma people as well as in the development of the society, the role and contribution of women should be the same. Women also need to participate in politics and it is essential for men as well as women to come forward in support of their rights.”



FIRE



Anne Lasimbang



With no proper roads, running water and electricity, she was the primary caregiver to her siblings while her mother ran the household with an income, she generated from going to the market.

And so, when she decided to pursue her passion for education, Anne recounts that it was her mother who inspired her with her leadership and drive in community organization,

“I think it was my mother who inspired me to be an activist. When we were young, she would tell us of her stories when she was growing up, how she made decisions for herself and when she was already married with children, she was active in the village organising support groups whenever there was a wedding. From my mother's story, her mother (my grandma) was also a woman who stood up and spoke up if there were injustices that she saw in her neighbourhood. So, the role model of women who are willing to support others was there for me to learn. So, when I grew up and went to school and later university, I always had this passion and courage to do more for others.”

Life taught Anne Lasimbang many lessons early on before she decided to become a teacher herself. Growing up in Nampasan, a small village by the Moyog River in the Penampang district in the Malaysian Borneo state of Sabah, Anne was the oldest of thirteen children.

“I think it was my mother who inspired me to be an activist. When we were young, she would tell us of her stories when she was growing up, how she made decisions for herself and when she was already married with children, she was active in the village organising support groups whenever there was a wedding. From my mother's story, her mother (my grandma) was also a woman who stood up and spoke up if there were injustices that she saw in her neighbourhood. So, the role model of women who are willing to support others was there for me to learn. So, when I grew up and went to school and later university, I always had this passion and courage to do more for others.”

Anne belongs to the Kadazandusun Indigenous group who are mainly subsistence farmers. Even though the pull of the cities is strong for most Indigenous Peoples globally,

the heart lies closer home, eventually leading to a homecoming in later life. The Kadazandusun peoples may have to spend their youth looking for better education and jobs in cities but the twilight years are spent re-connecting with the land and farming and Indigenous traditions,

“We have very strong traditions related to our social life starting from birth to death, besides this we also have traditional practices related to land especially farming. We are also very close to Nature, for instance we can call the wind if we need it, interpret the sound or presence of animals as a sign of something (omen). We also have a lot of traditional knowledge but many of this knowledge is fast disappearing because this knowledge is mainly oral and we have just started to document them but many of our elders have passed on.”

Perhaps it was this connection with Nature that led to the idea of forming a community organizing group after graduating from university that eventually paved the way for PACOS-Partners of Community Organisations, with the objective of organizing different community groups to focus on the most challenging issues in Sabah.

“My organization [PACOS](#) works with Indigenous communities in Sabah Malaysia. We were formally registered in 1991. We work on issues affecting Indigenous peoples in Sabah such rights to our land and territory;

economy and livelihood; education and natural resource management”, according to Anne who is now its Executive Director.

With thirty years spent empowering Indigenous communities through capacity building programs focused on education, human rights and the environment, PACOS Trust is a go to for most organizations looking for allies with vast experience and knowledge of the grassroots.

In her own words her biggest achievement is that, “Many of our communities in Sabah are now aware of their rights and willing to stand for it. Since I started this work in PACOS on Indigenous advocacy I am also happy to see many indigenous women from villages that we have worked with are now leaders. PACOS has a strong grassroots network of community organisations throughout Malaysia.”

But things are never easy for an Indigenous woman, especially when she is rocking the boat. Her biggest personal hurdle when amplifying the voices of Indigenous Peoples in Sabah, was to find hers, “An indigenous woman is that culturally we are not aggressive and outspoken. At times not being able to voice out my concerns as an Indigenous woman due to cultural upbringing is something I am constantly trying to overcome.”

And while she has found her voice which has grown stronger and louder over decades of advocating for the rights of Indigenous Peoples, she still feels the road ahead is long and winding particularly when seen from an engendered lens, “As an Indigenous woman, I wish that we as women, are given more resources and support to participate in movement for rights and resources. We are living in a patriarchal society and it is still very difficult for women to actively participate in the movement. Women also have multiple roles such as reproductive that can be a barrier to be an active participant. Creating support systems and spaces for women to be included would be something very good for us all. “

Not having formal training in advocacy such as a law degree, Anne’s training as a teacher held her in good stead, which serves as an example for other fiery indigenous women looking to make an impact to never let lack of professional capacities get in the way of action-oriented thinking.

Her advice to young indigenous women comes with a deep worldview that is rooted in her community, “Our Indigenous identity to me is very important, it is like the root of a tree, it ensures the tree does not die and grow strong. Therefore, I would like to encourage our Indigenous young women to reconnect to their Indigenous identity as it will keep you grounded. No matter how strong the winds of change and challenges are, you can stand strong. Learn and understand your way of life, knowledge, language, food, clothing etc.”

PACOS today has more than thirty community learning centres that focus on Indigenous knowledge as part of standard curriculum, while also invigorating the conversations around environment and climate.

In a quote given in an earlier interview to [Green Empowerment](#) Anne said, “There is such a great need for Malaysian youth to become more engaged in community organizing, particularly as the gap between the haves and have nots is becoming greater, including in urban areas too. The first thing I’d say is don’t be afraid to fully understand the current situation in Malaysia, including the positive as well as the negative. The second thing I’d say is to focus on people and community, rather than consumerism and a lavish lifestyle, as the latter tend to distract you from what is truly important in life. Research areas you’re interested in in which you can make a difference, such as climate change, human rights, and access to clean energy and water. We need more Malaysians to represent our country at important international meetings with organizations like the United Nations and others. Have the courage to believe that you can directly help your communities if you set your mind to it.”

Kakay Tolentino

“Women are not just voices of their families, they are voices of the communities, of the society.”

