

HER STORY 7





Publication name:

HerStory 7

Indigenous women breaking biases for a sustainable tomorrow.

Copyright (©) : **AIPP**

The contents of this book may be reproduced and distributed for non-commercial purposes if AIPP is notified and the authors and AIPP are acknowledged as the source.

Published by:

Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)

112 Moo 1, Tambon Sanpranate, Amphur Sansai,
Chiang Mai 50210, Thailand

Tel: +66 (0) 53 343 539

Fax: +66 (0) 53 343 540

www.aippnet.org

ISBN: 978-616-7898-51-3

Suggested citation:

AIPP 2024, HerStory 7, Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), Chiang Mai, Thailand

Produced by: **Indigenous Women Programme**

Written by: **Nina Sangma, Dr. Elizabeth Imti, Tassanee Surawanna, Koinchbu Kaatich.**

Copyedited by: **Evangelene Carina Nongkhlaw**

Layout by: **Himal Shrestha**

Artwork by: **Damrongrit Phrommacharee**

Supported by: **OXFAM and SIDA**



Disclaimer :

This is AIPP's publication, and the responsibility for the accuracy of the facts and information included in this publication remains with the individual authors. The information and statements do not necessarily reflect the views of AIPP or OXFAM.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In this special edition of **HerStory 7**, we gratefully acknowledge the invaluable contributions of Indigenous women across Asia whose stories illuminate the resilience, leadership, and unwavering commitment to their communities and the environment. We extend our deepest appreciation to every individual who shared her lived experiences, shaping this collection into a powerful testament of strength and determination.

We honor the courage and wisdom of Indigenous women: Nimi Sherpa and Shobha Sunuwar from Nepal, Basanti Murmu from Bangladesh, Noridah Samad from Malaysia, Chalouy Hantalay from Thailand, Diana Tan Beng Hui from Malaysia, Mia Magdalena Fokno from the Philippines, Manjula Bala Rabha from North East India, and Shinako Oyakawa from Japan. Their voices echo through these pages, inspiring us to stand in solidarity and advocate for justice and empowerment.

We also extend our gratitude to every individual and organizations who have supported and uplifted Indigenous women's voices, whether through storytelling, advocacy, or policy initiatives. Your solidarity is vital in advancing justice, empowerment, and dignity for Indigenous women everywhere.

Together, let us continue to amplify the voices, honor the wisdom, and advocate for the rights of Indigenous women, standing in solidarity with them as they pave the way for a more just and equitable world.

FOREWORD

Each year, on March 8th, the world commemorates International Women's Day (IWD) as a reminder of our shared dedication to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. This year's theme, "Invest in women—accelerate progress," emphasizes the crucial need to prioritize investments in the empowerment of women and girls to hasten our journey towards equality, ensuring the well-being, rights, and dignity of Indigenous women and girls.

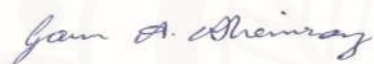
The HerStory series by AIPP is a testament to this commitment, celebrating the achievements and resilience of indigenous women across Asia. Through these narratives, we acknowledge the importance of amplifying Indigenous women's voices and experiences, recognizing their pivotal role in driving progress towards Indigenous people's rights.

HerStory 7 focuses on sharing the remarkable journeys of eleven indigenous women from seven diverse countries in Asia across three central themes: Indigenous Women Leadership, Indigenous Women and Climate Change, and Gender-Based Violence. Through this series, we aim to illuminate the accomplishments of Indigenous women who have traversed immense challenges in their lives, propelled forward by their unwavering conviction, dedication, and self-confidence. Moreover, these women come from varied backgrounds and are facing challenges shaped by rural or urban settings, migration, and other factors that navigate a complex intersection of identities. Acknowledging these complexities is crucial for understanding their journeys and addressing their unique needs as we strive for gender equality and empowerment.

These stories serve as a source of inspiration not only for indigenous women and girls but for all individuals, encouraging them to embrace their own strengths and convictions. Each narrative is a testament to the unwavering spirit of indigenous women, resonating with real-life experiences that many of us can relate to and draw inspiration from.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the courageous indigenous women who have shared their personal journeys, as well as to all those who have contributed to shaping this impactful series.

In Solidarity,



Gam A. Shimray
Secretary General
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact





CONTENTS

Foreword

Theme: Indigenous Women Leadership

1. Nimi Sherpa 2
2. Basanti Murmu 5
3. Shobha Sunuwar 8

Theme: Climate Change

4. Noridah Samad 13
5. Chalouy Hantalay 16
6. Diana Tan Beng Hui 19

Theme: Gender Based Violence

7. Mia Magdalena Fokno 23
8. Manjula Bala Rabha 26
9. Shinako Oyakawa 28



Indigenous Women Leadership



NIMI SHERPA'S PERSONAL EVEREST

Ethnicity: Sherpa, Nepal



Nimi Sherpa's core memory was that she was not enough; at least not enough to be a man. A feeling she acutely felt as a girl born to a father who longed for the "real" stamp of a man; and therefore assured of his shot at immortality through his lineage being passed down through a male child. This feeling is no doubt shared by countless girls being thrust on to the world under similar circumstances.

Born in the Sherpa village of Junbesi in Nepal's Everest region, Nimi is one of four girls born to rural farmers in the remote mountainous area. Nimi spent her childhood watching ruddy men passing

through from climbing expeditions. The fact that it was only men who had the privilege of the thrill and adventure that come with it all was not lost on the young child. This severely drove home the fact that she was a girl, a lived reality that curbed access to such joys. Patriarchy also has a way of bringing violence into homes where women like her mother pay the price of not being able to give birth to a male heir.

Disappointed after having four daughters, Nimi's father decided to remarry in hopes of siring a son, leaving Nimi to wrestle with her inner turmoil. From a young age she was plagued by the fundamental question,

"How can I be like a man?" This question opened the door to other existential inquiries, such as why women weren't climbing mountains, which seemed to offer Nimi a way to possibly emulate men.

At the age of twelve, Nimi decided it was time to make good on her promise of wanting to be like a man which set her off on the path to Kathmandu, Nepal's capital to find a job. At fourteen Nimi found herself married, presumably because unmarried girls are often targets of unwanted male advances. Undeterred by the mundaneness of marriage, she made her foray into tourism, starting out as a porter carrying camera equipment up Mount Annapurna in 1976 to cooking for mountaineering groups, and eventually becoming resourceful in every way in true Sherpa style.

Her first tryst with fame came after climbing Mount Nuptse in 1984 without oxygen, the first Nepalese woman to do so; the first of many firsts in her life. The media attention and press coverage of this phenomenal achievement gave a tremendous boost to her career in tourism. From porter to tour guide, to proprietor of a trekking company called the Alpine Trekking and Expedition Service.

Not content with owning a trekking company, Nimi set about making her leadership and vision a reality by bringing together an organization to represent the Share Price Association. This was the move that opened the door for many indigenous women to join what came to be known as the SHE organization. From then on, indigenous women found a platform and a stage to get vocal about their rights and issues concerning them through public demonstrations and rallies.

