



Indigenous women of Asia: When hearts, minds and spirits unite

by Eilleen Meneses

Indigenous women from the Lahu hill tribe of Thailand, Orang Asli of Malaysia, Dalit of India, Dayak of Indonesia, Ainu of Japan, Atayal-Seediq of Taiwan, Karen of Burma, Jumma of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Bangladesh), tribal women from Nagaland (India), West Papua (Indonesia), Korea, Sabah, and Vietnam and from the Philippines, Igorot women of the Cordillera, the Lumads and Muslims of Mindanao, the Mangyans, Aetas and Agta tribes.

*We work on native soil
Feel the sweat from our toil
With the power of our hand
We feed the people of the land*



The first Asian Indigenous Women's Conference, held in Baguio City, northern Philippines, opened with a festive celebration – a colorful parade of indigenous women dressed in their traditional garbs of brilliant hues and handwoven stripes and prints.

Land as a source of life

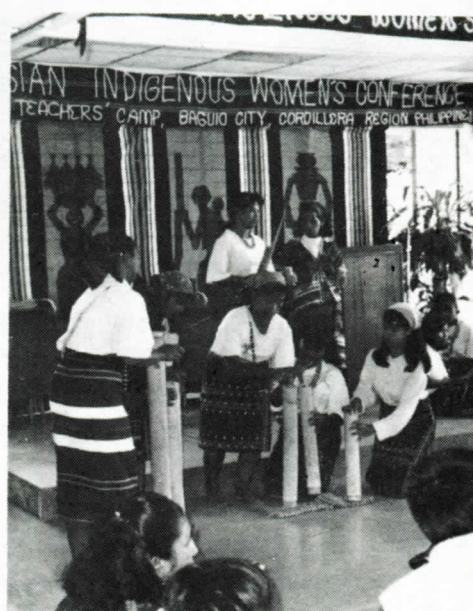
Land is the common bond that links together the indigenous peoples. For them, land is not just a commodity to be appropriated. Land is the very source of life. And it is the indigenous women who nurture the land to give sustenance to life.

"Our history as peoples basically revolve around our attempts to protect our ancestral homelands from incursions and destructions," stated Victoria Tauli-Corpuz of the Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center (CWERC).

In West Papua, for instance, all the land is by tradition community-owned. Describes a Papuan woman Jojo Roemadas, "We are afraid of losing our culture, our identity, our dignity just as we are losing our land and all the forests and the seas." In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region in southeast Bangladesh, the Jumma village women live in constant fear. They can no longer wear their traditional dress, forced to hide their indigenous identity for their own safety.

Violence against women

"Rape and assault against women is being used as a vehicle to suppress, even extinguish, the unique culture and identity of our indigenous peoples. The oppression faced by indigenous women is not just a physical act of violence but a threat to their cultural practice," said Kabita Chakma, tracing her roots to the Chakma tribe of the Jummas.





The indigenous women from the Philippines agreed that women are uniquely victimized by state violence.

In Thailand, the rich meanings of their cultural expressions and ceremonies slip away as these are turned into tourist attractions. The indigenous peoples themselves are being used as a tourist attraction.

Prostitution has grown to be a major tourist attraction in Thailand. Junejira Suknaphasawat, a youthful Lahu hilltribe woman from Thailand, thus revealed: "Many tourists come to the villages to smoke opium, inject heroin, and have sex with young women."

We are the sisters, wives and mothers

*We provide the care for others
From the womb we are begotten,
Generations of our children;*

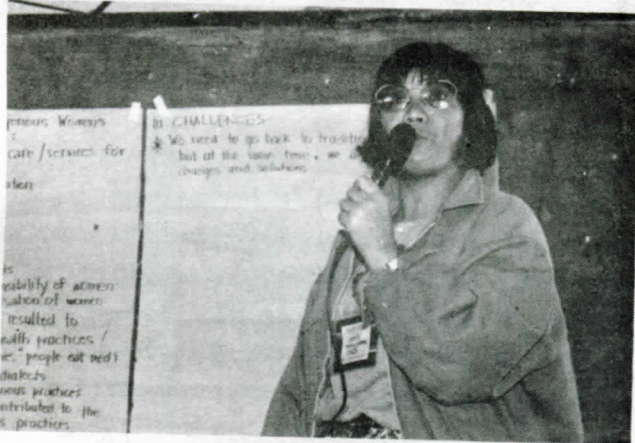
Junejira told the group about how the indigenous women in her country become victims of sex trafficking. Young hilltribe women fall prey to Thai recruiters who promise good jobs in the city.