Kakay Tolentino has become a force to be reckoned with in the Philippines. But it took many personal battles to bring out the innate warrior in her. Growing up poor in the Indigenous community of Alta Dumagat, in the Sierra Madre range in Aurora province of the Philippines, Kakay was used to not having much as her people were marginalized, not having access to social services and being excluded from the State’s public policies. Simple though life was living in her ancestral village, Kakay recalls the struggle to make ends meet and the need to look beyond the Sierra Madre,

“Our lives were simple back then as typical Indigenous that usually live in a small hut during planting and harvesting rice which you can find in one corner of our farm we called “kaingin, and we have also the so called “Talikod Mundo”, a mobile one post hut that my father moved from one place to another along the seashore while we are fishing during the summer time. We usually lived along the seashore and rivers during summer for fishing, we caught fish and dried them to store longer for our consumption during the preparation of our kaingin, plantation and harvesting rice, vegetables and root crops.”

The Alta Dumagat are a semi- nomadic peoples. Hunting, gathering and fishing have been the traditional sources of income and livelihood



which is dependent on the natural resources of the forest, rivers and sea. The Alta Dumagat are strongly connected to the environment they live in. All their traditional practices and daily ways of life such as traditional hunting, traditional fishing, and farming are connected to the “Subkal’n- Is’suwi” whom they inherit from their ancestors. They value all of the resources found in their ancestral land because they believe that it came from the Supreme Being they call “Makidepat”. They believe they should protect and preserve it as a legacy for the next generation.

But it soon became apparent that this way of life was under threat and the need for an education become essential even though Kakay was happy helping her family in their subsistence farming.

Her parents encouraged her to pursue an education in the hope that one day she would return to uplift the lives of her fellow Alta Dumagat. But life has a few hard knocks in store for the Indigenous child,

“I experienced discrimination from my own teachers. I remember when I was still in elementary school, my teacher would not recognize me even if I stood in front of the doorstep of our classroom. After walking for hours, I was sweaty and muddy, so she refused to acknowledge my presence even if I was standing there. My classmate, who would then become my friend, called the attention of my teacher so she let me in.”

Not having the means to even buy a complete set of school supplies, Kakay remembers a resourceful friend who decided to take matters in her own own hands, “One time, my friend, my classmate who made me visible in the eye of my teacher, told me to gather guava fruits. After which, we traded the fruits for pencils and papers with my classmates who had spare supplies.”

The Church had a major impact on the young Kakay who was in high school when she got actively involved in the Church’s mission of organizing Indigenous communities, in helping the establishment of the church of the poor called Yapak (footprints of Yaweeh the messenger of the gospel).

The fire in her belly had been stoked. Kakay decided to become a full time volunteer in the Church’s mission programme after graduating high school.

Part of her job was to become a community organizer and para-teacher to support the initiatives of establishing literacy and numeracy programs in the Sierra Madre ranges. Her work led to a deeper understanding of how marginalized, Indigenous Dumagat were slowly but surely being pushed off the edge.

Kakay says, “The Dumagat communities have little to “no access to free education”. Indigenous Dumagat experienced discrimination, swindling, and plunder in various forms. We are swindled by middlemen who set the price and standards for our products because they do not know how to identify the quality and make no decision on the price of our products. But it depends on the decision of the middlemen. Also, illegal logging concessions were very rampant in those times (and even up to now). Such activities posed a threat to their lives and livelihood, destroying the ecosystem and natural habitat.”

Raising awareness as a para-teacher and a fellow Dumagat, Kakay also taught them their basic rights – that is, to assert their rights to self-determination and their ancestral lands – apart from teaching them how to read, write, and count. They also practiced the teachings of the Church: to sensitize and engage the people in their quest for social justice.

Armed with good intentions was not enough to clear the way, with the time and place proving dangerous to Kakay,

“Of course, we faced many hurdles as we continued our mission. It was very dangerous to become an organizer during that time. There was Martial Law in the 1970s, and the Marcos government had been using excessive force in communities and against people who were resisting his tyranny and violence. Organizers and Indigenous leaders got arrested, killed or disappeared. Even church people were not spared.

I could describe myself as a “Bakwit” (refugee) because I had to leave the community from time-to-time to secure myself from the threat of attacks from State forces. Instead of retreating, it only deepened my commitment in organizing and working for social transformation.”

A few years after serving as a para-teacher, Kakay got involved in establishing socio-economic, health, and nutrition programs in the Sierra Madre. While still supervising the literacy and numeracy programs, she managed to implement socio-economic projects which supported the provision of social services to Indigenous communities during the time they were fighting against the construction of the dam during the Marcos dictatorship. They were able to apply appropriate technology in farming while maintaining Indigenous knowledge systems and practices. She also trained community-based health workers that provided basic health care services to Indigenous Peoples. Government support however, was not forthcoming, “These services should have been supported by the government; instead,

government officials continued to neglect the needs of Indigenous Peoples and even paved the way for big corporations to plunder our ancestral lands. The Indigenous involved in community farming and in the health program including the community organizer and the priest assigned in the community were red tagged and vilified by the armed forces of the State.”

The 80s saw the construction of the Kaliwa-Kanan dam, a priority project of the Marcos regime. Despite its negative impact to lives and livelihoods of the Dumagat and non-IPs, the Marcos government through the Metro Manila Water Sewage Services (MWSS) continuously pushed for the construction of the dam. This project would displace thousands of Dumagat and non-IPs and destroy farmlands which are still the main source of livelihood of many farmers and Indigenous Peoples. To quell the mounting protests, the government offered relocation sites for the Dumagat in the far-flung areas somewhere in Rizal and Laguna provinces. Kakay got the chance to visit these areas – a grassland and a rocky mountainous area – with no access to fertile lands and water, making her worry about the chances of survival of the people living there. Never one to dwell on her thoughts, Kakay galvanized into action,

“In response to this, we organized our ranks and strengthened our unity to oppose the dam. We were inspired by the struggle of the Igorot in the Cordillera region and the valour of Ama Macli-ing Dulag, who led the fight against the Cellophil logging concessions and Chico Dam. We fought hard to resist the dam. In the end, our collective effort succeeded. The dam did not push through. The Marcos regime was ousted, and another regime was installed into position.”

