

A collection of personal essays by indigenous women

HerStory

of Empowerment, Leadership and Justice



Published by
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)



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In partnership with

Cordillera Women's Education Action Research Centre
(CWEARC), Philippines

Adivasi Women's Network (AWN), India

National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF), Nepal

Indigenous Women Forum of North East India (IWFNEI), India

Supported by

UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women (UNTF)



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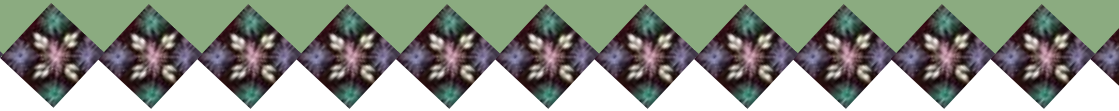
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We would also like to acknowledge the valuable contribution made by our partner organisations; Cordillera Women's Education Action Research Centre (CWEARC), Adivasi Women's Network (AWN), National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF), Indigenous Women Forum of North East India (IWFNEI). With a special thank you to Subha, Gwen, Vernie, Chonchuirinmayo, Elina, Faith Jane and Gina.

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Tanya Lutvey and Shimreichon Luithui
Editors

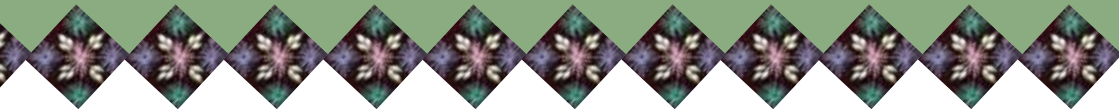


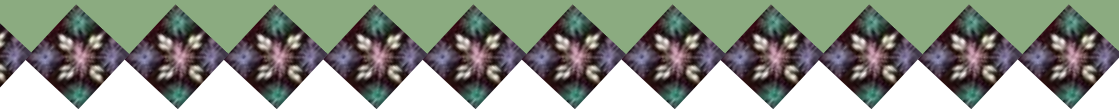
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Acronyms

AIPP	Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact
AWN	Adivasi Women's Network
CA	Constituent Assembly
CBA	Collective Bargaining Agreement
CLC	Cordillera Labour Center
CNT	Chottanagpur Tenancy Act
CWEARC	Cordillera Women's Education Action Research Centre
EIWTCI	Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions
FIMI	International Indigenous Women's Forum
FIR	First Information Report
GBV	Gender-based violence
GEFONT	General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions
GOI	Government of India
IRB	Indian Reserve Battalion
IW	Indigenous women
IWFNEI	Indigenous Women Forum of North East India
LGCDP	Local Governance Community Development Project
MOPRECO	Mountain Province Electric Cooperative
NAKASA	Nagkahiusang Kababayen-an sa Sarangani
NFDIN	National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NGO	Non Government Organization
NIWF	National Indigenous Women's Federation
NNC	Naga Nationalist Council
NMA	Naga Mothers Association
NPA	New People's Army
NPAN	Nepal Participatory Action Network
NSCN-IM	National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah)
NSCN-K	National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Khaplang)
NWUM	Naga Women Union Manipur
PESA	Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Area) Act 1991
SB	Sanggunian Bayan
SLC	School Leaving Certificate



SSS	Social Security System
SWWU	Sagada Women Workers Union
TNL	Tangkhul Naga Long
UML	United Marxist Leninist
UNTF	UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women
VAIW	Violence against indigenous women
VAIW/G	Violence against indigenous women and girls
VAW	Violence against women
VDC	Village Development Committee
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme



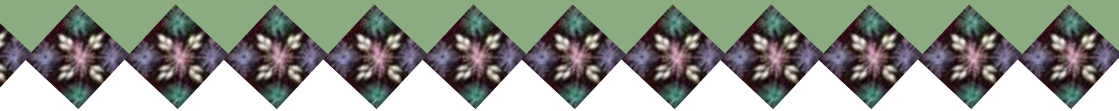
Foreword

The women's movement has been promoting another way of looking at records of events or personal accounts as “her story” instead of “history”. This is clearly an attempt to rectify historical accounts to include the perspectives, struggles and invaluable contributions of women. It is also to raise the voices of women and make them more visible, not only for the past but also for the present. “Her story” is now gaining more attention as part of the overall gender-equality goal being championed by women.

The indigenous women's voices and “her stories”, as an integral part of the women's movement and indigenous peoples' movement, remain faint. This reflects the overall conditions of indigenous women as relatively more marginalized, discriminated against and dis-empowered at all levels. It also illustrates the urgent need to strengthen indigenous women's organizations and institutions, as well as their leadership and effective participation, in all matters that concern them as women and as indigenous peoples.

This book, as a compilation of indigenous women's “her stories”, is a reflection of the conditions and struggles on the ground of indigenous women. They are the stories of Shanti, Tayet, Kareila, Samjhana, and 14 other indigenous women who are extra-ordinary women in their own right. They are in the hearts and minds of other women and villagers because of their suffering, struggles, sacrifices, commitments, dedication and lifetime achievements in advancing the dignity of women and indigenous peoples. Their voices and their stories need to be heard and relayed. They echo the realities on the ground and their actions are inspiring reflections of what can be done. Their shared aspiration for equality and dignity for all needs the support of everyone. After all, the world will only be truly free if women and indigenous peoples are not discriminated against. When they are living with dignity and pride for who, and what they are and when they have recognition of their roles and contributions to society.

Joan Carling
Secretary General
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)

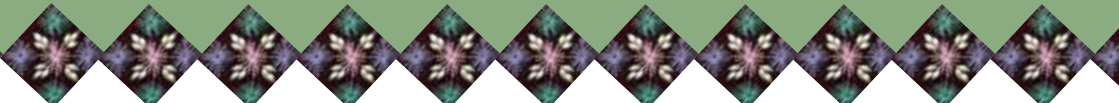


Introduction

Indigenous peoples in Asia, estimated to be more than 260 million, are disproportionately suffering from multiple forms of discrimination and oppression based on their ethnicity, race, location and economic status; rendering them part of the poorest of the poor, most politically disempowered and culturally and socially discriminated. In addition to this, indigenous women, estimated to be 50 % of the total indigenous peoples population are even more discriminated and marginalized on the basis of the intersectionality of their gender and ethnicity.

The dimensions of gender oppression and exploitation of indigenous women have distinctive features in the customary laws, practices and belief of indigenous peoples. The practice of customary law is still prevalent, and more dominant, than national legal systems in many indigenous communities across Asia. Customary practices relating to indigenous women have both positive and negative aspects in relation to women's rights governing the daily lives of indigenous women in many communities. Indigenous customary laws are largely against violence against indigenous women (VAIW) as they provide due recognition to the physical integrity of women as child bearers. On the other hand, customary laws do not consider women as equal to men in almost all aspects, including in decision-making. Traditional governance systems are only for men, and in general, the heavy agricultural work is left to the women. The traditional patriarchal system and mentality still prevail in the relationship of indigenous men and women.

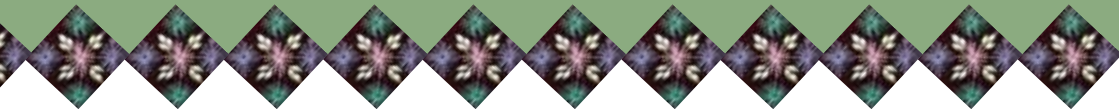
Through generous funding from the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women to Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), and in partnership with Cordillera Women's Education Action Research Centre (CWEARC), Adivasi Women's Network (AWN), National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF) and Indigenous Women Forum of North East India (IWFNEI) AIPP has been implementing the project 'Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions' since 2010. Through the project, AIPP has successfully implemented indigenous women's leadership capacity building, community awareness-rais-



ing, lobby and advocacy work with traditional institutions and local government units, and networking with different groups, NGOs and other institutions. Through the hard work of our project partners on the ground, indigenous women have learnt about their fundamental human rights, the various laws, policies and programmes that promote and protect women. Practical skills such as petitioning and First Information Reports (FIR's) have empowered indigenous women from our project sites to promote and protect the rights of victims of VAIW/G including domestic violence and kidnapping.

The following stories have been collected through the tireless dedication of our partners from indigenous communities in Northeast India, Mainland India, Nepal and the Philippines. Many of the forthcoming stories have been narrated in the storyteller's indigenous language, translated into the national language, and then translated again into English. In order to protect the integrity of the stories and in respect for the authors, the majority of the text has been directly translated with minor technical editing. The stories have passed through many ears to end at this publication, and we applaud those women who have participated, for their bravery and commitment in sharing their stories.

This publication is a reflection of the hard work of everyone involved in the 'Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions' project, especially the women in the communities we have been engaging with over the past three years. We hope that this collection of stories can be used to empower and promote the solidarity of all indigenous women.





Chapter 1

Indigenous Women as Social Leaders

Contributors:

Chhing Lamu Sherpa, NIWF

Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, IWFNEI

Gwendolyn Gay L. Gaongen, CWEARC

Lorna Mora, NAKASA

Louise Vinan, NAKASA

Shanti Jirel, NIWF

Subha Ghale, NIWF

Name: Shanti Jirel
Ethnicity: Jirel
Dolakha district, Nepal

I am Shanti Jirel, 40 years old, from Jiri in the Dolakha district. I am from the ethnic group of Jirel who are indigenous to Dolakha and Sindupalchowk districts of Nepal.

