

Maori women defend right to health

by Gloria Melencio

A glance at the status of Maori women's health in general will lead back to herstory where the fight for land and Maori sovereignty exist. New Zealand, a British territory, is home to both the Maori people and white immigrants they call *pakeha*. Maoris believe that the present health system is not beneficial to them, only to the British immigrants.

Maori women view their health both biologically and holistically. To them, the spiritual dimension of health is vital. Traditional Maori health care is based on the laws of *tapu*, a belief that there must be a balance in all aspects of life for one to be healthy.

According to Donna Awatere, a Maori feminist and activist, Maori women are not healthy. In a speech she delivered to the Women's Health Network National Conference in Auckland, New Zealand, Awatere disclosed that Maori women have the highest number of death rate anywhere in the world due to lung cancer, cancer of the lower intestine and heart disease.

"There has been a spiritual unrest," she laments. "Maori people are forced to live everyday by the rules of another culture," referring to the white immigrants.

The Maori population has been reduced to 40,000 during 100 years of British occupation, she claims. They have grown back to 300,000 now but this should have been their population in 1840, Awatere adds.

The British government has invaded the sanctity of their culture leading to so many imbalances. The traditional view of *tapu* was overridden by a system which gives immense power to doctors and little information to their patients.

More Maori women die of cervical cancer compared to non-Maori women partly because the latter do not go to male doctors for health check-ups. They find it embarrassing and uncomfortable.

There is little or no women's participation in decision-making policies about health medical poli-

cies and programs.

Awatere cites these figures:

☛ Based on 1975 statistics, the life expectancy of Maori

men is eight years less than white men. Maori women have 10 years less than white women.

☛ A Maori is one-and-a-half times more likely to die below age 25 than any white person. Above age 25, a Maori is two-and-a-half times to three times more likely to die before age 65 than any white person.

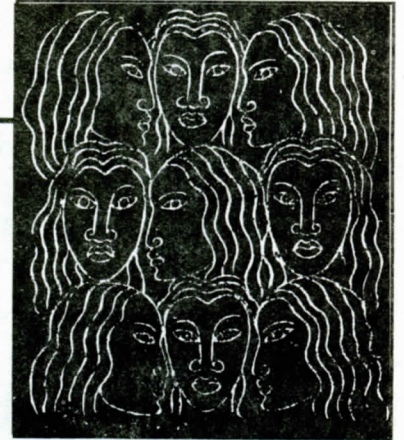
☛ Infant mortality figure of Maori babies is three times higher than that of white babies. Common causes of deaths are respiratory infections.

Maoris' poor economic conditions have not changed for years while the immigrants continue to live affluent lifestyles. Awatere believes that the Maori women's health conditions would improve if their socioeconomic status improves.

Maori women have organized themselves into organizations. Through the New Zealand's Health Network, they have worked towards change in the health system. They say that "The health system should realize that the Maori view of health is not European, so all aspects of training, treatment and research must change radically to ensure that Maori needs and views are respected and valued."

Maori women demand, among others, that doctors be taught about racism and sexism. A research center run by "Maori for Maori" is also being eyed.

About the author: Gloria Melencio is a project worker of Isis International Manila. She is currently part of the electronic networking project.



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