But destructive forces had already been set in motion which continued with the Aquino regime, meaning no changes in the lived realities of Indigenous Peoples who continued to face neglect and denial of social services. Militarization and human rights violations continued. Destructive projects such as logging were still practiced.

Meanwhile Kakay was confronting her own personal demons,

“As for me, I continued my involvement in the mission. The truth is, I have an inferiority complex. As an Indigenous woman, the layers of discrimination that our tribe experienced (and continue to experience) made me feel inferior whenever I get to interact with professionals and educated people. It took years for me to process my inferiority and believe in my capacity as a leader and as an activist.

What inspired me to overcome my barriers was the persistence of the Indigenous Peoples to learn and serve their own communities.

They were eager to learn how to make herbal medicines, acupuncture, basic health care and first aid, and nutrition. They were steadfast in strengthening their organizations and building their confidence. They wanted to change their situation. I realized that the solution to our longstanding problems as Indigenous Peoples is our unity. If we unite and strengthen our ranks, then we will gain more victories and even regain our confidence.”

Her biggest achievement has been to have contributed towards the defence of ancestral lands and territories against the construction of the Kaliwa Kana Laiban dam and continue to stand against continuation of the dam construction under the Duterte regime with his Armed Forces and the NTF_ELCAC.

In the 1990s, Kakay took part in the formation of a national alliance of minorities, the Consultative Assembly of Minority People, which later transformed into Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan sa Pilipinas (KAMP). Because of the imminent threat to her life as a community organizer and development worker, she was absorbed by the national secretariat of KAMP and worked there for many years in its advocacy and network-building programs.

“Being in a national organization, I regained my confidence, having to deal with different people – advocates, church leaders,

lawyers, academics, seminarians, researchers – sectors who supported and advocated the cause of Indigenous Peoples rights in the Philippines.

My activism continues as an organizer. It seemed to me that organizing at the community level was integral to my life as an activist. Apart from organizing in Indigenous communities, I also immersed myself in sectors of migrant workers' families, teachers, and government employees and led the regional environmental network. Such experiences taught me the importance of organizing not only within my sector, but also with other sectors. Unifying with other sectors meant stronger voices from the margins. The margins are often unheard and invisible. If we make our voices heard, then significant changes might occur."

The State, however, continues to silence Indigenous Peoples. In late 2000, Kakay was included in a list of activists who were charged with fabricated cases which were later proven false. Kakay then joined national organization-KATRIBU as the Secretary-General of the KATRIBU Party list, but unfortunately they did not get a seat in the House of the Representatives. It was then that Kakay was nominated to take on the leadership position at BAI 's Network. Bai was established in 2004 as a network of progressive 's organizations in the Philippines, focussed on building capacities of and solidarity among aimed at the full recognition and respect of women and the Indigenous Peoples collective rights to ancestral land and self-determination.

Among the pioneer members were Innabuyog-GABRIELA (Cordillera), Sabokahan Women (Southern Mindanao), Madagway in Northern Mindanao, NAKASA in Far Southern Mindanao, Anggoy in Panay Island and other women's organizations in Mindoro Island, Northern Mindanao, Western Mindanao, and Central Luzon. In 2015, they strengthened its structure and its membership in the regions. In total, there are eleven member organizations which are still active today. Speaking of her experience of heading BAI, Kakay says,

"It is humbling to work and connect with various 's organizations in the Philippines. I have learned a lot from their experiences – their courage to speak out and resist destructive projects and militarization in their communities, their willingness to learn and cultivate leadership among their ranks, and their courage to challenge the existing gender roles in their communities. I believe that can foster leadership and break the traditional gender relations. As shared by many of the members of Bai, they continue to overcome the feudal and patriarchal relations and assert themselves in the process of decision-making and other political matters in their communities and tribes.



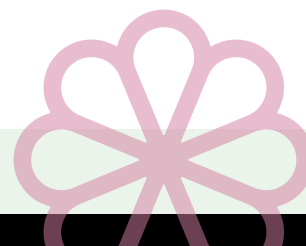
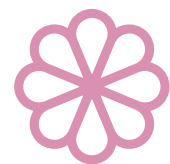
I am inspired by how through the years have been visible in their struggle for the defence of ancestral lands and the right to self-determination. In the previous years, were at the forefront of the Lakbayan (peoples' march) and other national and local mobilizations. Such determination and militancy proved that have important roles in social transformation.

Still, a lot of work needs to be done. The situation of Indigenous Peoples hasn't changed a bit. Majority of the Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines remain in the quagmire of poverty and neglect. They are unable to access social services such as health, education, and reproductive care. They are attacked and tagged as "terrorists" or "terrorist supporters."

Today as they continue to face a precarious milieu brought on by militarization and oppressive and repressive programs and policies of the State, it is imperative that be provided with more opportunities to learn and hone their leadership skills and creativity, to build their confidence, and to boost their morale to be able to actively participate in the movement for social transformation.

Kakay shares her wish saying, "Women are not just voices of their families, they are voices of the communities, of the society."

Her hope is that from urban centres go back and trace their roots and learn from their sisters and mothers; reconnect with their ancestors and take part in the wider struggle of national minorities for self-determination and liberation and that in the future, more become a future generation of leaders and activists who will take part in building a just, peaceful, and developed society free from discrimination and violence.