This year I got elected as the chairperson of the National Indigenous Women's Federation of Nepal. Until May 2012, I served as the Constituent Assembly¹ member (April 2008 - May 2012) of the historic Constituent Assembly that was established after holding a nation-wide CA election. It was momentous to be able to represent the Jirel community for the first time in the Constituent Assembly, which also served as the legislative parliament. I was the candidate of the United Marxist Leninist (UML) party, the oldest community party of Nepal, for the proportional representation quota. It was the first time a mixed electoral system comprising the majoritarian first-past-the-post and proportional representation was adopted in Nepal.



In 2013, Shanti was elected as the Chairperson of National Indigenous Women's Federation of Nepal (NIWF)

The Constitution Assembly elected in April 2008 was tasked with the

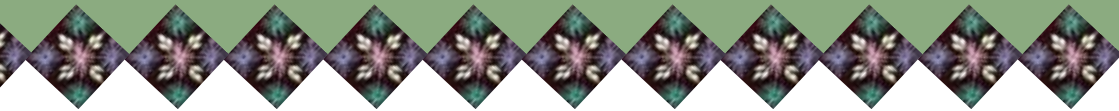
On 27 May 2012, the term of the Constituent Assembly ended without the new constitution being completed after four years of delay and disputes. At the heart of this crisis lies the issue of identity-based federalism, which the traditional elite comprising high-caste groups see as a threat to their long-standing hegemony over the rest of the population. In recent times Nepali society has become increasingly polarized between those who seek to bring about inclusion by granting a measure of autonomy to the historically excluded groups and those who equate inclusion with decentralization of administrative authority without essentially changing the power equation. The new CA election is slated for November 2013 and the campaign for the election running nation-wide. It remains to be seen whether the political parties will be able to safeguard achievements of 2006 republicanism, federalism, and secularism by resolving the issue of identity-based federalism. The hard-won peace and democracy in Nepal can only last if the State takes concrete steps for including marginalized caste and ethnic groups in the political process,

critical role of writing a new constitution for Nepal that could be truly inclusive and democratic. For the marginalized groups, including the Indigenous Peoples, the constitution-writing process was an opportunity to secure the rights that have been denied historically by the State. As a CA member I had two major responsibilities: 1) to draft the new constitution as a member of the committee for protecting the rights of Minority and Marginalised Communities and 2) to support the legislative parliament as a member of the Constitutional Special Hearing Committee. I have played a critical role in the drafting of the constitution, by safeguarding the rights of indigenous peoples in the very wording and description of the draft section of the constitution prepared by the Committee for Protecting the Rights of Minority and Marginalised Communities. Another big achievement during my tenure as a CA member was that I took the School Leaving Certificate exam (SLC, grade ten), also known as the 'iron gate', and passed the exam. Although I felt a little nervous while taking the exam, I was ecstatic when I found out that I passed the exam. I feel that I have come a long way from my humble beginning as a carpet worker to becoming a CA member.

As an indigenous woman from Jirel community, I have had to face many challenges at every step of my life.

As an indigenous woman from the Jirel community, I have had to face many challenges at every step of my life. My parents had a hard time raising seven children. Although my parents finally bore a son after having daughters one after another, my brother did not survive. My parents were subsistence farmers and my father also worked as a helper in the government hospital. Though my father realised the importance of education for my sisters and I, the education facilities were not easily accessible. Commuting to the school entailed walking for two hours every day. Given the hardship it was not practical for me to pursue education. So I had informal education for around three years when I was young. I remember experiencing a moment of victory as a young child of six when I had won in a dance competition. After that event I started getting more recognition in my community.

When the main market in Jiri was connected by road, my parents started running a small restaurant in Jiri. I used to lend a hand to run the family business. During that time my mother's sister, who worked in the burgeoning carpet industry in Kathmandu, used to visit us in Jiri sometimes.



With the help from my aunt, I also got employed in one of the carpet factories in Kathmandu at the age of fifteen.

I soon learnt how to make carpets and worked for nearly six years in several carpet factories. During that time, I experienced and witnessed the exploitative nature of the carpet industry in Kathmandu. The majority of young children employed in the carpet factories had migrated to Kathmandu from other districts in Nepal and were extremely vulnerable to any form of exploitation. The children were made to work under harsh working conditions, long working hours, and paid a very low wage. Luckily I was spared this harsh treatment and coercion faced by the majority of the employees because I was relatively better informed about the system in the carpet factories.

I ... worked for nearly six years in several carpet factories. During that time, I experienced and witnessed the exploitative nature of the carpet industry in Kathmandu.

During the People's Movement of the 1990s, I participated in the protest and demonstration organised by the United Marxist Leninist (UML) party. The success of People's Movement of 1990 led to the downfall of the autocratic party-less Panchayat Regime that had ruled the country for nearly three decades. The reinstatement of multi-party democracy opened up political space for a broad section of population – such as women, labourers, indigenous peoples, dalits and other marginalised groups – to voice their demands.

In 1990 I joined the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions (GEFONT) Nepal. GEFONT was a new arrangement structure that mobilised the workers during the 1st People's Movement of 1990 to fight for their rights. I was working at the Shangrila Carpet Factory when I became a member at GEFONT. Subsequently I formed a trades union at the Shangrila Carpet Factory and registered it under the Trade Union Act at the Labour Office so that it would protect the rights of the workers. Despite the pressure from the workers to register under the Trades Union Act, the proprietor of the carpet factory resisted and did not agree to support for registration. Instead they sacked me from my job without giving me any explanation. In response to the injustice I filed a case against Shangrila Carpet Factory and demanded they reinstate my job. After one year I

finally won the case and the Shangrila Carpet Factory had to reinstate me. The victory I experienced was exemplary in terms of securing the rights of worker in the new democratic system. Winning the case was a landmark event for the factory workers. Because of the victory, every worker realised that they were entitled to their job and workers couldn't be fired at the whim of the factory owners.

The same year, in 1992 I joined the UML party as a member. I joined the party because of their commitment to create an equal and just society which included protecting the rights of the workers. As a party member my work was focused mostly on promoting the rights of women and labourers. In 1992 I also became the GEFONT Central Women's Department and had the responsibility of protecting the rights of labourers working in the carpet industry.

In 2005 I became the vice-Treasurer of the Jirel Association Nepal. The organisation worked to protect the cultural rights of the Jirel community. In 2007, I, established the Mahila Samaj Sewa (Jirel Women's Service Society), which focused exclusively on the rights of Jirel women. The same year I was also chosen as the Federal Council Member of Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN). As a Council Member, we meet every six-month to develop national-level policies for indigenous communities and also evaluate the progress made.

All my life I have remained committed to advancing the issues of the marginalised sections of society such as women, workers, and indigenous peoples. Because of the series of revolutions that led to increased awareness about our rights, indigenous communities have already been able to identify our major concerns. Now we need more commitment from people to materialise our concerns.

As told to Subha Ghale, NIWF



Shanti (centre) (NIWF)



Name: Lorna Mora
Ethnicity: B'laan
Sarangani Province, Philippines

I am from a poor family. Farming is the primary source of livelihood for my family. I studied in Del Millona Elementary School, Upper Suy-an, Malapatan. We needed to walk for one hour from home to reach the school. I earned my high school certificate in Lun Padidu national High School and in Mindanao State University for college. I had no other ambition except to finish my studies and afterwards help my parents. While studying I had experienced many difficulties, especially the fast rising tuition and other school fees.

The poor were miserable because they could not go to school, particularly the indigenous youth that the government had long neglected.

I met the Anakbayan organiser, a progressive organisation of the youth in the school. They advocate that “education is for all, not only for the rich” and campaign for no tuition fee increases. I attended a seminar about the youth situation, especially students, and I learnt that education was slowly being privatised and no longer accessible to the poor. Education was now for the rich. We had launched protest action in the school and I had assisted in organising the youth and students from the campus, all without the knowledge of my parents. In 2006 I decided to stop schooling because I had seen the real situation of education. The poor were miserable because they could not go to school, particularly the indigenous youth that the government had long neglected.

I had stopped studying without the knowledge of my parents and for three semesters I continued to receive my allowance from them. I used my allowance for my personal needs and for fare to go to the areas for organising students and out-of-school youth. When they knew that I had stopped, they were angry with me. For one year we never saw each other. What was worse was that my sister was included in their anger and they did not allow her to continue her schooling.

It had been my parent's ambition that I should finish my study to free us from poverty. It was hard for me not to give them what they wanted and dreamt for me. But I bore all the hardships and sacrifices and even the longing for my family. I focused on organising indigenous people and the masses and they became my second family.

Year 2006 during the foundation of the Bai National, I was the representative and my work was to document cases of Violence Against Women and give education to women about their basic rights. We went to areas of the indigenous peoples to discuss the problems of the indigenous women. I had already seen that indigenous women were severely exploited and also suffered from the feudal outlook of the society.