The journey to the pinnacle of her success as President of the Nepal Indigenous Women Forum is akin to climbing Everest for almost five decades, while also breaking various gender stereotypes along the way. In a world designed predominantly for men, the rules are written differently for women.

The journey to the pinnacle of her success as President of the Nepal Indigenous Women Forum is akin to climbing Everest for almost five decades, while also breaking various gender stereotypes along the way. In a world designed predominantly for men, the rules are written differently for women. For women who want to play just as hard as the men, the rules get tougher at every level; especially in male dominated professions like alpine tourism which require odd working hours organizing round the clock arrivals and departures of tour groups. Women with families who are earning members of their households, are often tasked with the balancing act of being the primary caregiver and provider. Yet they are made to feel guilty for not being adequate mothers, which underscores the need for strong male allies in order to build truly equitable futures for their communities. For Nimi Sherpa, it meant having to convince her spouse who is also a patriarchal man like her father and in whose opinion, a woman's place is in the kitchen. Undaunted by her husband's hesitance Nimi went on to successfully establish herself in the tourism industry,



going on to challenge her community's patriarchal traditions.

One of the most fulfilling aspects of her job was training women to climb mountains, which led to a small grant from the Nepal Mountain Aid Association, underlying the necessity and role of financial inclusion of women as a critical step towards their emancipation. She believes that investing in women is investing in the future, as women who are earning are also ensuring that standards of living improve and that children are educated, thus securing the future of indigenous communities.

Indigenous women have always been resourceful but being financially included has led to some stark changes for the better according to Nimi who said, "Men, may be now they're not as controlling, now they feel that women are not beneath them so much. Earlier, women had the chicken farm or buffalo farm or cow farm and sold the milk. The money would be taken away by the men. But not these days. Women have a bank account and women can handle their own money." Nimi goes on to say, "They are not rich. But they are not very poor."

Indeed, financial inclusion has allowed indigenous women to make a plethora of decisions. For one, the Nepal government has given 20% tax rebate and tax-free land ownership to indigenous women which has then paved the way for them to invest in land and housing, sometimes even earning rentals from additional properties like small houses, rooms, and even tea shops.

With so much that Nimi has accomplished,

positive acknowledgement from her husband is still work in progress. There is always of course a sense of competition when one partner, especially if it is the woman, is getting public accolades for their work. On the other hand, her father's patriarchal mindset had undergone a change. She says, "My father was very proud. Not just my father but my community, my village people. Now they bless me with the khata which makes me feel very honoured as well."

These days Nimi finds satisfaction in being of service to others, especially indigenous women and orphans by providing them educational support, because she feels education is the foundation to a progressive life. She says indigenous women, "When we become educated or we have access to benefits, we always think of others."

Her advice to younger generations of indigenous women is, "You know, we need to work. We receive bookish knowledge after studying but we should also maintain our links with our lands, to touch the mud and participate in agriculture. Bookish knowledge is one thing but indigenous knowledge and practices must also be propagated. Now I understand that it's the same with most indigenous communities where people, young people, are going out and looking for jobs. They're not coming back to the villages. But Nepal is one of the most beautiful places. Our soil is very rich, and allows us to grow many different kinds of crops and vegetables. So we must reconnect with our roots while looking ahead."



Rooted in Resilience: **THE JOURNEY OF BASANTI MURMU**

Ethnicity: Santal, Bangladesh



In the lush greenery of Barokona village, nestled within Parbotipur Upazila under Dinajpur District, Bangladesh, there exists a force of nature in the form of Basanti Murmu. Her life is a testament to the resilience and leadership of Indigenous women, echoing through the generations. Basanti's journey, spanning more than four decades, is a symphony of advocacy, empowerment, and cultural revival.

Born into the Santal community on January 1, 1967, Basanti's upbringing was steeped in the rich traditions and struggles of her people. Yet, it was the realization of the challenges faced by Indigenous women that ignited the fire of activism within her.

"My husband was involved in politics. After marriage, I saw that the surrounding environment was not favorable for me or women. From there, I gradually got involved in various awareness activities", she recounts, tracing the origins of her journey.

In the heart of Basanti Murmu's journey towards advocacy and leadership, lay a deep-rooted understanding of the struggles faced by Indigenous communities, particularly Indigenous women. "Being born in an indigenous family, I realized that we are economically weak and the ruling class neglects us and sometimes tortures us if we do not

Her call for increased representation of women at all levels of leadership underscores her commitment to ensuring that Indigenous women's voices are heard and respected. Her commitment to the cause remains steadfast.

conform to them", she reflects somberly. It was this recognition of systemic oppression that fueled her determination to bring about change.

Basanti's activism transcended mere awareness-raising. It blossomed into a vibrant tapestry of cultural revival and organizational leadership. In 2007, drawing upon her experiences with the Jatiya Adivasi Parishad, she co-founded the Adivasi Nari o Shisu Kollyan Songstha, a sanctuary for Indigenous women and children. This marked the beginning of her concerted efforts to empower and uplift her community, especially marginalized Indigenous women.

The formation of the Adivasi Nari Parishad in 2011 was a crowning achievement in Basanti's journey and leadership. As Chairperson of the organization, she wielded her influence to amplify the voices of Indigenous women, advocating for their social, political, and cultural rights. Her dedication extended beyond organizational boundaries; she spearheaded initiatives to reclaim and preserve Indigenous cultural practices, such as the Baha Festival.

"The meaning of baha is flower. Baha festival means Flower Festival, and is

associated with the concept of land, environment, nature's seasons", Basanti explains, highlighting the festival's significance in fostering harmony with nature. Through her efforts, she not only revived cultural traditions but also instilled a sense of pride and unity within her community.

Yet, Basanti's journey is not without its share of obstacles. Financial hardships, gender biases in agriculture, and societal pressures tested her resolve. However, her unwavering determination and resilience propelled her forward. "Women's rights and freedom cannot be achieved without economic emancipation", she asserts, reflecting on her journey towards financial independence through agriculture and activism.

Twenty years ago, a harrowing incident shook Basanti's village to its core, serving as a catalyst for her activism. A Bengali boy attempted to assault an Indigenous girl in the fields, only to be thwarted by her brave resistance. "The girl was able to escape from there safely after fighting and later she told us about the incident", Basanti recounts. In response, the women of the village rallied together, confronting the perpetrator and demanding justice. "Some women of the village got together and found the boy and beat him up", she recalls, her voice resonating with determination. This pivotal moment ignited a fire within Basanti, compelling her to unite Indigenous women against the pervasive injustices they faced.

Inspired by the courage of her fellow women and motivated by her husband's activism, Basanti embarked on a path of advocacy and empowerment. "It was after this incident that the issue of uniting indigenous women began to take root in my mind", she reveals. Drawing upon her



husband's leadership within the Jatiya Adivasi Parishad, Basanti powered ahead, determined to create a platform for Indigenous women to stand together in solidarity.

With unwavering resolve, Basanti founded organizations dedicated to the upliftment of Indigenous women, recognizing the urgent need for collective action. "I started working by creating separate organizations for indigenous women so that women could stand together in their perils", she explains. Through grassroots efforts and community organizing, Basanti paved the way for Indigenous women to assert their rights and reclaim their agency.