AIR



Su Hsin

“Due to non-recognition, we cannot claim our land rights. Our culture is on the verge of disappearance due to lack of accessibility of cultural education to the younger generation. Our cultural laws and institutions are not given legal status. Even the process of free, prior, informed consent is not practiced with the non-recognized groups. We cannot protect land, cannot do traditional livelihood; women are food growers and practitioners of Indigenous systems of healing through herbs, the traditional ways of livestock rearing are also disappearing. We cannot protect our culture as there is no cultural education. At the same time, many Indigenous youths face immense challenges including loss of identity and solidarity, the erosion of values and identity, as well as continued struggles to ensure their rights and identity as Indigenous Peoples.”

Su Hsin is a young Indigenous civil engineer and activist from the Papora community in Taiwan, who believes that technology is a bridge between the young and the old and can go a long way in closing the generation gap.

Technology has indeed been a boon for the Papora Indigenous community who have welcomed it and used it for the greater good. Using it to maintain records and archives in a bid to retard the disappearance of their culture and way of life. This serves as an example to more Indigenous communities globally,



who looking to harness technology to make ancient traditions a part of living memory, one that needs to be shared with the rest of the world.

For Su Hsin who is at once comfortable with the modern world while maintaining strong ties to her heritage, her the source of inspiration has been her mother who educated her on how to be a real Papora, with a deep sense of responsibility and solidarity towards her people. As a little girl she was touched by the situation of Indigenous People and their suffering. That feeling of wanting to do something only intensified, eventually providing clarity as to what her destined role would be later on in life.

The first step towards that role was to be able to get a good job in order for her to be able to donate towards the Indigenous cause and find resources for her community. This led to a deeper involvement with Su Hsin advocating for their rights in different forums with the larger goal of empowering young Indigenous girls so that they are capable and educated enough to be independent.

The Papora Indigenous group is a matrilineal society where mothers are the heads of households. This could be a contributing factor towards gender equality in the community where there is respect for the contributions of all genders and their roles in society. They follow the lunar calendar and worship Nature as part of their culture and have strong spiritual beliefs which includes the belief that ancestors lead them to find a better way to co-exist and respect Mother Earth. One of the biggest festivals is the harvest festival in July and the remembrance of ancestors' festival where they participate in a traditional ceremony to respect the Papora spirit. In the ceremony, they separate into different age groups with different responsibilities assigned to them. It is through the practice of these ceremonies that younger generations grow up learning about traditions and cultural values which they can in turn practice, and keep alive. One of the most interesting aspects of this ceremony is when young men participate in a race where the winner gets to marry the most beautiful girl from the community!



Su Hsin's organization, the Papora Indigenous Development Association has more than three hundred members with two hundred indigenous women and a hundred Indigenous men. The focus has been human rights, climate change, elders' and child health, early warning systems, and traditional knowledge preservation with a digital database. Since Taiwan is not part of UN mechanism, their representation in different international mechanisms such as COP, UNFCCC is through other networks and alliances like Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact.

Within Taiwan, the gaps in policy for the rights of indigenous women are multiple. Su Hsin elaborates saying, "There is a need for legal recognition of all Indigenous Peoples within Taiwan. Taiwan has recognized only sixteen Indigenous groups while seventeen Indigenous groups are not yet recognized. Taiwan has been under the governance of the KMT party of China who have been reluctant to provide

recognition of Indigenous Peoples of the lowlands because of the opportunities these lands provide. In contrast, recognition has been given to Indigenous groups who are in remote mountain locations which aren't as accessible.”

Su Hsin goes on to say that, “Due to non-recognition, we cannot claim our land rights. Our culture is on the verge of disappearing due to lack of availability of cultural education to the younger generation. Our cultural laws and institutions are not given legal status. Even the process of free, prior, informed consent is not practiced with the non-recognized groups. We cannot protect land, cannot do traditional livelihood; women are food growers and practitioners of Indigenous systems of healing through herbs, the traditional ways of livestock rearing are also disappearing. We cannot protect our culture as there is no cultural education. At the same time, many Indigenous youths face immense challenges including loss of identity and solidarity, the erosion of values and identity, as well as continued struggles to ensure their rights and identity as Indigenous Peoples.”

It is not just the refusal to recognise her community by the government that has caused a feeling of alienation, Su Hsin has faced discrimination and stigmatization at the personal level. She says Indigenous groups like hers are stereotyped, where being Indigenous is considered being dirty and drunk. It is challenging for Indigenous Peoples to marry outside the community to non-Indigenous people since they are not accepted by non-Indigenous communities.

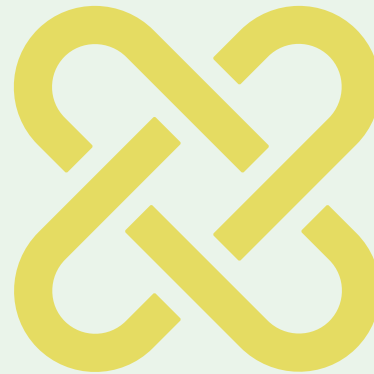


Being Indigenous, has also created professional challenges for her where it has been very difficult to be hired as an Indigenous person. There are also wage gaps; the compensation given to people from Indigenous backgrounds is lower than those given to non-Indigenous people for the same position and responsibilities. Also, not being legally recognized as an Indigenous person means that they do not benefit from centralized government policies and affirmative actions which are otherwise allocated for the recognised Indigenous groups.