2008 was the second regional assembly of the Kahugpongong sa Lumad sa Halayong Habagatang Mindanao (Kaluhhamin) and I was elected Secretary General. In 2010 the Nagkahiusang Kababayen-an sa Sarangani (Nakasa) was formed and I became the Chairwoman. I focused on organising women and, in that year, I became the Regional Campaign Officer of the Katribu Party list.



Lorna was elected Chairperson of NAKASA in 2010 (NAKASA)

When I was called in the local chapter of the organisation in Colonsabac, Matan-ao, Davao del Sur to give the Katribu Party list (a party list representing the voice of IPs in the congress) orientation, we encountered military check-points. When we arrived at the barangay captain's house we were asked to log in our names. After a few minutes the military men came and asked us to go with them to their camp at the barangay center. They even told us to bring with us our bags, but we refused in fear that they might put something in them to incriminate us. We left our bags at the barangay (local government unit) captain's house and then we went to the camp.

When we arrived at the camp, they kept on asking us and repeating questions about whom the New Peoples Army (NPAs) are that we knew. For four hours we were illegally detained, as they suspected that we were spies. We were allowed to go at about 8:00 pm in the evening. Even with this harassment we were never intimidated.

In 2010 the AIPP project had started and the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women funded it. Its partner was CWEARC and NAKASA was the local partner in the Sarangani Province. I was the local coordinator and its objective was to increase women's awareness and further their rights as women, particularly involving Violence Against Women (VAW). As part of the project, I educated the women regarding their economic, political and cultural rights and tried to gradually abolish the outlook that the women were just for home, children and to care for the animals.

Organising is not easy, lives are always at stake. But for me, organising women is a challenge and I will continue what I started for our future. Because if we will not act, who else will? If not now, then when? I am Lorna Mora, 30 years old, single and a resident of Tamayao, Upper Suyan, Malapatan, Sarangani Province. And this is my life story.

Written by Lorna Mora and translated by Louise Vinan, NAKASA



Name: Nisma Gharti Magar

Ethnicity: Magar

Rolpa district, Nepal

I am Nisma Gharti Magar from Rolpa. I was born in Gujrat, India on the 23rd of August 1991. My elementary education started in Gujrat, India and later on I continued my education in Kot Gaun, Rolpa after my family moved back to Nepal. While I was studying in class 10, I was married to a boy from Jankot VDC Rolpa at the age of sixteen.

***Everyday
life was a struggle
between life and death***

As I was married at such a young age, I always felt deprived of my parent's love and support. At the age of seventeen, I also had the responsibility of being a mother and raising my child. Amid all

this, the Rolpa district was severely affected by the ten-year armed conflict (1996-2006) between the state and the Maoists. Everyday life was a struggle between life and death. Although I tried to continue my education amid all these challenges, it was not possible to pursue my education.

I became part of the AIPP supported project through NIWF in 2011 and gained valuable insights into the issues of women and indigenous peoples. The series of training relating to the rights of indigenous peoples, women's rights, customary laws and traditional institutions has opened me up to knowledge I was previously unaware of. The training of mentors, amongst others, has greatly strengthened my leadership capacity and skills to act as a change agent in my community. The series of trainings highlighted the importance of participation of indigenous women in decision-making in their homes, traditional institutions and community for their empowerment. Due to lack of participation, women in my community have been deprived of many opportunities. I strongly believe that we can move forward only when we can ensure meaningful participation of women in all spheres of life beginning with their home and community.

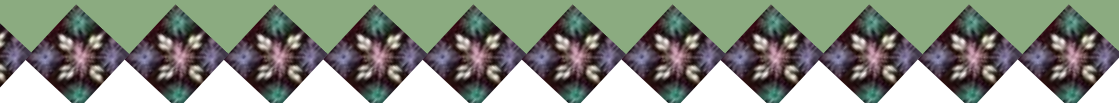
I strongly believe that we can move forward only when we can ensure meaningful participation of women in all spheres of life beginning with their home and community



Nisma Gharti Magar (NIWF)

I began working as a primary school teacher in 2012. I noticed that the participation of girls, as both teachers and students, was very low at the school I was working in. Realising the importance of equality between men and women in education, I initiated a campaign to address the low representation of women/female in the school.

I began a door-to-door campaign in the community to raise awareness on equal rights of education for both girls and boys. I also organised meetings for guardians to sensitise them about equal rights to education and why it is important to encourage girls to go to school.



When some parents resisted the idea of sending their girls to school, I used the training manual developed by NIWF for the project participants, as reference material to emphasise the significance of equal rights for girls. This training manual aimed at developing the capacity of indigenous women by encouraging their participation in customary and traditional institutions. As a result of the campaign the enrolment of girls started to increase in my school.

After a few months, the turn out of the girls started to drop again. When I asked the parents of the students, they complained that their daughters were stealing money from their parents to buy junk food, like biscuits, chocolates and instant noodles, from the shop nearby to the school. As a result, the parents had stopped sending their girls to school and held me responsible for such negative consequences. Some parents even went on to say that sending their girls to school comes with the risk of their daughters being labelled as a thief, tarnishing the image of their daughters and thereby ruining their future prospect for marriage. I felt that it was unreasonable not to send their daughters to school just because they might steal money from their parents for their snacks. Instead of arguing with the parents of the students I felt that I had to come up with a better solution to tackle this problem. I was not ready to give up so easily. Once again I tried to convince the parents of the girls to send them to school by reiterating the importance of education. I said that if they think that their daughters are stealing money to buy junk food the solution might be to send healthy home-cooked food as snacks. Many parents thought that it was a good idea and eventually the parents started sending their daughters to school again.

I then had another issue to deal with. The shopkeeper near the school became disappointed with the sharp decline in sales because the students had stopped buying junk food from him. So much so that the shopkeeper complained to the school management regarding the issue with the hope of increasing his sale. I went to the shopkeeper and narrated the incident that had led to the decrease of sales in his shop. I explained to him that the situation was so grave that the girl children almost lost their opportunity to go to school altogether. To ensure that my campaign for equal education was not dampened again I also initiated a rule in the school to prohibit junk food and a rule to pay fines in case of non-compliance.

The rule has worked effectively and now we have moved past the hurdle, which could have prevented girls from attending school. I still continue to campaign for equal education for girls and boys.



Nisma Gharti Magar
(Shimreichon Luithui, AIPP)

I would not have been able to make this change in my community without the knowledge and skills I got from training through the AIPP project. I am particularly grateful for the training manual, which has become an extremely valuable resource material for me to bring positive change in my community.

Translated by Subha Ghale, NIWF

Name: Magdalena Tambiac

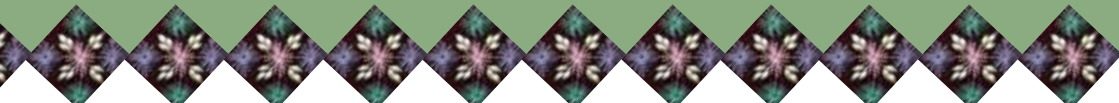
Ethnicity: Kankan'ey

Mountain Province, Philippines

It was July 2011 when Magdalena approached me along the Makamkam-lis road, Sagada. She asked when we could be available, as she wanted our assistance. “Regarding what concern?” I asked. “Permi nan problema mi ay menob-obra id Sagada Weaving” (We workers in Sagada Weaving have grave problems) she replied. So I told her to meet me at our office on a day-off.

“My fellow workers at Sagada Weaving filed loans with the Social Security System (SSS) but we were surprised when the officer in charge said we are not qualified because of non-payment of contributions.” Said Magdalena Tambiac or “Magda” as she is popularly known. “I went to an NGO in Sagada and sought their help and was promised that they would look into the matter. But months went by and no action was taken” she added.

In July 2011, when Magdalena met project staff of the Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions (EIWTCI), she told the workers story. The staff promised her that they would take up



their concern. The staff decided that the case of the women workers merits attention and should be included as target group for the project.

Magda has been working as a weaver at Sagada Weaving for 22 years now. She along with at least 30 other workers at the “weaving” had been receiving an average of 155 Philippine peso (Php) a day [The legislated daily minimum wage is 285 Php]. Even worse, their employer had been deducting the workers share for the SSS but had not been remitting such payment to the SSS. As well as this, the management also bullied them and made unjust deductions from their wages with the excuse of “management prerogative” or “quality control”. Php 5 per meter is deducted from their wages when they do not finish the 80-meter roll of cloth within 35 days. This is at least Php 400 Php or at least 2 days’ worth of wages.

Since July 2011 the women workers at the Sagada Weaving became a focal group of the EIWTCI project. A meeting with the Cordillera Labor Center (CLC - a non-government organization based in Baguio City that focuses on labour issues) was set-up with the women workers. Mr. Tony of the CLC conducted a seminar on workers’ rights and unionism. The women were encouraged and decided to continue the process of forming a union and raising their issues officially. They said they were of peasant background, many of which are un-educated, but they had had enough of the exploitation.