Basanti's message to younger generations of Indigenous women is one of courage, education, and solidarity. 'Sometimes you have to be brave and move forward', she advises, urging them to pursue education and economic empowerment. Her own journey serves as a beacon of hope and inspiration, illuminating the path towards empowerment for future generations.

Amid accolades and recognition, Basanti

remains grounded, emphasizing the ongoing struggle for meaningful inclusion of Indigenous women in the movement. "The freedom of Indigenous women is not possible without unity and economic and political empowerment", she declares. Her call for increased representation of women at all levels of leadership underscores her commitment to ensuring that Indigenous women's voices are heard and respected. Her commitment to the cause remains steadfast. "Women's rights and freedom cannot be achieved without economic emancipation, she asserts", she asserts.

Today Basanti Murmu's work continues to resonate; her tireless advocacy echoing across the plains of Bangladesh. As President of the Adivasi Nari Parishad and Chairperson of the Adivasi Women and Child Welfare Association, she remains at the forefront of the Indigenous rights movement, championing the voices of the marginalized and oppressed. Her story serves as a testament to the transformative power of courage, solidarity, and unwavering determination.



A strong
identity made
by the ancestral
language:

SHOBHA SUNUWAR

Ethnicity: Sunuwar, Nepal



What's in a name? But we are all fighting for the name. One's name is the first identity of a person and we want to be known by our own name rather than others. Yes, Shobha Sunuwar is a name that is struggling for itself, for its self-identity and self-management. Shobha Sunuwar stepped on this earth as the only daughter of mother *Tholoch* Tankamaya Sunuwar and *Bujich* Ram Bahadur Sunuwar, on September 19, 1980, in the Buj village of Ramechhap district. She had many names, mother's beloved *Savitri*, villagers' *Thuli Suba*, grandmothers' *Doma*, astrologers' given name Manju, and Shobha at school. However, the name known among all is

Shobha Sunuwar 'Juliet', a self-identified name in the honor of the ancestors. She is the first female poet in the *Kōinch* (Sunuwar) indigenous language, a language which has very little written practice. Carrying the essence and support of the *Kōinch* language, she succeeded in becoming a member of the Literature (mother tongue) department of the Nepal Academy, a platform of intellectual personalities in the country.

In the year 1992, after passing the district level fifth grade examination from Thinkepu Primary School, a 12-year-old girl, carrying some items and food from home goes to Tripureshwar Secondary



School at Durgaon, the nearest secondary school in the village, to fulfill her parents' dreams. Having been brought up in *Koits* and *Newar* nations, it was difficult for her to suddenly move and adjust to non-Indigenous and Gurung communities. For her, Duragaon was a foreign land. At that time, those who wanted to study had to leave the village, as many villages did not have secondary schools. There was slight relief in staying and studying in Duragaon as her middle brother (Navaraj Sunuwar) studied at that school and her uncle Yoman Kumar Sunuwar was an English teacher there. No matter how difficult it was to spend five years in another's village, her dreams of gaining a notable name in the society made her forget these difficulties. After completing grade 10 (SLC) at Tripureshwar Secondary School, again with big dreams for higher education and SLC certificate, she walked for two days and reached the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu. Kathmandu was a big city compared to the village. How could someone last there with the dignity of a village? Unlike in the village, one could not study there with just a few items and food brought from home. In order to ask for money from home, one had to ask one's relatives or family members to travel back and forth. Time was slipping day by day. College life back then had only a few fun days. Especially for students coming from the remote Hilly region, they had to struggle a lot to survive in Kathmandu. It was not possible to simply study, without simultaneously working. Besides, there was the poet alive in her heart, still. So she studied Major in Nepali language at Kanya Multipurpose Campus at *Dillibazar*.

One day, in the anniversary celebration of the campus, she participated in a poetry competition. After winning second place in the competition, she became known to

In the process of empowering the voice of indigenous women, she went to different parts of the country and not only recited poetry but stood tall and bold as a human rights activist, and played a leading role in ensuring the human rights of Indigenous women.

her peers on campus, and also received a scholarship. In the same year 1998, her poem was published in the campus Gazette *Pushpanjali* under the title '*Zindagi*' 'Life'. That was the beginning of her literary journey. But unfortunately she could not complete her education from this campus. While studying, she got married to a young man from her school. However, she was dedicated to stay in the capital Kathmandu with the zeal to achieve her dreams. What she needed was a friend to help her fulfill her dreams. After all, dreams are not easy to achieve. After marriage, the dream of studying drifted away, replaced by familial responsibilities. She became a mother, and to compensate for her loss of education she aimed to raise her children better. So she flew to Dubai, UAE to earn money for her family. After four years of struggle and work she returned to Nepal. A younger daughter was born to her. She continued her wish to fulfill her dreams of dancing, singing and enjoying life through her children. However, this journey of achieving her long lost dreams through her children turned into a new journey of self-discovery and exploration. She joined Sunuwar Welfare Society Representative Organization of *Koits* Indigenous peoples in 2008. At the request of village brother



She strongly believes that the Indigenous Language Decade will build a strong foundation for language preservation respecting and encouraging Indigenous Language poets.

Gopal Sunuwar, she became a member of Sunuwar Welfare Society Kathmandu district ad hoc committee.

After becoming an executive member of Sunuwar Welfare Society Kathmandu District Committee, she participated in many other identity advocacy and activities and made language and culture preservation her top priorities. In various programs of the Sunuwar Welfare Society, she tried to write down her lost dreams through poetry. She felt that this is a golden opportunity to serve the language of her ancestors, one she has been speaking since little. Despite being away from the village, her drive to serve Koĩts language gradually took root. The glowing memories of village fairs and singing songs in Jojor Bazaar flourished on her literature stage. The mode of poetry gradually diverted from Khas Nepali language towards the Ancestral Koĩts language. On the occasion of the International Mother tongue Day, the Nepal Academy organized a multilingual poetry seminar. There again she stood on the stage and poured out her heart as Muruaa Ragi (Human's world). Her language gave her a chance to stand on stage again. After that, Shobha Sunuwar 'Juliet', who had been writing occasional poems in Khas Nepali language, started writing poems continuously in Koĩts language. Poetry writing campaigns began as a way of preserving her ancestral

language in the time when Koĩts language poetry was minimal. After association with Koĩts poet Koĩts bu Kaatich, she started writing poems in Koĩts language in traditional poetry styles like Theani, Salak, and Khalo. She also learned about her traditional literature. Soon after, she was motivated by the desire to publish a poetry collection in her ancestral language and in 2015, she published the poetry collection *Khurindankhin* translated into Khas Nepali language. So far, she has published three collections of poems namely Sangmi and Urur in Koĩts language.