But despite unsavoury experiences, Su Hsin believes the younger generation should not be afraid and give up. One should always follow their heart, she believes. She emphasizes that the younger ones have to come back to the community and find a mentor or a leader to follow, one who they can learn from and emulate. She also advises them to donate and give back to the community if they have more resources.

Her biggest achievement she says has been, “The establishment of a cultural school in 2000 where the younger generation are taught about their traditions and supported in English learning since they cannot afford a fancy education.”

Most recently she and her team have initiated elder health care for her community. Not only that, she along with thirty young people from her community have devised early warning systems combining traditional knowledge with technical know-how. The result is that they have been able to install early warning systems in ninety communities in rural areas inhabited by Indigenous People which has lessened the death rate significantly.



Kanako Uzawa

“It is a good idea to build up our strength by receiving education, making good allies and finding good venues (digital included). If we manage to keep up our inspiration, we can stay strong for longer as well.”

The personal is political and for Kanako Uzawa that happened to start at home where her political will was shaped by her grandfather, Tadashi Kaizawa who was a respected Ainu leader and activist who fought against the dam construction in the Nibutani community in Hokkaido which was the central government's nation-wide development project in the 1960s as part of a larger economic growth effort.

She remembers saying, “The dam was planned and launched in the sacred Ainu community, Nibutani by the Hokkaido Development Agency to supply water to an industrial development area. The project was cancelled later on, but the dam continued to be built. My family was one of the plaintiffs to sue the government led by my grandfather. We won the case on March 27, 1997. The Sapporo District Court recognized a right (respect for the individuals) guaranteed under Article 13 of the Japanese Constitution and Article 27 of ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) to enjoy our "minority" culture. This became a landmark court case in the Ainu discussion in Japan, and I have been following the process,



understanding how important it is for us as Ainu people to be able to speak and demand our rights on our own terms.”

She goes on to say, “My grandfather used to say “To stand on the same platform as Wajin (non-Ainu), we need an education.” I believed in his word and followed my education. What has been important to me is also to carry on the inspiration I have received from all Ainu elders, friends, and family members; collective memories of us having warm meals together, harvesting, embroidering and sharing stories.”

All this equipped Kanako with a fertile imagination sparked by memories, “All of which follow me wherever I go and remind me of who I am and how I became who I am today, which I hope to pass onto younger generations.”

The Ainu people belong to Japan and are people of the North who nowadays live in Hokkaido and many other areas of Japan. Traditionally, their ancestral lands included southern Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands, and parts of Northern Honshu which is the largest of the four major islands that form the Japanese archipelago.

Speaking of geography, since working and living as an Ainu woman in Europe, Kanako says the challenge for her has been to, “Create a venue and space to share my stories as an Ainu woman. Since I have moved to Europe, it is very hard to bring in Asian perspectives, both among the general public and within academia. Asian culture in general is hardly known in Northern Europe, so bringing in indigenous women’s perspectives from Asia is really challenging.”

What has also been a challenge is that even as an Indigenous woman from a developed country like Japan, patriarchal structures have ensured she has had to compete with Japanese male professionals, “For me, to become a doctor in social sciences was crucial because it has created more avenues and space to speak out and share my voice as an Ainu woman, which existed in a very limited sense.”

It is with that primary objective that Kanako founded [AinuToday](#), which is a digital information sharing platform that provides contemporary voices and issues of Ainu people in Japan. AinuToday is the first English knowledge-sharing platform for an international audience

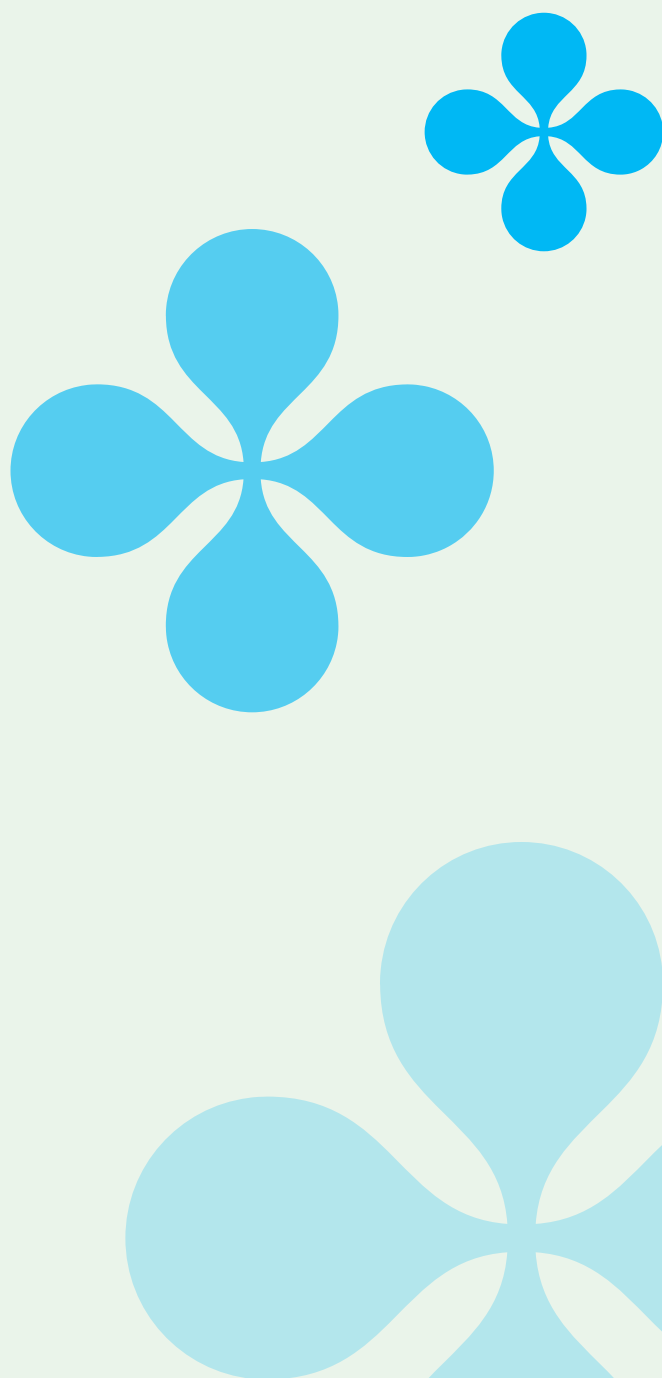
to learn about contemporary Ainu voices, issues, and arts, according to Kanako,