On August 21st, 2011 the Sagada Women Workers Union (SWWU) was born and on August 22nd, 2011 the first Sagada Weavers workers assembly was held. This was devoted to ratification of the organisations constitution and by-laws and election of officers. The SWWU under the leadership of Magda devoted half of their day-off during Sundays for education and solidarity work. They studied Genuine Trade Unionism; Philippine Society and politics; undergone research and study sessions on computing the rate of exploitation that they undergo. On December 21st of 2011 the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) accredited the SWWU. The SWWU was able to struggle for better wages at Php 255 per day. Still this is not enough for their family needs (based on Ibon facts and figures – a minimum of Php 960 a day for a family is needed to provide decent food, housing, elementary-high school education, basic health not including money for emergency hospitalization and other expenses) but a lot more than the previous Php 155.

Workers concerns are a new thing in Sagada. This is because the town is mainly agrarian in character. Traditional systems have evolved in relation to labor related to agriculture and in others such as carpentry and masonry work. But wage and workers-capitalist/business relations are something new to the community. Thus existing labor relations have been left to the workers and the management of such establishments.



Sagada Weavers Union receiving training on labour rights (Shimreihon Luithui, AIPP)

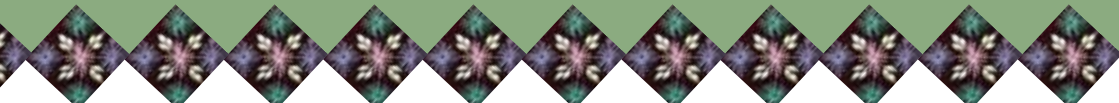
The workers had to struggle so hard to attain what they have at present. Magda and her co-workers have never been harassed in previous years. This is because they never spoke up against management. Only when they formed the union did management harass them. Sometimes the owners corner the women individually. They cry and try to emotionally blackmail them. Their boss consistently harassed Magda. She was frequently

cornered during workdays and asked to desist from leading the union. Sometimes employing tactics of drama, the employers appeal to her to stand down. Now even her wages are being arbitrarily lessened. In the past, Magda has been one of the most skilled and top weavers of the SW. But now her wages are lesser due to deductions for quality. Php 5 per meter is deducted (or Php 400 per roll) when the bosses are not satisfied with the cloth.

“Why do you fight the people who have provided you with work? They have fed you and your families”

At times they are straight out screamed at or bullied by the male owner. Later they were asked to go on leave or are deliberately forced to stop work, as there were no materials available for weaving. What was

worse, was that they were not allowed to seek temporary employment in other establishments during the prolonged “vacations”. Many of the women wept. Some were terrified of losing their jobs. Other community members even added to their burden. “Why do you fight the people who have provided you with work? They have fed you and your families,” say some people in the “ili” (village).



The women stood their ground. They learned from all the seminars that their issues were just and that they all had the right to form a union and demand better wages and work conditions. As a result of several grievance meetings, their wages, which used to be Php 57 per meter of women cloth or approximately Php 171 per day, was increased to the minimum wage of Php 258.00 per day. Being good-hearted women and understanding, they even waived the unpaid SSS contributions that their management had not submitted. They said “It’s ok if they will not pay the past contributions as we understand this will be heavy on them. But we want from now on for the payments to be made regularly”.

Sometime in May 2012 the concern of the union was raised with some community elders and leaders. At first the elders were scolding saying, “why do you have to make a union? Can we not just settle this without you forming an organisation and referring to all these legal bases?” They were not wholly convinced after the meeting. But they promised to raise the issue with the local legislative body called the Sanggunian Bayan (SB).

The remaining workers were steadfast. They said that they had to be strong. They are the first union in the history of Mt. Province and their hometown Sagada. “It will be a shame if we fail in our struggle. We must be an inspiration for all other women workers who are like us, exploited and repressed” said Manang Mary.

Violence against women (VAW) is often construed to be limited to the issue of physical and domestic violence. But the experience of working with the Sagada Weaving women workers has helped the project staff as well as the workers broaden their understanding of VAW to merit even economic exploitation as a grave form of VAW. This will also include political harassment and threats.

Magda stands firm in her position as a union leader. She says even if some of the members have given in to harassment she will remain and take on the challenge. The SWWU is now engaging in negotiation for Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA), an avenue where the weavers can formally and legally negotiate for economic and non-economic gains. As yet the management have not agreed to the workers proposals for an increase of wages to start at minimum wage of Php 285, a 10% increase in three

years, regular payment of their social security contributions, removal of arbitrary decisions such as deduction on so called substandard woven materials, deductions for beyond 35 days for one loom, recognition of the workers' rights to organize and ask redress of grievances. However, she and her members will not abandon the struggle for just wages and better working conditions.

The SWWU is the first union in Mt. Province's history. With Magdalena's leadership, we hope they achieve victory. To them "This is already an achievement. For us simple folk to have been able to reach this stage in our union, to know about rights and to have actively engaged in CBA is more than what many of these rich and educated people in the community have not even experienced".

Written by Gwendolyn Gay L. Gaongen, CWEARC

Name: Chhing Lamu Sherpa

Ethnicity: Sherpa

Udaypur district, Nepal

Chhing Lamu Sherpa, 53 years old, was born in the Udayapur district of Nepal. Her father, Rikjan Norbu Lama, 90 years old, and her mother, 87 years old, continue their livelihood as farmers. Although her parents had 11 children, three of them died in their childhood - one of her sisters died due to complications during her pregnancy, while another one died because of paralysis. She says that there was lack of health services even in the district headquarters at that time.

Chhing Lamu was able to start her formal education when she was 17 years old. This was possible after finally being able to convince her parents about the importance of education in her life. She says that it was common to underestimate the importance of education for girls, particularly if it entailed travelling far away from home to reach school. Despite the ordeal, Chhing Lamu started her formal education from grade six after getting private tuition to compensate for the years she had lost. It was a great challenge to start her education from grade six and finish the 10-year school curriculum in just five years. As her school was about a day's walk from her home village in Finjoling, she had to live at the head

master's house near the school. Drinking water was a big problem and she had to spend more than two hours to fetch drinking water every day. Saturday [day off called by the government] was the only opportunity she had to bathe and wash clothes in the nearby river. Because of her dedication, she finally completed her grade ten School Leaving Certificate (SLC) in 1979 from Panchawati High School in Udayapur. She moved to Kathmandu to pursue her education and completed her Intermediate-levels. In 1991, Chhing Lamu also got a post-graduate diploma in Rural Extension and Women from the United Kingdom.

After finishing her Intermediate levels, she started her job as a junior instructor at the Women's Training Centre under the Ministry of Local Development. Meanwhile she also enrolled in the bachelors program at Padma Kanya College in Kathmandu. Chhing Lamu says that it was not easy for her to work in a government office as an indigenous woman. She explains that the office environment was entrenched with Hindu culture and as an indigenous woman she was seen as someone who did not belong to the 'mainstream'. She remembers how she was compelled to wear the 'national' office dress - a sari and could no longer wear her traditional clothes that she was familiar with. She carried out her study while she was working for the government.

Chhing Lamu has played an important role in promoting and protecting the rights of people from mountain communities, who have remained excluded by the State largely on the basis of the geographical remoteness and hardship. She is the founding member of the NGO called Mountain Spirit established in 1996. The NGO is dedicated to conservation of environment and social development of communities from the mountain region. The NGO now has over 90 members spread across 16 mountain districts of Nepal. The members are involved in improving the lives of mountain communities, particularly marginalized ethnic groups, through awareness raising and capacity building. Chhing Lamu Sherpa serves as the advisor of Mountain Spirit.



Chhing was able to bring positive changes in the communities labour rights (NIWF)

Chhing Lamu is also associated with many development organisations such as TEWA (a women's philanthropy organization), SAGUN (for

social harmony), Nepal Participatory Action Network (NEPAN), Imagine Nepal (appreciative inquiry group), and Nepal Sherpa Association in various capacities. She has gathered rich experience in participatory development through her involvement with various national and international organisations including the Ministry of Local Development, Action Aid-Nepal, the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation, Plan International (Nepal) and Plan Nepal. In the last two decades Chhing Lamu has worked at the village and district levels in remote areas in the Northeastern part of Nepal, including trans-boundary issue management of China autonomous region (Tibet) and India (West Sikkim), helping developing communities to improve leadership roles and training communities in conflict mitigation, institutional development, environment management, gender and ethnic sensitivity development.

She has bitter memories of being lost in the dense forest, hungry and helpless.

strong role in conservation as well as production of Allo³ (natural) cloth that is being marketed in and outside Kathmandu. Working in the conservation area was very challenging and physically strenuous. She has bitter memories of being lost in the dense forest, hungry and helpless lost in the dense forest, hungry and helpless. She remembers working for weeks end without rest and without even being able to bathe. So much so she got lice in her hair and had to cut her hair really short for the first time in her life. Nevertheless she has no regrets because she was able to bring about positive changes in the communities through training and mobilisation. In recognition of her commitment, in 1996 the US Ambassador to Nepal invited her to visit the US and speak to women's groups about her work in the Makulu Barun Conservation Area project.



Chhing Lamu Sherpa (NIWF)

² Makalu Barun National Conservation Park was established in 1992. The park covers an area of 1,500 km² (580 sq mi) in the districts of Solukhumbu and Sankhuwasabha and has an elevation gain of more than 8,000 meters (26,000 ft). The area covers tropical forests and snow-capped mountains.