She was not only involved in literature but also contributed greatly to the promotion of Koĩts culture. From Sunuwar Welfare Society, she started teaching Koĩts language to young people. She went around from village to village as a language and culture instructor. In Arunthakur of Sindhuli District, she taught Koĩts language for a month. After reaching Taplejung in the far east, she trained others to weave traditional Koĩts costumes, along with the importance of Koĩts language. She even ran a program as a language trainer on TV and YouTube channels. Meanwhile, along with the human rights of Koĩts Indigenous Peoples, she also started protesting against the violation of the human rights of the Indigenous People of Nepal. In the movement of identity, she raised voice for Koĩtsvan (Wallo Kirat Koĩts land) Autonomous Province. She did not hesitate to create awareness through poetry in various interactions, discussions, trainings, conferences, and even took to reciting poetry on identity and resilience on the street. Her journey led to her exposure of her poetry on radio and TV. It became habitual for her to bring her Koĩts poetry language to various literary programs. It was almost as if reciting poetry became a primary preoccupation

for her to preserve the ancestral language. Poetry became her life and in it she began to feel the sufferings of Indigenous women and her own pain. This began to reflect in the practice as well. As part of this journey, she became the federal council member of the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities and the National Indigenous Women Federation, and now she is the general secretary of the National Indigenous Women's Federation, an umbrella organization of Indigenous women of Nepal, which advocates and lobbies for the rights of Indigenous women. In the process of empowering the voice of indigenous women, she went to different parts of the country and not only recited poetry but stood tall and bold as a human rights activist, and played a leading role in ensuring the human rights of Indigenous women. Coming from a remote Hilly region in pursuit of her dream, her journey to speak and fight for the human rights of Indigenous women was guided by her own ancestral language. While continuing to follow this *Goho* (route), she is currently also the president of Sunuwar Women Society, a representative organization of Koits Sunuwar women. As a representative member of Nepal Ethnic Museum, Bhrikutimandap, Kathmandu, she has contributed in building that living museum. She currently holds numerous hats that represent her continuous hard work in the movement. She is the general secretary of Koits Kumso Khiko, Treasure of Koits Reporter Society, member of Nepal Indigenous Literature Federation, member of education committee of Koteswar Kathmandu, Koits Kirat Sport Club, Lalitpur and Gokarneshwar Sunuwar Welfare Society, advisor of Attarkhel Kathmandu and senior vice-president

of Sunuwar Welfare Society Federal Committee.

She was the Sub-editor and chief reporter of Hamsa Monthly, the only magazine published in Koits language and script, and also worked as a reporter for Radio Likhu and Bani Half monthly. She is also the presenter of Koits Chuplu, the first TV program in Koits (Sunuwar) language, which is now being broadcasted weekly on Indigenous Television and ITV. During the time of Covid-19, she broadcasted public welfare information from the Indigenous Rights Radio, Cultural Survival, America in Koits language.

She does not know when she got into creative work, but since 1998, she has become highly respected for serving the language of her ancestors. She has built her name and made her own identity. In 2015 she was awarded with the Shrasta-Chautari Award, Sahitya Sangalo.com, UK for her work. Similarly, she also received "Literature Activities in Indigenous Languages, Conference 25-26 November 2020", has received an award in the title of Indigenous Language Poet fellowship from Asia in the 2nd International Academic Forum, Sustainable Development of Indigenous Languages, organized by The Joint Board of South and North Korea for the Compilation of Gyeoremal-Keunsajeon in cooperation with UNESCO. She strongly believes that the Indigenous Language Decade will build a strong foundation for language preservation respecting and encouraging Indigenous Language poets.



Climate Change



Championing Indigenous Leadership, Rights and Environmental Conservation: **NORIDAH SAMAD**

Ethnicity: Tombonuo, Malaysia



In the heart of Sabah, Malaysia, Noridah Samad stands as a beacon of Indigenous women leadership and resilience within the Indigenous community of the Tombonuo ethnicity. At the age of 34, Noridah serves as the Chairperson for the community committee of Datong in Pitas, Sabah. Her journey into advocacy began eight years ago when her community faced significant threat to their ancestral lands and resources.

Noridah's journey into leadership began amidst the turmoil caused by the encroachment of a mega shrimp farm project in 2012. The lush mangrove forests, integral to the livelihoods and cultural identity of her people, faced imminent destruction. As the youngest leader among the G6 and the sole female chairperson, Noridah took on the mantle of responsibility with unwavering

resolve. Noridah embodies the spirit of resilience and determination that defines her people. As the Chairperson of the community committee of Datong in Pitas, Sabah, she leads with grace and strength, navigating the challenges that threaten her community's way of life.

In 2015, the tranquility of Noridah's community was shattered by the encroachment of another mega shrimp farm project, which wreaked havoc on their mangrove forests. This encroachment not only violated their rights but also posed a grave threat to the delicate ecosystem upon which their livelihoods depended. Witnessing the destruction of their environment ignited a fire within Noridah to take action.

As the youngest and only female leader among the Group of 6 villages (G6; Pitas-G6), Noridah took on the

responsibility of spearheading the movement to defend their land rights. Despite being formally educated, she faced numerous challenges in navigating the complexities of Indigenous rights advocacy. However, fueled by her passion for her community and guided by the wisdom of her late father and elders, Noridah fearlessly led the charge against injustice.

Noridah's leadership extended beyond mere rhetoric. She actively engaged her community, inspiring both youth and women to join the fight for their rights. She emphasized that gender should not be a barrier to participation, advocating for equal responsibility and opportunity for all members of the community.

However, Noridah encountered various obstacles along the way. A lack of awareness and understanding among

her community regarding their rights hindered progress. To address this, Noridah dedicated herself to educating her peers about Indigenous rights, self-determination, and the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) process. She tirelessly worked to change mindsets and empower her community to assert their rights confidently.

However, the path to victory is fraught with challenges. The lack of awareness and understanding about Indigenous rights posed a significant hurdle. Noridah recognized the importance of education and empowerment, dedicating herself to raising awareness within her community. She conducted workshops, facilitated discussions, and empowered women to take on leadership roles, nurturing a new generation of Indigenous leaders.

Noridah's efforts bore fruit when, after



years of advocacy, collective action and perseverance, the mangrove area was officially recognized as an Indigenous and Community Conserved Area (ICCA). This landmark achievement not only safeguards their environment but also affirms their rights as Indigenous peoples. It serves as a testament to the strength and resilience of Indigenous communities when united in purpose.

Looking forward, Noridah emphasizes the importance of inclusivity within the Indigenous Peoples' movement. She believes that women should play a more meaningful role, not just in household tasks but also in decision-making and leadership positions. Noridah envisions a future where Indigenous women's voices are heard and respected, where they actively contribute to shaping their communities' destinies.

Noridah Samad's story is one of bravery,

determination, and an unwavering commitment to justice; as she continues her journey of Indigenous women leadership, empowerment and inspiring hope for future generations of Indigenous women. In her own words, "As Indigenous women, we should not feel that our voices are small because we are just like everyone else who has the right to be respected"

Noridah Samad's story is truly a testament to the indomitable spirit of Indigenous women who, against all odds, continue to lead with courage, resilience, and determination. As she continues her journey, she paves the way for future generations of Indigenous women to rise and reclaim their rightful place as stewards of the land and guardians of their heritage.