“I founded AinuToday in 2021, supported people throughout the Ainu community and like-minded colleagues Dr. Scott Harrison, Sabra Harris (MA), and Michael J. Ioannides (MA), and Maria Victoria Diaz-Gonzalez. I am an Ainu scholar, advocate, and performer who engages with contemporary expressions and first-hand narratives of the Ainu people in Japan. The Ainu are Indigenous people of Japan who were, and still are to some degree, considered “being in danger of extinction.” Until recently, most Ainu related literature and activities were dominated by non-Ainu scholars, and little information about the everyday lives of the Ainu was available. This is changing as Ainu-created, initiated, and co-developed research, art, and policy is increasing. AinuToday celebrates, contributes to, and highlights information about living Ainu and promotes forward-thinking, respectful and lively dialogue toward a better future. As the pandemic is making more people dependent on the internet for information and building community networks, AinuToday is a long overdue and well-timed initiative.”

For Kanako there is always a right time and place for change to happen which she says indigenous women can use to claim their rights. Till then she says, “It is a good idea to build up our strength by receiving education, making good allies and finding good venues (digital included). If we manage to keep up our inspiration, we can stay strong for longer as well.”

She offers sound advice to other young indigenous women, “Pursue what you feel more passionately for, whether it is language, dance, song, handcraft etc. There are so many ways that we can contribute to and send a message to the world about why our rights as Indigenous peoples have to be protected and why our culture needs to be cherished and developed further.

Her biggest accomplishment she says, “Is finally to be positioned and recognized as a spokesperson internationally for our people.”



WATER





Luong Thi Truong

The vacuum was filled by establishing the Vietnam Indigenous Knowledge Network – VTIK which was formally established on 15th July, 2007, and its coordinating council which is The Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas (CSDM). As of 2021, VTIK composes three thousand four hundred members divided into seventy-three groups across fifteen mountainous provinces and twelve ethnic minority groups.

Luong herself belongs to the Thai ethnic minority group. Thai people in Ba Thuoc and Tuong Duong districts have their own traditional custom and practices, own dress and language, & script which is basically similar to Thai people in Vietnam. As an Indigenous woman, Luong has faced discrimination from men in general and Indigenous men in particular, and from majority peoples.

She says, “The Thai people keep their own religious practices such as worshipping ancestors and gods and people believe that people and creatures have a soul, and the soul of the person governs his or her spiritual activities. Thai people have customs such as worshipping the forest to pray for rain, water and favourable weather for good crops. There are Xang Khan, Xen ban, Xen Muong festivals, where all community members gather for ceremonies and celebrate together with

“I am a proud Indigenous woman; I want to keep our Indigenous identity as a distinguished group of peoples.”

For Luong Thi Truong that is the guiding principle of her life’s substantial work advocating of the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Vietnam which includes the cross cutting and intersecting issues of gender rights, conservation of Indigenous knowledge and the revitalization of ethnic minority languages. Building the voices and narrative of the various Indigenous groups has its challenges, foremost being the need to gather as much information and data of the different groups in order to capitalize on ideas and amplify voices.

The road has been long and narrow according to Loung who said in the past, “Indigenous Peoples in Vietnam were not aware of laws, policies with no Indigenous person taking up the issue of their rights.”

traditional songs, dances and food. There are special customs such as taking a bride at 12 o'clock at night, celebrating a child's birth, worshiping with offerings to their ancestors for a peaceful village. The Thai also have with their own typical food and still retain a lot of Indigenous knowledge and customs related to use and management of water, forests and biodiversity because of their livelihoods which are based on water sources and forests; they cultivate both upland and paddy rice fields. The Thai keep many precious herbal remedies, and in each community and village there are healers who provide herbal medicine not only to the villagers but outsiders as well. But traditionally women enjoy limited access to public affairs such as religious and traditional practices and ceremonies which women aren't allowed officiate."

Through the Vietnam Indigenous Knowledge Network, its members have advocated for the Thai language since 2007- 2015. The Dao group has advocated from 2012- 2017 for the Dao language.

The Vietnam Indigenous Knowledge Network's philosophy is that Indigenous knowledge should be protected in its living context and environment and must serve for the improvement of ethnic minority living standards. Indigenous knowledge must be used in harmony with appropriate modern techniques for development of agriculture, forestry and income diversification and promoting non-farm employment for ethnic minority peoples.



The shared vision of the network is to conserve, revitalize and promote Indigenous Knowledge for the prosperous future of their peoples as distinct ethnic groups.

Luong is one of the founders of both CSDM and VTIK. On the considerable achievements made she says, "We successfully revitalized four ethnic minority languages in the community. In addition, VTIK members in their provinces have been champions in conservation, revitalization and promotion of Indigenous culture and identity."

She goes on to add that, "The organizations have also revitalized the Thai and Dao ethnic languages. Before 2007, the Vietnamese government did not allow its usage or allow ethnic minority languages to be taught. Since the establishment of the Vietnam Indigenous Knowledge network (VTIK) in 2007, we have fought for their revitalization and in 2015 the Thai language was officially accepted by the government and was allowed to be taught in secondary schools, while we were free to teach the Dao language in communities."