³ Allo is made from the bark of the girardinia plant which is grown in Nepal at the foot of the Himalayan Mountains. It is naturally antibacterial and mould resistant. Historically, allo has been used to make rope (source: <http://www.yarnrhapsody.com/1/post/2012/06/allo-hemp-jute-and-sisal.html>).

In 2013, Chhing Lamu participated in the Global Leadership School of Indigenous Women Program on Human Rights and International Advocacy Leadership skills from FIMI (International Indigenous Women's Forum-IIWF). She was also awarded a small fund by FIMI to support an indigenous women's organization in Nepal to strengthen their intuitional capacity. Through the support of FIMI, Chhing Lamu has been supporting NIWF and its member indigenous women's organisations to develop their institutional capacity.

Because of her continuous commitment to the empowerment of women and marginalised communities, Chhing Lamu Sherpa is a source of inspiration for many.

Written by Chhing Lamu
Sherpa, NIWF



Chhing's continuous commitment to the empowerment of women and marginalised communities, is a source of inspiration for many (NIWF)

Naga Women in Peace Building Northeast Region of India

As mothers and women, considering all as equal, the women express their wish that the different groups (Naga factions) unite and work together.

Indigenous women often suffer from multiple forms of discrimination in conflict situations: as women and as indigenous members. This situation gets aggravated when they become the target of violence

in political conflict. In spite of this, indigenous women have contributed a great deal in conflict resolution and achieving sustainable peace.

Naga people have been asserting their right to self-determination, from the British colonial and post-colonial periods. After the British left India, the Naga territory was left divided between India and Burma, against the expressed will of the Nagas. Since then, Nagas have been fighting against the political control of both India and Burma, including armed struggle that was led by the Naga Nationalist Council (NNC). To suppress their

struggle for self-determination (terming it as a ‘law and order problem’), India has responded with heavy militarization in the Naga areas spread in the four states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur and Nagaland. This only resulted in a more strident armed struggle for the Nagas. On the other hand, numbers of unsuccessful peace agreements were signed including the controversial Shillong Accord, 1975 which lead to the breakup of the NNC into ‘accordist’ and ‘non-accordist’. Two factions further broke away: National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Isak-Muivah) (NSCN-IM) and National Socialist Council of Nagalim (Khaplang) (NSCN-K). These groups had been embroiled in fratricidal killings, often fomented by tribalism.

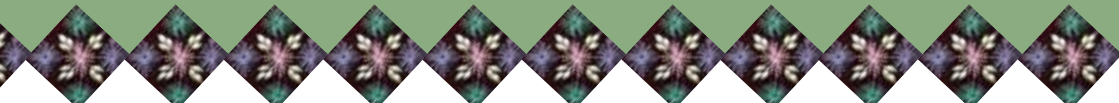
The NSCN-IM and Government of India (GOI) in 1997 agreed to cease-fire and to have an unconditional peace talk at the highest level in the country. In 2001, a separate ceasefire agreement was signed between the NSCN-K and the GOI. However the continuing factional confrontation has adversely affected the Naga national movement with the GOI and its agencies taking every opportunity to exploit the rivalries.

The Naga Civil Society has taken it upon itself to bring about reconciliation amongst these groups. The Naga Women Union, Manipur (NWUM) and the Naga Mothers Association (NMA) are the apex organizations of the Naga tribal women organizations in Manipur and Nagaland states respectively. They have been in the forefront when mediating factional dissensions and they have been working relentlessly for peace building within the Nagas.

Naga Mothers Association (NMA)

The NMA was established in 1984 with the motto ‘human integrity’. Initially its focus was on social issues such as alcoholism and drug addiction. They took up the responsibility as mothers to get rid of the social malaise and bring about reforms. NMA’s political journey came much later. It was a response to the endless factional killings. In its 5th General Assembly, 1994, NMA launched the ***Shed No More Blood Campaign***⁴ calling upon all the mothers to have a day of mourning remembering those killed in the political struggle.

⁴ The slogan was of the NMA, however, the two organizations adopted it as a common slogan while going to meet the political leaders in different camps



..... Although the Naga groups have different ideologies, their blood cannot be separated.

Naga Women Union Manipur (NWUM)

NWUM was born in 1994; ten years after NMA came into being. There was a need for a common platform for all

the women organizations of the 16 Naga tribes in Manipur to affirm the rights and dignity of Naga women, promote traditional values and improve the living standard of Naga society.

On the Road for Peace

NMA and NWUM took the initiative of reaching out to the members of different groups to end the factional killings. Their main objective was to connect the leaders of various groups for a dialogue and build understanding and trust between them. They met leaders and members of different factions, having had to travel to very far places sometime for days on foot. The women had to pass through a number of challenges including reluctance on the part of the different groups to come forward for a dialogue, communication gaps and misunderstandings. They also had to raise the funds for their travel.

First Journey

From 15 to 26 March, 1999 a four women team representing the two women organisations undertook the first journey to meet the NSCN-K leaders starting from Kohima, Nagaland to Arunachal. In a hired jeep, they reached Khonsa, Arunachal Pradesh without knowing that they had to have permits from the state government. So they travelled without permits. They halted for the night at the Noglow village. The night was cold and they slept using big mats and mosquito nets as mattresses and quilts. The next day, they started their journey early in the morning on foot with no proper road. They crossed a river and climbed a mountain. They came across burnt jhum fields. There were some women working in the field. They helped them with their luggage. They walked through thick and steep forests, each of them using two walking sticks. Across the mountain, they met some people from the area who were on their way to buy supplies from Khonsa Bazaar, Arunachal Pradesh. A woman complained of stomach-ache, they gave her digestive tablets and she got better. They finally reached their destination late at night and halted a day to meet the members of NSCN-K. The team was received warmly and a feast

was hosted in their honour. They had long discussions with the members of NSCN-K, explaining their mission. A lot of misconceptions were cleared and the members acknowledged their effort for peace. The women then had to walk for almost a day to meet Khaplang, Chairman of NSCN-K. They were accorded a warm welcome but could not immediately meet Khaplang due to his preparation for the republic day.

The team had three rounds of talks wherein they apprised him of the situation back home and also the Naga consultation with NSCN-IM on the latter's invitation in Thailand.

They conveyed to him the message from all of the Naga women not to fight and kill as that is not helping the Nagas in any way; that, all it did was make more widows and orphans in the Naga society. Their appeal was "SHED NO MORE BLOOD". The women also suggested to Khaplang to meet for dialogue with other factions. While appreciating the suggestion, he also expressed his apprehension.



Representatives of NMA & NWUN
being received by NSN (NSCN-K)

The women group left after their meetings and reached Dimapur Nagaland on the 26th of March 1999. The very next day, they met NSCN-IM leaders and briefed them of their meeting with Khaplang and his men. The NSCN-IM leaders expressed their appreciation and courteously, listened to their stories.

NMA and NWUM also came out with a joint press statement appealing to all the factions to accept each other as brothers. The two organizations also continued their effort to meet other national workers.

Thus, they also met with the NNC leader Adino Phizo and her brother, who is the advisor to NNC in London. They had long discussions with them and appealed to them to help bring the different groups and factions together. They also met the NNC, Peace Campers in Kohima and conveyed the message of "SHED NO MORE BLOOD". They appreciated the effort made by NMA and NWUM.



Naga women representatives on the way to NSN-K in Myanmar (NSCN-K)

Second Journey 1st - 11th February 2002.

Following the consultation with NSCN (IM) in Bangkok in January 6th – 12th 2002, a three-member team took another trip to Eastern Nagaland to meet Khaplang at a place convenient to both the parties.

They started their journey from Kohima on the 1st of February 2002. They travelled through Assam; then, to Mohenbari, Arunachal Pradesh where this time they got their inner liner line permit and proceeded to Changlang, a Naga territory in Arunachal. They met some public leaders and shared with them the objectives of their journey to reach out to the leaders of various Naga groups which the women team could do so due to the declarations of Cease Fire.

The team appreciated their stand on national issue. As mothers and women, considering all as equal, the women expressed their wish that the different groups unite and work together. They had another meeting with other leaders, which they called the ‘meeting of North and South’. It was acknowledged that language and tribalism divided the Naga people. The public leaders also expressed how much they felt left out. There had been incidents of violence in the Changlang district taking the lives of many people, yet they were of the opinion that NSCN (K) and (IM) must be united to achieve their aspiration.

It took the team two and half days to reach the place where Khaplang was staying. Without rest, they sought an appointment and met the chairman and his men. They briefed them about the consultative meeting in Thailand and read out the declaration of the consultation to him line by line with translation. It was conveyed to Khaplang how Issac Swu and Muivah recollected the past days of their stay together. Khaplang was happy to hear this and he also shared the good times they spend in those days.

They had an official meeting the next morning with Khaplang. To make their message clearer, they demonstrated “Power Structure”⁵. He observed

⁵ Demonstrating how people at the higher rung of power exploited those below who in turn formed the support base of those in power. Thus, when the support base is exploited by those in power, everyone within the power structure is affected.

it very attentively. The message of the power structure was explained, i.e how enemies were suppressing the Nagas. A member of the team expressed that they had missed a new opportunity while nursing their hurt and pride. The team also met other officials and together, they relived through memories with sadness of those days spent in other parts of Naga areas, regretting the situation they were all in.