Women's actions

Junejira's work at the New Life Center in Thailand gives her the chance to help her indigenous sisters to become literate, to find

economic alternatives for their lives and to cope with the trauma they have experienced of being forced into prostitution.

In Burma, the Karen indigenous peoples suffer untold miseries under the military junta. Women and children suffer the most. In response, the Karen women have organized to alleviate their lot. The Karen Women's Association (KWO) was established to help women and children in health care, education, and cultural programs.



*Lest our cultures be forgotten
Bequeath our values to our children,
Teach them what is right and wrong...
Sons and daughters proud and strong*

Indigenous women, as life bearers, play a key role in passing on the indigenous way of life to the future generation. "We, as life givers, are the ones who keep the families and the clans alive," said Jojo Roemadas, who founded the women's self-help group Keloupok Kerja Wanita di Irian Jaya (West Papua).

Papuan women teach their children to respect and take pride in their indigenous identity and roots.



Restrictive religious customs

In Sabah, indigenous women occupied leadership roles, headed religious ceremonies and performed rituals to pay respect to the spirits. With the entry of male-dominated religions like Christianity and Islam, women lost these important roles. Winnie Joannes, a delegate of Partners of Community Organizations in Sabah, (PACOS) lamented that religion, has reinforced the inferior and subordinate position of women in society. "From birth, our position is lower than that of men, being dominated by our fathers and husbands. This justifies the control over us through customs, religion, social taboos, family life and language."

*Our work fill up all our days
We walk miles to the market place
Climb the steep hills, plant the trees
Mine the earth and dive the seas*



Subsistence economy pervades in most indigenous communities. Among many tribal groups in the Philippines, women bear a predominant role in food production. They do most of the work in the fields from planting, weeding, harvesting, and then selling the produce. The Bagobo women do all the household chores, childcare, raising animals like chicken, and most of the work



in the field.

Among the Orang Aslis in Malaysia, women weave baskets or mats and make blowpipes.

"We feel these injustices in our own lives. We want to do something to change this situation," Joannes of Sabah further said.

*We the women are solid and fighting
Hearts and minds and spirits uniting
Fists in the air, feet on the ground
A women's movement on the birth*

Karen woman Naw Rebecca proudly explained the meaning of the Karen Women's Organization (KWO) flag. "The white star at the center, with a black shadow behind it, symbolizes the women's role as light-bearers, shining to give what is inside them and to show their goodness. The black shadow," said Naw Rebecca,

"is meant to remind the women of their present situation in a society still in darkness because of the oppression and violence inflicted upon them by the Burmese military government and, at the same time, by the Karen men. The KWO casts a shining star in the struggle to light up this darkness.

Women leadership and organizing

In the Philippines, the Cordillera women prove to be leaders in getting organized. In 1990, they launched a regional federation, INNABUYOG, which gathered some 60 women's organizations from the Cordillera provinces. The group focuses on education and training.

Towards the end of the conference the women vowed to support each other's struggles and drew up various resolutions and action plans. They agreed to continue working towards their empowerment in many ways: by building networks among the Asian indigenous women's communities; forming information pools to be forwarded to the United Nations; and improving the situation of discrimination on women.

The participants composed and sang the song embodying their declaration of unity and solidarity:

***We are the women of Asia
We are the peoples of the land
We are the women of Asia
We stand together hand in hand.***

***Dayak, Papua, Rakhain, Chakma
Kadazan, Lahu, Mamanwa
Tay, Senoi, Burman, Ami
Karen, Kachin, Agta, Puma.***

***Igorot, Mangyan, Banwaan
Ayta, Ainu, Higaonon
Naga, Teduray, Bagobo
Tamil, Seediq, Tayal, Moro.***