The VTIK's coordinating council, the Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas (CSDM) is a non-profit organization. Since its foundation in 2000, CSDM has lived up to its name by providing direct assistance to ethnic minority communities in mountainous areas and in leading the important task of educating the public about their way of life. CSDM is a leading institution in ethnic minority program services and advocacy work in Vietnam.

Explaining the scale and scope of the work undertaken by the Centre for Sustainable Development in Mountainous Areas, Luong says, "CSDM works comprehensively, carrying out programs and services for ethnic minorities such as assisting in the strengthening and consolidation of local ethnic minority organizations and communities for the promotion and propagation, preservation and protection of Indigenous knowledge, climate change, reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation & community forestry."

She goes on to add that, "The organization also ensures the protection of the rights of ethnic minorities through grassroots democracy ordinance programs. CSDM also assists in the capacity building of ethnic minority local network organizations and coordinates with other organizations in developments that lead to the appreciation of the cultural heritage and traditions of EMs and takes into consideration their practical situation.

Currently, CSDM has maintained a close working relationship with various Indigenous networks and organizations such as IWGIA (Indigenous Working Group on Indigenous Affairs), AIPP (Asia Indigenous People Pact Foundation), PACOS – Malaysia, RECOFTC; CSDM is participating in Sub-national working groups on BDS, local implementation and governance and safeguards of National REDD network; moreover, CSDM is a member of national UN-REDD+ Program Executive Board so we have the opportunity to share and contribute to the development of good forestry policies in general and conservation and utilization of Indigenous knowledge, customary laws and practices for REDD+, forest conservation and climate-resilient livelihood in particular."

A major achievement due to the unrelenting efforts of the VTIK was that in May 2014 at the National Dialogue of Ethnic Minorities, representatives with the UN-REDD program were assigned by the participants to be the focal point for all ethnic minorities at REDD programs in the whole of Vietnam. Main activities in localities focus on the conservation and promotion of Indigenous knowledge and its uses in agriculture and forestry development, natural resources management, environment and response to the impact of climate change.

One of the major hurdles for CSDM has been a struggle for funds for the operations of the networks. Luong says, "CSDM staff has volunteered and coordinated within the network. Network members at localities participate in local activities with a modest fund."

The situation is exacerbated by the lack of support from the government, especially when it comes to indigenous women's issues.

Despite such ongoing obstacles, Luong says that they have had some phenomenal milestone victories, "Since 2015 the Thai script has been recognized and allowed to be taught in secondary schools and communities in provinces where the Thai live. Since 2012 the newly established Dao network has been able to set up Dao language teaching programs for Dao communities in Bac Giang, Thanh Hoa, Hoa Binh and Yen Bai. From 2014 the Mong script has been taught in

the Mong communities and from 2018 the Muong language has been taught in the Muong communities."

The network was also able to research, retrieve and collect books and some epics of ancient Thai language such as "xong chu xon sao", "khon lu nang ua" and translate it into Vietnamese. Parts of which have served as a syllabus and as references in teaching programmes for the conservation of natural resources.

The network has been a catalyst in the revitalization of cultural festivals, folk songs and dance in mountainous provinces, so that they can be transmitted and preserved for future generations.

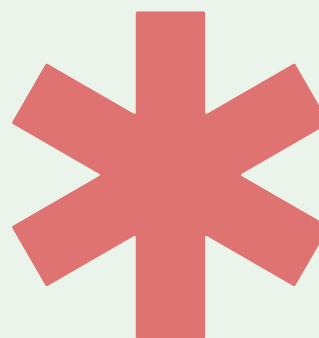
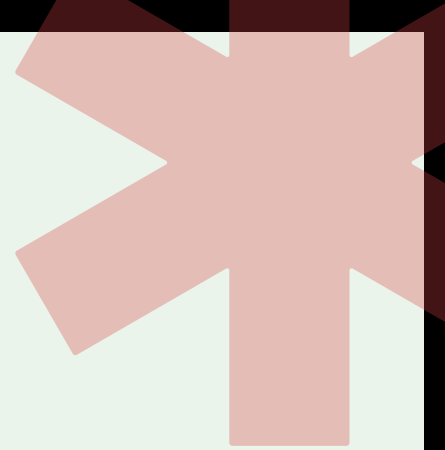
Luong adds, "The network has also helped maintain and develop traditional remedies, while making substantial contributions towards sacred forest conservation while applying Indigenous knowledge in forestry, biodiversity and water conservation."

When asked what her hopes are for indigenous women with regards to their inclusion and participation in movement building, she says, "All indigenous women have to be made aware of their rights as Indigenous Peoples as stipulated in national laws and international conventions, legislation, regulation, especially CEDAW and laws on gender equity.

They have to take pride in the vital role they play within their families, community and society.”

Her advice to indigenous women is, “Be proud of your Indigenous identity and practice, follow traditional practices and preserve language, Indigenous food, and Indigenous behaviours. In the community: keep and practice traditional customary laws and practices of communities; collaborate with young peoples of their own group to conserve the group’s identity.”

Her hopes for the future are that, “All governments recognize, respect indigenous women’s role and rights and support them in asserting their rights through full and effective participation in the decision-making process that will lead to sustained rights in the development and management of natural resources.”



Khamla Keovongphet



“For a long time, we have been living in a patriarchal society. Men are accepted to be good at everything even when that is not true. I wish to see men accept women for what women can do and have respect for them and I wish to see women have their rights and access to natural and financial resources.”