Organization: Pertubuhan Wanita Orang Asal Malaysia (PWOAM)



"Tides of Tradition: The Sea People's Fight for Ancestral Homes"

CHALOUY HANTALAY

Ethnicity: Urak Lawoi, Thailand



Chalouy Hantalay is a leader among the Urak Lawoi (Sea People), Women Environment and Human Rights Defenders advocating for the land rights of their ancestors in Koh Lipe (Lipe Island), Satun Province in Southern Thailand. She has been actively involved in addressing housing and land rights issues for her indigenous community since 2010. Koh Lipe is one of the key tourist destinations in Thailand, generating substantial income. However, conflicts arise as private investors claim ownership of land, the blocking of access to essential services like schools, hospitals, and the beach for the Urak Lawoi indigenous communities. In addition, the announcement of the Island as part of the National Park has limited Indigenous Peoples' access to natural resources in many parts of the island. The limited access to natural resources has impacted their food and income security so most

of them have to depend on income from tourists and related businesses.

The situation on Koh Lipe underscores the ongoing challenges faced by the Sea People in asserting their rights to land and resources. It is regrettable that such disputes often escalate, impacting essential services like education and healthcare. The incident involving the protest highlights the urgent need for a resolution that respects the rights and livelihoods of the Sea People while addressing the concerns of all involved parties. Chalouy's family was once accused by a business owner on the island of land encroachment. However, she received support from non-governmental organizations and the People's Movement for Just Society, where she has been actively engaged in the land rights movement and housing rights. In 2021, Chalouy and her family won a significant legal battle against accusations of land



Chalouy's motivation stems from a desire to share the Sea People's story on Koh Lipe, highlighting their history, indigenous lifestyle, and traditional cultural practices. She wants the public and especially the government to know that their ancestors have been living on the island for a long period of time before the announcement of the National Park Laws.

encroachment, reaffirming their rights to their ancestral land on Koh Lipe. At that time, she felt very happy and thankful for the support and encouragement from the network and her own Indigenous communities.

Despite winning the case, Chalouy continues to be a steadfast leader for her community, which still faces challenges in housing and resource utilization. Chalouy's motivation stems from a desire to share the Sea People's story on Koh Lipe, highlighting their history, indigenous lifestyle, and traditional cultural practices. She wants the public and especially the government to know that their ancestors have been living on the island for a long period of time before the announcement of the National Park Laws.

"I want everyone to understand the lifestyle of the Sea People. We have lived harmoniously with nature on this island for generations, with no intention of causing harm. Despite this, we frequently confront accusations from the government or private sector of trespassing on land that has been in our families for many years. Our grandparents cultivated coconuts, cashew nuts, and various vegetables on these grounds. However, when the area

was designated as a national park, the community people were banned from entering and harvesting from it. The lack of knowledge and comprehension of the law has exposed our community to exploitation, rendering us unable to assert our rightful claims". She emphasizes that despite linguistic and cultural differences, people can coexist on the island harmoniously. Chalouy also emphasizes the Sea People's longstanding respect for nature and their use of indigenous knowledge in fisheries, agriculture and food processing.

Moreover, the lack of rights to access land use also impacts access to basic needs, especially water. In the past, the island was full of trees, and the Sea People could easily access the water sources on the mountain. However, the increasing popularity of tourism led to the destruction of the forest area, and many trees were cut down. As a result, the Sea People have faced difficulties in accessing water, especially drinking water, with many having to buy water. The community used to request the local government to support the development of a water supply system using underground water. However, the project was opposed by private sectors

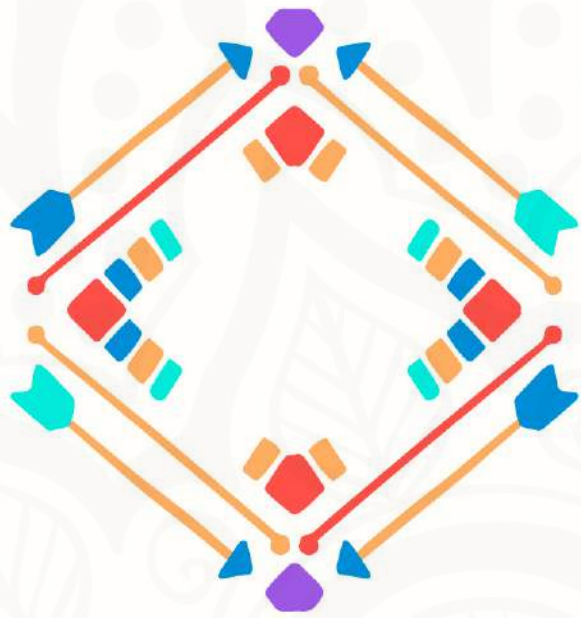
claiming that the land does not belong to the community, so the project was canceled.

Since COVID-19, Chalouy and the Indigenous Women Environment and Human Rights Defenders from the South have expanded their collaboration with Indigenous Peoples in Northern, Northeastern, and Central Thailand through the Council of Indigenous Peoples of Thailand. Initially focusing on food exchanges during COVID-19, they now advocate more for draft bills to promote the rights of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand. Participating in broader networks has helped her understand more about the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand, and also the need to promote economic empowerment for Indigenous Women to increase their income security while claiming their land rights and access to natural resources.

Chalouy and other IWEHRDs have engaged with government officials at various levels to voice their concerns and

seek justice for their communities. She has never felt afraid to share information about the hardship that the Sea People face to the government so that they can understand the real situation from the rights holders from the ground, not from the outsiders or newcomers to the island. Nowadays, the provincial government and the ministry are becoming increasingly aware about the Sea Peoples' struggles. Additionally, the government has created a provincial and regional platform that brings the Sea People's representatives to discuss solutions.

Chalouy's efforts are driven by a recognition of the exploitation faced by the Sea People and a commitment to creating a better future for their children. Her story is one of resilience, community solidarity, and the pursuit of justice. She continues to inspire and collaborate with others facing similar challenges, believing that through unity and shared experiences, all can achieve meaningful change.





DIANA TAN BENG HUI

Ethnicity: Jakun (Orang Asli), Malaysia

Leading the Charge for Indigenous Youth in Climate Action

In the heart of Malaysia, amidst the verdant forests and rich cultural heritage of the Jakun community, Diana Tan Beng Hui stands as a beacon of hope and inspiration. Born into the Indigenous Orang Asli tribe, Diana's journey into advocacy and leadership began at a young age, fueled by a deep-rooted passion for environmental justice and community empowerment.

Diana's involvement in the climate movement started with her community. Witnessing the encroachment of logging activities and the pollution of their river resources, she felt compelled to take

action. Her journey began with grassroots activism, where she found herself at the forefront of the fight against environmental destruction.

As a member of Belia JOAS, Diana delves into the impact of oil palm cultivation on her village, acquiring the skills to write comprehensive reports and gaining a deeper understanding of the issues at hand. Her commitment led her to join Climate Action Malaysia as a volunteer, actively engaging in community work and examining cases related to environmental concerns.