The team continued their journey to meet another top leader of NSCN-K. They interacted with him on unity and reconciliation. He pointed out that although the Naga groups have different ideologies, their blood could not be separated.

The team left in the morning and halted for a night in the jungle at a Rest Camp. It was a cold night and they kept themselves warm with leaves. From there, they walked to a village where they took a lift on a jeep and reached 'Tamna Hill View Hotel' Changlang. They met the Official-in-Charge (OC) of the Changlang police station. A Major from the Indian security force came to their hotel and interacted with them.

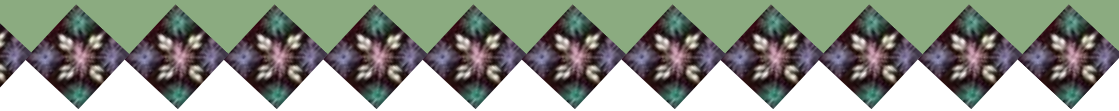
They also had another meeting with the local leaders who apprised the women team of the prevailing situation. Accordingly, they made a statement appealing to both the groups NSCN (IM & K) to exercise their good sense and refrain from attacking each other. They finally made their journey homeward.

Both the journeys were very tiring but the women were satisfied that they had reached out with the message of reconciliation. The women faced a lot of criticisms from different quarters. But with persistent endeavour and blessing from God, they received positive feedback and the different Naga political groups showed willingness for a dialogue. The initiatives of the NMA and NWUM have significantly contributed to the peaceful dialogues among the different factions within the Naga movement. In turn, there has been a drastic reduction in fratricidal killings.

Written by
Chonchuirinmayo Luithui,
IWFNEI



A torch rally in Ukhrul town to protest against military operations-15 Aug 2009 (NPMHR)



Chapter 2

Violence Against Indigenous Women and Access to Justice

Contributors:

Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, IWFNEI

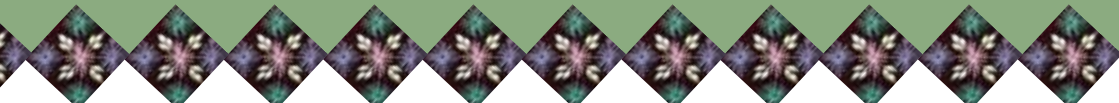
Gwendolyn Gay L. Gaongen, CWEARC

Juvylyn Caburubias, NAKASA

Lorna Mora, NAKASA

Shanti Marina Kerketta, AWN

Subha Ghale, NIWF



Name: Phila Wung⁶
Ethnicity: Naga
Ukhrul district, Northeast India

From a very young age, I could sense the pressure my parents were going through because of the absence of a son in our family. I and my sisters often felt rejected because we had no brother

My name is Phila Wung. I come from a village in Ukhrul district, in Manipur. I have two older sisters. Our father met an untimely death, forcing our mother to take the role of both parents and become the sole bread earner for our family. From a very young age, I could sense the pressure my parents were going through

because of the absence of a son in our family. My sisters and I often felt rejected because we had no brother. In our society, only men can inherit the ancestral property. It is also only the men who participate in the decision making process. So my father's sudden death left a hole in more ways than we could imagine.

In my community, it has been in practice from time immemorial that the heir is duty bound to take care of the family from whom he inherits, as well as perform their burial rituals. In earlier times, he was also bound to avenge their death if they were killed. When our father died, he left eighteen ancestral properties including paddy fields and farms, which according to our customary practice would have been under the control of our mother. However my father's legal heir, (my cousin brother) immediately started claiming the properties without my mother's consent and without shouldering the responsibilities that a legal heir was supposed to take up.

In the meantime, my two older sisters got married and I continued with my education. I got my bachelor degree and wanted to study further for a master's degree in Mass Communication. But we did not have the financial means. So my mother, sisters and I sat down for a talk and decided to approach our cousin brother (the legal heir) about selling one of our father's paddy fields. He gave his permission after discussing it with his

⁶ Name changed

brothers and our uncle. In our custom, when we sell off a property, we offer it first to the nearest of kin within our clan. Where the nearest kin cannot or refuses to buy, it is offered to the more distant relatives and finally outside the clan. In our case, after long discussions, my Avagato (an uncle, the cousin of my father) agreed to buy it and he and my cousin brother started negotiating the price. We were informed later.

I had to leave home before the sale could be completed since I had to prepare for my admission into an institute in Bengaluru. It had been decided that an aunt would loan me money for my studies and we would repay her once we received the money from our uncle. In the midst of all this I got a call from my mother saying that my cousin brother seemed to have changed his mind. Still, I waited. Finally when the money never came, I had to return home. I was very disappointed but did not give up hope and approached my cousin brother again. He started saying that we were planning to sell off the field behind his back and that he was never informed. Had my father left a will directing how the properties should be managed on his passing, it would have been easier. Since there was no will, my mother and I did not have any say.

So we appealed to our closest relatives within our clan, including the heir's two younger brothers, Avagato and Avagato's son to settle the matter. Our relatives and Avagato stood by us and testified that my cousin brother had given his approval when we approached him for selling the field. But my cousin kept insisting that he never gave his permission. At long last we had to present it before a meeting of the Wung clan. My mother and I presented our case. My cousin brother also gave his side of the story completely denying that he ever consented to sell the land and that he had had no idea what was happening. Our other family members including Avagato spoke in our favour. So finally the clan told my cousin brother that my mother could sell off the field. My cousin was very angry. He even told the clan members that they were taking the side of the women who had no right over the properties.

With the clan's decision, Avagato started tending the paddy field. But the heir also started working on the field. As a result an injunction was placed on both sides by our clan. The heir refused to honour the decision of our clan and therefore he was expelled from the clan. This did not deter him from going against the decision of the clan. Eventually my mother and I



were compelled to go to the traditional court at Ato Longphang⁷ where it was decided in our favour.

My cousin brother appealed to the apex court of Tangkhul Naga Long (TNL). There the court overturned the Ato Longphang's judgment on the ground that women had no right over ancestral property. We felt so helpless and defeated. We did not know where to go for help. But we continued to discuss. We asked for help whenever we could and one day we were advised to request for Presidential Review where the President of TNL could review our case. He was obliged to give his opinion/judgment within six months.

So, we made our petition for Presidential Review. Six months passed but the call never came. Later on we found out that he did not even open our file. One day our father's friend visited us inquiring about our case. After appraising him, he took us to the President. He agreed to look into our petition. Within no time he came out with his order, overturning the decision of the court of TNL and directing my cousin brother to release the property for sale. Thus finally we could sell off the field to my uncle.

In the end, it took more than five years to get justice. The money we received was not much but for me, I feel that it is not just our victory but it is for all the women placed in a situation like ours. I believe that we set a precedent in many ways. It was unheard of for a woman to go to the traditional court.

The money we received was not much but for me, I feel that it is not just our victory but it is for all the women placed in a situation like ours.

I remember my mother crying so dejectedly whenever we were getting ready to attend court. She found it shameful to be glared at inside the courtroom; men would watch from the doors and peep from the windows. It was a bitter time for my family, my mother, two sisters and I. I can still remember clearly the anger and endless hours of tears for the loss of our father and to top it all off, the feeling of rejection and insecurity. But the memories of our father kept us going and we were reminded of his love as

⁷ The Tangkhul Naga Long, i.e., the highest traditional body of Tangkhul people is divided into Ato Longphang (Northern region), Aze Longphang (Southern region), Zingsho Longphang (Eastern region) and Zingtun Longphang (western region) for easier administration.

a father and husband to his wife. We knew that he, like many fathers without a son, would never want his family to go through those dark times.

Our case also shows that women have rights. We just have to be more aware and assertive of those rights. Unfortunately while the case was ongoing, there was not a single woman who could give us advice or suggestions. All the help that we received came from men. Every woman that we met during the case seemed to have accepted that women did not have any right over landed properties and this was very discouraging. I believe the judgment has also changed this view.

We also participated in the decision making process when our case was brought before the clan. It was very rare for women to attend such meetings, forget about any kind of intervention. It opened the way and now, in my village, we can see women participating even in public meetings. Initially we were reluctant to go to the meeting of our whole Wung clan since there was an accepted norm that women cannot inherit and with men as the sole decision makers; we were not sure what decision they would make since we were women. But they heard not just the heir but also us and stood in our favour.

As for my cousin brother, he forgot that his right to inherit came with certain responsibility. My cousin was supposed to look after my mother, my sisters and I as much as he could. But he did not. This is how many of our men are interpreting inheritance rights. But we can change this, if we as women are more aware and assertive of our rights and do not simply give in when the situation gets tough.