Khamla Keovongphet’s story begins with a lot of hard work, resistance to gender inequalities and a stroke of luck. Like many indigenous women, Khamla grew up in a large family of ten siblings- four sisters and six brothers in Bokeo - Northern Province of Lao PDR. Perhaps it was her formative years that had the most impact on her, growing up as she did in a patriarchal household where her brothers had access to education while the same was denied to her sisters and her.

Not an uncommon practice in the Tai Lue Indigenous community, where gender binaries mean that women are often relegated to doing unpaid

domestic labour for their families such as household work and other caregiving duties. This meant that Khamla’s mother had no decision-making power which lay in the hands of her father.

Lady Luck smiled on Khamla when she was all of twenty years old. An international non-government organization was the doorway to an informal education. She says, “When I was 20 years old, an INGO gave me the opportunity to join the project and help the community in Namchuang village. Because I did not have any education, I worked as a housekeeper. The Director (female) gave me an opportunity and supported me in my non-formal-education. While working I also learned to read and write. I had access to education, but I had to do the household work, as well as do housekeeping work in the office, and after work I studied. I finished high school and could read and write. I continued my job as a housekeeper, and also volunteered in NCA in field work.”

Always conscious of gender disparities and the life changing role of education, Khamla knew that her good fortune had to be paid forward,

“In my community, I observed many boys and girls couldn’t write or read but I got the opportunity to study and develop myself. Now, I have the opportunity to work with community development organizations and they inspire me so much to improve myself more. Even though I can’t speak English, I think I can make changes necessary for a better life and continue to fight for women’s rights.”

Today her organisation, Gender Development Association, contributes to a society where women are empowered and can live without violence and discrimination. GDA offered her the role of gender trainer in a young mothers and nutrition project.

According to her, “GDA wants to achieve the goals that women can work alongside men, of reducing poverty and providing opportunities for development. GDA envisions a world free from discrimination and violence leading the to the achievement of gender equality and the advancement of women in Laos PDR.”

When asked what she wished for indigenous women that is lacking in the movement for rights and resources, her reply was succinct and clear,

“Since a long time ago, we have been living in a patriarchal society. Men are accepted to be good at everything even when that is not true. I wish to see men accept women for what women can do and have respect for them and I wish to see women have their rights and access to natural and financial resources.”



Her hard work and dedication have resulted in her becoming a role model for her community. With more than two decades of her work proving that she was no less of a match as an Indigenous woman when it came to men.

She goes on to say that gender roles need to change since, “Men take on the main role of earning money but they usually spend it outside the house and bring only some to the family while women are not brave enough to make a decision and still rely on men. Men need to accept women easily and as their equals.”

For Khamla, young ethnic women should participate in community development activities and any workshops organized by civil society organizations to improve themselves. That she says is a small step towards moving mountains!



Malina Lopaying

that there exist persistent structural barriers that prevent the full realization of human rights by people in poverty, particularly ethnic minorities.

These structural barriers have diversified and broadened the gender gap in the community where in families like Malina's, women are discouraged from being assertive. Instead, arranged marriages decide the fate of the women where the burden of household chores lies squarely on their shoulders. Education is often not a priority when it comes to women and girls. In Malina's own words, "Families discourage ethnic girls from getting educated and put pressure on them to get married early."

Gender roles are also clearly defined and rigid with men being the only breadwinners in families which only serves to reinforce gender inequalities.

Malina speaks with a wisdom that belies her age, "I wish to see Hmong women take the opportunities to improve themselves and be brave to make decisions in family affairs as well as in community development plans. Ethnic women are not confident about showcasing their ideas in society. That needs to change."

"When I was a child, I saw some girls and boys have not attended school and they couldn't write or read. But I got the opportunity to study and develop myself. Now that I have the opportunity to work with community development projects and assist teams in translating ethnic languages, this has spurred me on to improve myself more. In a short span of time, I think I can make some changes in women's knowledge, understand new techniques and improve their life. I will never stop fighting for women rights."

Twenty-two-year-old Malina Lopaying belongs to the Hmong Indigenous community in Laos PDR. Despite being the third largest ethnic group in Lao, the Hmong community faces extreme poverty and serious marginalization; the result of a top-down approach of economic policy, the UN special rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights noted during his visit to Lao in 2019,

Another barrier to women's emancipation she feels is because, "Ethnic women are underestimated in the workplace. This often means that women themselves also underestimate themselves and doubt their abilities. This insecurity and feelings of inferiority is enabled at homes and by families who are not encouraging towards women, often not allowing them to develop skills." She goes on to add that a woman's identity means little, "In communities the woman's maiden name is not acknowledged. Instead, her husband's name is valued."

For her, indigenous women are a link between the past and the future. She believes that research on ethnic identity and preservation of traditional activities & exchange with other communities needs to happen in order to achieve sustainable development goals. According to her, "Different generations need to work together with knowledge transfer from mother to daughter."

It is with this goal that her organization Gender Development Association provides internship opportunities to young girls and boys every year from the community in order to gain experience of community work. She has her work cut out for her,

"We are working on community development projects to facilitate ethnic women's participation in community development. I do translations from Lao tai to Hmong ethnic language in the community meetings, surveys and interviews.

When we conducted the survey or training session, the pamphlets with pictures needed to be explained in the ethnic language. This may be time consuming but it ensures people understand and apply it to practices. The research findings and recommendations need to be shared and disseminated among stakeholders and policy decision makers."

Speaking about the moment she knew she wanted to be a changemaker Malina says, "When I was a child, I saw some girls and boys who had not attended school and they couldn't write or read. But I got the opportunity to study and develop myself. Now that I have the opportunity to work with community development projects and assist teams in translating ethnic languages, this has spurred me on to improve myself more. In a short span of time, I think I can make some changes in women's knowledge, understand new techniques and improve their life. I will never stop fighting for women's rights."