Additionally, Diana plays a pivotal role in her village, acting as a mediator and voicing the concerns of Orang Asli women through various social media platforms, including her YouTube channel "Apa Kata Wanita Orang Asli". Her dedication has taken her to international platforms like COP conferences, where she shares the inspirational voices of indigenous youth and submits reports on the impact of the climate crisis on her community.

Diana's journey as an advocate for Indigenous issues was inspired by her ancestor, a spiritual leader and village headman who instilled in his descendants a love for the forest and the land. Despite facing challenges in her personal and professional life, including difficulties in writing and understanding international terms, Diana remains undeterred.

Her message to younger generations of Indigenous women is clear; embrace new experiences, have the courage to take action, and never underestimate the power of your voice. Diana's main supporters are her family members, ancestors, and villagers who cherish their forests and lands.

One of Diana's proudest achievements is the successful cancellation of a paddy industry project in her village, a victory won through the collective efforts of her community. Looking ahead, Diana is committed to ensuring that Indigenous women are included in the climate movement in a more meaningful way by providing equal opportunities and recognition of their roles.

Through her journey, Diana exemplifies the resilience, determination, and unwavering spirit of Indigenous women in the fight against climate change. Her story, along with those of other Indigenous women, serves as a testament to the power of

Diana exemplifies the resilience, determination, and unwavering spirit of Indigenous women in the fight against climate change. Her story, along with those of other Indigenous women, serves as a testament to the power of community mobilization and grassroots activism in addressing environmental challenges and creating a more sustainable future for all.

community mobilization and grassroots activism in addressing environmental challenges and creating a more sustainable future for all.

As a member of the Jakun tribe, Diana's connection to the land runs deep. However, her journey as a climate advocate was sparked by the encroachment of logging activities in her village. Witnessing the degradation of natural resources and the impact on their ways of life, Diana felt compelled to take action. Her journey began with community organizing and grassroots activism, where she found herself at the forefront of the fight against environmental destruction.

Diana's commitment to the cause led her to join organizations such as Klima Action Malaysia and Apa Kata Wanita Orang Asli, where she serves as a lead researcher and member, respectively. Through her work, she amplifies the voices of Indigenous women and youth, using various media platforms to advocate for their rights while also highlighting the issues they face.

As a filmmaker and social media activist, Diana uses her platform to shed light on the struggles of Indigenous women

and youth, particularly in the face of climate change. Through her YouTube channel, "Apa Kata Wanita Orang Asli", she shares stories of resilience, strength, and defiance, inspiring others to join the fight for environmental justice.

Despite facing numerous challenges along the way, including lack of recognition and support from government agencies, Diana remains undeterred. Her determination and resilience have seen her through police interrogations and threats, as she continues to stand firm in her advocacy efforts.

One of Diana's proudest achievements is the successful cancellation of a paddy industry project in her village; a victory won through the collective efforts of her community. This triumph not only protects their land and resources but also serves as a testament to the power of grassroots activism and community mobilization.

Looking ahead, Diana is committed to ensuring that Indigenous women are included in the climate movement in a more meaningful way. She believes that providing equal opportunities and recognition for women's roles is essential for driving lasting change and creating a more sustainable future for all.

To the younger generations of Indigenous women, Diana's message is clear; "embrace new experiences, have the courage to take action, and never underestimate the power of your voice". Through her journey, Diana exemplifies the resilience, determination, and unwavering spirit of Indigenous youth in the fight against climate change. As she continues to blaze a trail for future generations, Diana Tan Beng Hui stands as a shining example of what it means to be a true champion for environmental justice and community empowerment.



Gender Based Violence



Speaking
truth to
power:

MIA MAGDALENA FOKNO

Ethnicity: Kankanaey, Philippines



The digital age brings about new forms of gender-based violence in the form of trolling such as rape threats and abusive language, doxing wherein a woman's personal details like her phone number and address are shared online making her vulnerable to offline attacks as well. The nature of online crimes like cyber misogyny needs to be viewed from the structural lens of patriarchy which aims at controlling women's movements, their voices and agency, which is attributed to unequal political, social and economic rights of women; a phenomenon that has been normalized as culture.

Given this background, indigenous journalist and Filipino activist Mia

Magdalena Fokno's story is a sign of the times, the lived experience as it were, of vocal women with a public identity who are trolled for speaking truth to power. A fiery activist and journalist, Fokno has made it her life's mission to speak truth to power nonetheless. Her post questioning the absence of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr following an earthquake in Abra province in July 2022 elicited a violent response from Padawi, a supporter of the President. Padawi's posts and online comments were laced with sexual innuendo and threats to Fokno's life who saved the video clips and proceeded to file a complaint. Padawi initially pleaded not guilty but then confessed to his crime on the 1st of February.

Indigenous journalist and Filipino activist Mia Magdalena Fokno's story is a sign of the times, the lived experience as it were, of vocal women with a public identity who are trolled for speaking truth to power. A fiery activist and journalist, Fokno has made it her life's mission to speak truth to power nonetheless.

In a court verdict made public on 3rd February 2023, a Philippine court found a video blogger guilty of online sexual harassment as a reaction to Fokno.

A welcome and much needed signal that public litigation can deliver justice to indigenous women occurred when the Municipal Trial Court of La Trinidad, in northern Baguio city, fined Renan I. Padawi (also known as Jackfloyd Sawyer) nearly U.S. \$3,000 for violating the Philippines' Safe Spaces Act, which became law in 2019. The ruling by Judge May Adube-Cabuag found Padawi "guilty beyond reasonable doubt" for violating the Safe Spaces Act.

"The Safe Space Act also penalizes wolf whistling, catcalling, misogynistic and homophobic slurs, unwanted sexual advances, and other forms of sexual harassment in public places, workplaces, and schools as well as in online spaces." Source: Benar News

In a country where troll armies of politicians ritually go scot free for viciously trolling women who are critical of their policies and demand accountability as is the right of every citizen from their elected

leaders, this landmark case is a beacon of hope.

Progressive laws such as the Safe Spaces Act will go a long way in countering the prolific sexism and silencing of women via public shaming in the Philippines. The road to public litigation is not a bed of roses. Fokno further emphasizes, "The decision to pursue public litigation in the troll case was guided by my cousin, a police officer, whose insight into the situation revealed the seriousness of the threats I faced. This advice led me to utilize the Safe Spaces Act, demonstrating the importance of standing up against harassment and advocating for safe spaces for all."

Fokno then says that she relied on her family and friends during the process. She says, "My children, aged 25 and 22, are my primary support system. They share my commitment to human rights and democracy, providing a critical perspective on my work. This dynamic reinforces our bond and ensures that my efforts are grounded in our shared values and dedication to fostering a just society.

Balancing work and family responsibilities was challenging when my children were younger, but as they've grown, they have developed an understanding of the demands of my various roles as educator, journalist, and advocate. This evolution reflects our mutual respect and appreciation for each other's commitments and the complexities of balancing personal, professional, and advocacy work.