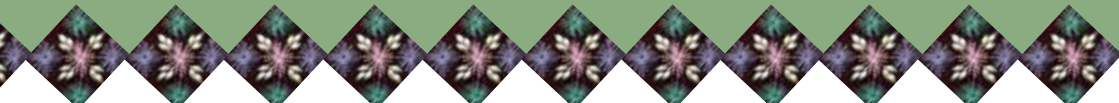
As narrated to Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, IWFNEI

Name: Belinda

Ethnicity: Kankan'ey

Mountain Province, Philippines

Belinda is one among eight siblings. She grew up in one of Sagada's old villages. Her parents are both small farmers and locals of Sagada. At 45, Belinda has three children. She has been working as a peasant organizer in the past. Presently Belinda takes on agricultural work in her family's



small “uma” or swidden farm. She has coffee trees and a few vegetables there. For additional livelihood Belinda does seasonal tourist guiding, massage for locals or tourists, raises bees for honey production and volunteers for community and NGO work whenever she has spare time.

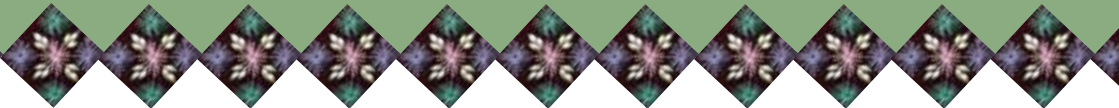
One evening, her ears bleeding and her youngest child in her arms, she ran to the local police station for help.

“Where’s Belinda?” asked a colleague one day in 2009. “I have not seen her for a week” I replied. We went to see her at her house. She was in bed. Her body ached. In tears Belinda told us that she’s in pain from a battering at the hands of her husband. This is one

among several incidents of domestic violence she has suffered over the years. One evening, her ears bleeding and her youngest child in her arms, she ran to the local police station for help. Most often, the beatings came after her husband had been on one of his drinking sprees. In drunken rages he threw things at her, punched and even kicked her. Triggers for such rages were often because Belinda did not cow-tow to his demands, which could be anything from simply making a cup of coffee to jealous wraths. When she and her child ran to the police station, the policemen took her statement and entered it at the police blotter. The police officers brought Belinda to the nearby private hospital. The next day the police officers went to speak with her husband. That was the end of the police intervention in relation to her case.

“Many times I had opted to leave my husband but many of our elders and even relatives persuaded me not to do so”, Belinda says. “Kababain nu mensina kayo” (It’s shameful when you separate); “Ngan pay nan kanan di ipugaw kendatako?” (How will people speak of us if you leave your husband) says her family. It is truly a norm in Sagada society that women victims of domestic violence are made to suffer the situation in order to preserve family honour.

But Belinda had had enough of being battered. One day she packed up her stuff and took her children. She went to her family’s ancestral home. Taking control of herself, she asked the help of local barangay officials. In the Lupon (local justice system) discussions, the decision was made for the community to “destiero” (ask her husband to leave the community) her husband for the violence he has committed towards his wife.



However until today he still walks the town of Sagada. Belinda has been a single parent now since 2009.

“It’s difficult to be separated”, she says. “In our community, separated women have restrictions” she further narrates. Many mothers would ask their daughters (married and single) to keep away from separated women. “It is contagious or like a flea that leaps to another”. In community gatherings, separated women are also disallowed to serve food. This is because such women are considered to be “dirty” or “stained”. As a victim of domestic violence, she now suffers a form of ostracism because of her courageous act to seek freedom.

A strong person with many talents and a drive to learn and work, Belinda continues to care for her three children. By working as a seasonal tourist guide, a volunteer at the local community radio and taking on various agricultural works, Belinda manages to provide her children’s needs. She also devotes part of her time to women activities in her municipality. Frequently she assists in the *Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions* project by taking on topics for seminars or topics during trainings.

Belinda hurts from this ostracism. She feels that this is such an unfair cultural punishment. But she, being a vocal and strong person, explains her circumstances. Many women now understand her situation and empathize with her. Others have also found courage to voice their situations from hearing about her experience. Belinda, together with other Sagada women who have separated from their husbands, look forward to working for a society that is more friendly and understanding towards women survivors of domestic violence. Through the EIWTCI project, Belinda and other women in similar situations have been able to look at their experiences from a more scientific point of view. Sharing their personal circumstances has raised the level of understanding about how cultural influences affect people in the community. Belinda has been able to help other women through sharing her story and also in assisting in advocacy work in the community.

Written by Gwendolyn Gay L. Gaongen, CWEARC



Name: Nilmanti Minz
Ethnicity: Oraon
Simdega district, Mainland India

Born to a humble family of four in West Bengal, father Nicholas Minz was an Army official, mother Magrita Minz a housewife, a very quiet and hard working woman came out of the crowd to rise as a role model for her community. The family resided in different parts of India as her father moved a lot for work. Thus Nilmanti and her sister were educated in different parts of India. The family belonged to the Oraon community. It was a very happy family; their parents never discriminated among their children. However due to frequently moving, their studies were disrupted; always leaving one school and then going to another school in another part of the country. Adjusting to the new place, school, and study was too much for them and it affected their studies to a great extent. Nilmanti made two attempts for her matriculation exams but couldn't clear them. She became discouraged and decided to leave her studies for a while.

Nilmanti was an active member of youth group during and after her school years. She was very much involved in social activities, in and around the youth group and church level activity. Her parents had full faith in their daughter and never restricted her in her involvement in various social activities.

Meanwhile her parents found a good match for her and got her married to Ajit Minz in 2001. After her marriage, she went to live with Ajit's family. Ajit is a matriculate and, at that time, had no job as such. His family had quite a good share of agricultural land and depended on agricultural based yields. Nilmanti had to learn the techniques of cultivation and soon became absorbed in the typical village life routine. She had no complaints. She was contented and happy. The time passed by and she became mother of four daughters.

Ajit was always a casual drinker, but after the birth of their second baby girl, his alcohol consumption frequency increased. By the time Nilmanti gave birth to her third baby girl, Ajit's behaviour towards her had completely changed. He started torturing her physically and mentally. He hit

her and treated her as if she had no self-esteem or value. Viewing their quarrels every day, Nilmanti's in-laws left them, giving them their share of property. After this, Ajit became fully immersed himself in alcohol and left Nilmanti alone to do all the agricultural work. Nilmanti tried her best to counsel her husband, but it was in vain. Meanwhile their fourth daughter was born. Having four female children was not acceptable to Ajit.

Nilmanti didn't accept this as her fate, and decided to change things - not for herself, but for her daughters, who were unaware of the brutality they were about to face from the person they called father.

Even the villagers began to treat her differently. Nilmanti didn't accept this patriarchal way of thinking as her fate, and decided to change things - not just for herself, but for her daughters, who were unaware of the brutality they were about to face from the person they called father.

After her marriage, she had been fully tied up in and around her home, and had no chance to speak to or visit other people except her parents. This squeezed her from inside. She always wanted to go on outings, meet other people or to do something creative. This desire of hers became stronger when she came across one of the trainers from the same village, who invited her to attend a seminar organized by AWN. This was like a breeze of fresh air for her and she has not looked back since then. She had found a way to unleash her neglected social work and this was a way to drown out her apathy. She would finish her housework quickly and found time to participate in the meetings and seminars. She was, and still is, very regular in the training programmes and her confidence level has grown. Thankfully her in-laws have supported her through thick and thin. They look after the children when Nilmanti is kept away from home for training programmes. However, Ajit does not like all of this and has created lot of nuisance.

Yet, Nilmanti never gave up. In the month of December when she wanted to take part in a rally for '16 Days of Activism on Violence against Women', her husband (who at the time of marriage had vowed to stand by her in every decision), now made a condition that she take her four daughters along. He had thought that this could stop her. However, this did not deter Nilmanti from participating in the rally. She took her four daughters with her.



Nilmanti Minz (AWN)

On the way to the sister-in-law's house she met one of her daughters who said that her father had burnt all of her saris.

The torture continued from her husband when she attended another skills training programme. Nilmanti had informed her husband that she would be back by a certain day, however due to a Jharkhand Bandh (closure) she couldn't return. While on her way back, her sister-in-law forbade her from going home directly and asked Nilmanti to visit her first. On the way to the sister-in-law's house she met one of her daughters who said that her Ajit had burnt all of her saris. All this had become too much for her, in one of the seminars her burdened heart poured out saying "Bas bahut sah liya aur nahin sahungi" (enough is enough, will not take it anymore). In the meeting it was decided that women participants would counsel Ajit on community level. If he still refuses to stop all this then further action could be taken such as filing a case under domestic violence act 2005 against him. This action has been successful. He has stopped harassing her.

Nilmanti has been a role model for many other women. She has even taken leadership roles in the programs held at the panchayat level and created awareness among the masses through the medium of nukkad natak (skits) and sports activities etc. Her efforts have changed her husband's views. She is no longer subjected to domestic violence. In one of the inter-state meetings organized by AWN on Violence against Women, he attended to observe what kind of meetings his wife was participating in. This was a life changing experience for him. He is changing and convinced about her involvement in the community. Now he said that he will give his support and would like to work for the cause.

Nilmanti said she would like to work to strengthen the women by building the women's group, uniting them and to advocate and lobby together to fight for their rights.

Written by Adivasi Women's Network

Name: Tayet Maguan

Ethnicity: B'laan

Sarangani Province, Philippines

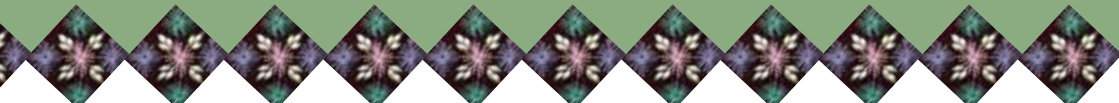
"I have to save my children! The military might kill them!"