My extended family, particularly my mother and sisters, and a close-knit group of friends, form an essential support network. This community, both in person and online, offers a foundation of strength, laughter, encouragement, and a sense of belonging, crucial for dealing with the challenges of my professional and

advocacy efforts". This reinforces the importance of indigenous women's access to psychosocial support given the higher levels of discrimination faced by them for being women and indigenous, a majority of whom are poor.

Fokno goes on to say, "The importance of building a community outside one's family cannot be overstated. We are part of something greater than ourselves. Such networks extend our influence and enable us to contribute to societal change, embodying the collective effort required to address broader issues beyond our immediate surroundings."

The necessity of shifting the power balance by empowering indigenous women to own and create their narratives cannot be overstated. Often the subject of negative stereotyping in popular culture, media and films, indigenous women like Fokno realise the power of journalism in unsettling the power dynamics. When asked about her decision to become a journalist she said, "My journey into journalism was driven by a quest for truth, leading me into the realm of fact-checking to challenge prevalent misinformation and historical revisionism. My foray into journalism was accidental, emerging from an opportunity to be the only media presence at the Panag-apoy in Sagada on the 1st of November, 2023. My posts

In a country where troll armies of politicians ritually go scot free for viciously trolling women who are critical of their policies and demand accountability as is the right of every citizen from their elected leaders, this landmark case is a beacon of hope.

on social media caught the attention of national media outlets like Rappler and ABS-CBN, marking the start of my contributions focused on arts, culture, and socio-political issues. This path aligns with my identity as an Igorot, fueling my commitment to accurate representation and counteracting misinformation."

Her message to younger generations of indigenous women is clear as she says, "Daily, I find inspiration in simple acts of kindness that reflect the inherent goodness in people, from community support to personal gestures of help. To young indigenous women juggling multiple roles, remember the power of your heritage. Your roots and values are your unwavering guide through life's challenges, anchoring you in your identity and journey."





A case in point of witch hunting violating indigenous women's land rights:

MANJULA BALA RABHA

Ethnicity: Rabha, North East India

Witch hunting is as old as the patriarchy. Since time immemorial, women who refuse to stay within the lines of patriarchal control, have been labelled trouble and branded as witches. Rural indigenous women continue to face the brunt of gender-based violence within their communities as their rights and agency are linked to their ownership of land. Therefore, the root of this violence and campaigns targeting them as witches is centred on disputes over land and property.

The patterns are similar in both Mainland and North East India where men spearhead these attacks as a way to contest the authority and ownership of indigenous and Adivasi women's inheritance. This puts indigenous women at multiple risks as they are vulnerable to attacks both from the men in their communities and the State which has

displaced Adivasi and indigenous populations to clear the way for extractive industries via the military and other State machinery.

Studies suggest that gender-based violence which aims at displacing indigenous women from their land is often aimed at older women who are mostly unmarried, divorced, or widowed. All these social conditions put women at risk in patriarchal societies which devalue women who are not protected by husbands and fathers; and who are seen as public property, as opposed to the social equity women enjoy as wives and the so-called private ownership by the spouse and his family. This means that they stand exposed to the whims of men who enjoy a fair degree of impunity when they target unmarried women making them easy targets for those eyeing their wealth.

Dehumanization through disinformation is a tried and tested tactic. In cases where

women are branded witches, it becomes easier to clear the way for attacks on her even leading to murders because, who cares what happens to witches? Society would be rid of evil as it were.

Patterns of witch hunting among the Rabha community of Goalpara district in Assam align with the goals of displacing vulnerable women from their land and properties. Indigenous women in the Rabha community might take up traditional medicine and healing which could be viewed as a threat to male shamans.

Another interesting point to note lies in the given excerpt; which "...attempts to map the changes which Rabha society has undergone in the process of the construction from matrilineal to a patriarchal society. The shift from matrilineal to patriarchal is an outcome of the emergence of 'identity formation' among the male members of the Rabhas. Therefore, the construction of the identity has become a major issue regarding the establishment of the patriarchal setup in their society. As a result, the women who

Rural indigenous women continue to face the brunt of gender-based violence within their communities as their rights and agency are linked to their ownership of land. Therefore, the root of this violence and campaigns targeting them as witches is centred on disputes over land and property.

were considered as powerful are now seen as a threat to the patriarchy. In this regard, particularly, the women healers or midwives, who hold the expertise in the area of gynaecology, have become a threat to the patriarchal setup. In the name of identity creation, the patriarchal society started to brand the powerful women as the practitioners of evil powers. The popular term used by the Rabhas for a woman who is known as a keeper of evil power is tikkar."

Gender, Power and Conflict of Identities: A Witch Hunting Narrative of Rabha Women

- Sikha Das

Manjula Bala Rabha's story is a testament to her decades-long resistance against the seizure of her properties, driven by the insidious motives behind branding her a witch for over three decades. It is a generational curse because her late mother Jogai Bala Rabha too faced the same allegations before subsequently being ostracized by the community. Manjula has dedicated her life to achieving justice for both herself and her mother. However, despite several police cases having been registered, justice continues to elude Manjula. Meanwhile, the alarming trend of killing innocent women under the guise of witch-hunting continues unabated.

Living under the military's shadow:

SHINAKO OYAKAWA

Ethnicity: Ryukyu, Japan



The people of Ryukyu, like all Indigenous Peoples elsewhere in the world, share a contentious relationship with Japan and its colonial past and present. The history of Japanese colonization is one that is familiar to people whose lands and territories were forcibly taken away leading to the erasure of a distinct indigenous identity and right to exist in the manner befitting an independent kingdom.

Ryukyu was once an independent kingdom until Japan began its invasion in 1609. By 1879, Ryukyu was forcibly annexed to Japan, becoming Okinawa Prefecture, while the northern regions were integrated into Kagoshima Prefecture. This annexation led to the suppression of the Ryukyuan indigenous languages, the imposition of conscription, and the involvement of the Okinawan people in the wars of the Japanese Empire. The Battle of Okinawa in 1945, a brutal conflict between the U.S. and Japan, resulted in the death of one in four Ryukyuan. Following the war, Okinawa was placed under U.S. military governance

for 27 years, effectively being used by Japan to secure its own independence.

Since 1945, Okinawa has hosted a significant portion of U.S. military bases, with 70% of U.S. bases in Japan located on the island. This military presence has deeply affected the local population, leading to numerous issues such as land confiscation, environmental contamination, and the endangerment of public safety and health. The rights and dignity of the indigenous people have been compromised, with restricted access to ancestral lands and a high occurrence of accidents and pollution linked to military activities. Additionally, the issue of sexual violence perpetrated by U.S. military personnel against local women remains a grave concern.

The expectation that the 1972 "reversion" of Okinawa to Japan would lead to the removal of U.S. bases and the restoration of human rights was unmet. Instead, the military burden on Okinawa increased, with the introduction of Japan Self-Defense Force bases. The strategic military relationship between Japan and the U.S.

continues to disproportionately impact Okinawa, which suffers from the continued concentration of U.S. military facilities.

Given this background, Shinako Oyakawa's life and work is a study in decolonization, seeing as it is a quest for assertion of her rights as an indigenous Ryukun woman whose lived reality is one of constant resistance, partly through memory keeping, and partly through discovering what it means to express her complex identity as a woman who has a clear sense of what it means to be distinctly Ryukyuan while living under the shadow of Japanese occupation and American militarization.

As always, what constitutes development has lopsided connotations for Indigenous People. Shinako explains saying, "Japan seems to be a developed country, but the status of women is really low in a patriarchal society. Surveys always show that GDP is really high, but the status of women is really low out of 200 countries". She goes on to draw on the stark difference enjoyed by Ryukyuan Okinawan women who, unlike their Japanese counterparts, enjoy a high status in the Ryukyuan society as powerful priests with the celebrated ability to bring peace and health to the Ryukyuan people through their vast traditional knowledge.

Things took a rapid downturn, she says, with assimilation into Japanese mainstream society. She emphasizes the importance of indigenous women acknowledging their importance and contributions to society, "We have to respect ourselves more, better. And then we can see our power and in our, you know, existence, like important existence in this society. Like a way that we want to take care of like, you know, people, environment and the society. So, we really have to put ourselves in the center of

Japan seems to be a developed country, but the status of women is really low in a patriarchal society. Surveys always show that GDP is really high, but the status of women is really low out of 200 countries.

our society". The need for this is evident more so in a patriarchal society like Japan's, where there is a systemic gender gap when it comes to including women in decision-making roles in public life whether it is through the government's social welfare schemes or business. She goes on to add, "Everything is made for the men and then the women are kind of put away. But still, if we have this indigenous identity, we can change society, you know, little by little."

Militarization brings with it a plethora of daily horrors for indigenous women and children who are sexualized and fetishized as being primitive, illiterate, lacking agency and seen only fit to do menial jobs while also being the object of sexual advances by US army men and Japanese tourists who throng the Okinawa islands or Okinawa Prefecture. It is no coincidence that Okinawa Prefecture is the poorest prefecture in Japan. It is by design, says Shinako, "It is a colony that is dependent on the government for its economy. Tourism and militarism are the two main economic drivers. So, it's really hard to be successful in this system. There are no stable jobs like agricultural work or factory jobs. The center of Okinawa Island is a US military base and then we have only part-time jobs which also puts women and children in really difficult positions.

Militarization brings with it a plethora of daily horrors for indigenous women and children who are sexualized and fetishized as being primitive, illiterate, lacking agency and seen only fit to do menial jobs while also being the object of sexual advances by US army men and Japanese tourists who throng the Okinawa islands or Okinawa Prefecture.

So that Japan always, from the Orientalist perspective, sees indigenous women as lacking in education and deemed fit for jobs in nightclubs and for prostitution. They always explain it that way, but it's not really true because looking back on our history, we Okinawan women are so independent, we have power. We are facing this, you know, poverty and then this question because of colonization and then the military creates added burdens on us."

Militarization and colonization have conspired to displace the Ryukyuan people from their ancestral lands. This has given way to a complex array of issues such as higher rates of accidents as the US army conducts military drills on their lands. There is also the troubling aspect of it being one of the places with the highest rates of sexual crimes in the world. Most cases go unreported and the ones that do are often shrugged off. There is a double standard in the way access to justice is hampered. Shinako says in what is essentially a sinister chicken and egg scenario, "We cannot really talk to the US military. We have to be a Japanese government and then Japan kind of let the US use our land."

Caught in the crosshairs of structural inequalities, education and social welfare for the Ryukyuan is still a distant dream where politically strategic and military issues take precedence. This inevitably led to a huge gender gap which increases indigenous women's vulnerabilities spanning several generations according to Shinako who elaborates, "So it's not just my generation, my mother's generation, my grandmother's generation, and my children's, you know, daughters' generation. There is always like a rape case and then, you know, so like a sexual crime is really serious. And then sometimes like people get, you know, killed by the US soldiers, but it's never been, you know, equal, like, you know, equal access to justice."

This perspective is not limited to the government but is also prevalent among many Japanese citizens. Instances where indigenous women protested, suggesting that the military bases be relocated to Yamato (mainland Japan), have been met with counter-questions loaded with prejudice, such as, "How will you take responsibility if Japanese people are raped?" This reflects a NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) attitude towards the U.S. military presence; deemed necessary but not welcome by local communities.

Efforts by the indigenous population to eliminate, reduce, or renegotiate the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement seem to fall on deaf ears. Following a heinous assault in 1995, both the U.S. and Japanese governments pledged to close an aging military base, only to announce plans for a new one funded by Japanese taxpayers. This decision, made despite significant local opposition, disregards the cultural and environmental importance of the region to the Ryukyu people.

The proposed site for the new base is an ecologically rich area, home to over 5,800 species, including 262 endangered ones. This sea, a place of prayer and sustenance for the Ryukyans, faces irreversible damage.

When asked if she faces surveillance for her public position as a vocal critic of the government, Shinako says, "Not really yet we can say whatever we want to say because one way of looking at it is we're not really successful yet with our campaigns. It's bothering the government, of course. So, they control the media and control what is being said in the mainstream media while suppressing our voices". She goes on to add, "To have an indigenous identity is really difficult in Japan. To express yourself as being indigenous. Even though Ainu people are officially recognized as indigenous by the Japanese government, it is still hard. If you openly identify as indigenous people there is discrimination. Even for us, many are ambiguous about our true identity. Like we know we are different from Japanese. Like we know the history, we know the cultures, but we still don't know." So, while there is active silencing by the authorities, self-censorship contributes to the problem.

What then made Shinako acutely aware of her indigeneity and willingness to assert it openly is made clear when she says, "Yes, I was kind of lucky. You know, I had a lucky experience because I could go to Hawaii to study and where I met other indigenous people there. And then got to see the indigenous movement there. Living in Okinawa, it's rare to see other indigenous movements."

Shinako's gradual awakening and

commitment to the movement was strengthened by her exposure and learning from other indigenous groups in Hawaii. She believes Indigenous Peoples need to continue learning from each other in order to build solidarity and foster action amongst themselves. Speaking at public events generates a lot of curiosity among young indigenous Okinawans for whom these events act like a gateway into deeper engagements with indigenous identity and affairs. Using herself as an example Shinako says, "You know, it took me like a long time to get here and then it might take time. But yeah, I see little changes here whenever I talk to anybody. Really, there's so many things in terms of the history and the ongoing colonization."

All this unfolds while they must navigate daily life on a military base that is undergoing expansion. This growth is not limited to US military facilities but also encompasses Japanese Self-Defense Force bases, introducing new facilities and training areas. Such developments directly impact their everyday reality and environment, particularly through noise pollution from aircraft, missiles, and gunfire.

As the 80th anniversary of the U.S. military's presence in Okinawa approaches, the prospect of a new base signals a continuation of the burden imposed upon these islands. It is crucial to confront and halt such developments in order to prevent the passing of this legacy of struggle onto future generations. The situation demands immediate action to safeguard the rights, environment, and dignity of the Ryukyu people.



ISBN 978-616-7898-51-3



9 786167 898513