This is my sad story and this is where I get my courage to continue struggling for our rights and welfare. I am Tayet Maguan, 29 years old and a member of Nagkahiusang Kababayan-an sa Sarangani (NAKASA), residing at Sitio Kyahe, Barangay Kinam, Malapatan, Sarangani Province.

I am blessed with a loving husband and three little angels; Shiela, Queency and Rustom. My life is simple as it is. A wife taking care of her husband and her children and going to the field and garden for our livelihoods is my daily routine. Our place is mountainous. Together with my husband we are actively participating with the people's organization in our community. With other NAKASA women, I learnt about the situation of indigenous peoples, especially women. It encourages me to be strong and help advocacy for empowering women to stand for our rights, while my husband is an advocate of peasant's rights and welfare.

With our participation and advocacy we are tagged as members of New People's Army (NPA), an armed group who are visible in our community from time to time. Because of this my husband was forced to leave us for a certain time for his own safety. My family agreed and set arrangements for seeing each other with the children away from our community. Days and months passed. It was difficult raising our children with our situation, but we got used to it and lived peacefully. But still the military continue to maliciously declare that my husband joined the NPA and that was why he never visited us.

This is where my agonies started. On January 27th of 2011, around six o'clock in the morning, 10 elements of the Philippine Army arrived at our house. Without any questions they grabbed my brother Ron-Ron and tortured him in front of me. My brother was brought to the hinterlands in Sitio B'kay Falak. The military said that if I do not surrender within three days, they threatened to kill Ron-Ron.



While I was interrogated, one of the military elements shouted that they would put Ron-Ron into the waterfalls if I did not cooperate.

I was worried about what might happen. On the 29th of January, 2011, I went to the 73rd Infantry Battalion, Philippine Army Detachment at Sitio Coop, Barangay Kinam accompanied by my sister and my two children, Queency who

was nine years old and Rustom who was one month old by that time, to appear in the investigation although it was unlawful. They questioned me if I had ever met with my husband who joined the armed group. While I was interrogated, one of the military elements shouted that they would put Ron-Ron into the waterfalls if I did not cooperate. Their intention was to threaten me and force me to answer their questions. Our legitimate struggle for the rights and welfare of my fellow lumad were their reasons for why we were being harassed. They considered the alleged involvement of my husband a “warrant” to detain and harass me. They kept me hostage together with Queency and Rustom to force my husband to surrender.

I was detained until February 1st of 2011 in the military detachment despite there being no case filed against me. Since I was not strictly guarded, with the help of Barangay Captain and Barangay Kagawad in Kinam, we were able to escape from the detachment. For several days we were barefoot, cold and hungry. Rustom and I had nothing to eat. After the military learned that I had escaped, the head ordered a search for us. Unfortunately they found us and tried to arrest me. After I asked them if they have the warrant of arrest, they walked away as they failed to present any papers or documents. I suffered a nervous breakdown after the incident. I felt that anytime they might get me and I was frightened!

We fled to Davao Del Sur, yet my trauma continued. Since my security was at risk I left Shiela and Queency to my parents. After more than a year had passed, in Barangay San Isidro, Santa Maria, Davao del Sur, I was arrested at my aunt’s house on August 7th of 2012 by the elements of the 39th Infantry Battalion of the Philippine Army. Together with my one year and nine month old child Rustom, I was forcibly detained at Battalion Headquarters in Municipality of Santa Cruz, Davao del Sur and later turned over and detained for 15 days in the Municipality of Santa Maria, Davao del Sur, Philippine National Police Station, still without any case filed against me.

With the help of the members of NAKASA, together with some support groups and organizations, I was finally let out of prison. The support groups took care of me and NAKASA members made efforts to counsel me on how to release my fears and move on from my trauma. It was hard for me to cope because what had happened was always coming back as nightmares. But with their help and my willingness to overcome the fears, I know that one day I can bear all of this as long as I have my family and the never-ending support of NAKASA.



As of now I continue to be an advocate of defending human rights especially the rights and welfare of the Indigenous Peoples, the indigenous women and the children. I know that I am not alone in this situation, there are many people that experience what I have been through and those people need someone like me to have courage and the willingness to continue struggling for us.

As narrated to Lorna Mora and translated by Juvylyn Caburubias

Name: Alona Kamei⁸

Ethnicity: Naga

Tamenglong district, Northeast India

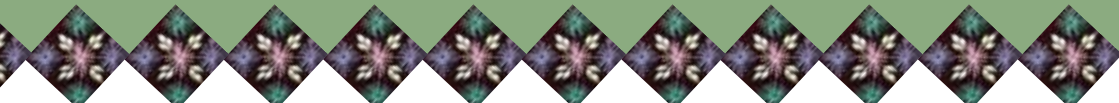
She shouted for help and pleaded with them that she was like their mother and was also mother of four children.

Alona Kamei is a 40 year old mother of two sons and two daughters residing in Khoupum Namkaolong, a remote village located in the Tamenglong District, Manipur. Her husband, Namsuaklung Kamei was seriously injured in an accident three years back and Alona became

the sole bread winner in the family, working in their field and selling Naga king chilli to support her family and her children's education.

On the 21st of March 2012, she had been given a lift in a truck carrying timber, driven by her husband's brother, to sell the chilli in Imphal. They were stopped by the Village Defence Force (VDF) at Chinikon and they stayed there the whole day to avoid harassment by the state security

⁸ Name changed



forces by way of demanding money. By the evening, six trucks including theirs started the journey to Meijrao to unload their timber. When they reached Khongapal Pump house, Tiddim Road around 1.30 am on the 22nd of March 2012, one of the trucks stopped to refuel. As they were waiting, four persons in a silver car came and accosted them on the pretext that they had not registered the vehicles in the entry log book at the Forest Check Post in Bishnupur. One of them was holding a pistol.

Two of the persons in the silver car were wearing Indian Reserve Battalion (IRB) attire. They were identified as being Havaldar (Sergeant) of the 1st IRB, 37 years of age and Rifleman of the 1st IRB, 37 years of age. Both of them were attached with the Bishnupur Police Station. The other two were in civilian clothes.

They took away the money, mobile phones and other essential commodities from the truck drivers and passengers at gun point. When they reached the spot where Alona was, the four men asked her brother-in-law who she was. To save her, he told them that she was his wife. When they asked her, she replied that he was her husband's relative. Then, they turned to him and beat him till he was unconscious. She tried to stop them but she was also beaten. The handy-man of the truck, was also dragged down from the truck and was badly beaten.

They ordered them to bring down the stuff from the truck. Then one of the men dragged her inside the car at gun point and made her sit on his lap and started molesting her. They mocked her saying she was a woman from Khoupum, selling her body. She was threatened by one of the occupants on the back seat with a pistol and told to keep silent, if not, she would be shot dead. She was more terrified and almost lost her senses with fear of being killed. She even bowed her head and pleaded with them not to harm her and not to kill her, while thinking only for her children who are in school studies, praying to God in her heart. She tried telling them that she was having her menstrual period. At this, one of them remarked, "you are the right woman whom we desire most and right time to enjoy." She begged them to spare her, that the same God had given life to all of them. But, they told her at gun point not to mention God and told her that turn by turn she would be raped.

The four men took Alona to an isolated place near a primary school, Langpok Kokyai, Bishnupur District, Manipur. They pulled her out of the car and stripped her of her clothes and raped her. After the horrible ordeal, she was kicked and ordered to dress up. Somehow she managed to put

on her dresses. They threw her in the back of the car and dumped her in an unconscious state. They had taken away her mobile, chilly and money. When she regained her senses, she realized that the place where she was raped was close to Irom Meijrao, P.S Nambol, Imphal West District. She heard sounds of heavy vehicles coming towards her and she got up and stopped them. One of them was driven by her brother-in-law. They went to unload timber at a saw mill at Meijrao. There the owner served food but she didn't take anything and did not wash herself.

On the 22nd of March 2012 at around 8 am, they went to Bishnupur Police Station, where their First Information Report (FIR) was registered. When the four persons were apprehended, she returned to the police station to identify them. The culprits' families offered Alona money in exchange for her silence but she rejected this. Instead, she told them that she could take care of her children with the money she earned from selling chillies and that she would rather demand capital punishment.

While waiting for justice from the court, she underwent all types of harassment and mental torture from the culprits' families and also her own family. She was approached three times by the culprits' families with money and even a plot in Delhi. She rejected all of this and was determined not to give in under pressure. She knew that she had to stand, not just for herself but for the rights of all women. She chose not to make a compromise with any promises or threat. Her determination to get justice got the support of many social organizations and civil society in Manipur. In one of the court hearings, she could not control her emotions while she was narrating her account of the story and the people present in the court room, as well as the judge, were crying. The court was adjourned for a short while. Her story and experience touched many lives.

Her story and experience touched many lives.

The trial went on for eight months but on the 26th of June 2013, all four accused were found guilty and convicted. They were sentenced to life imprisonment for rape, outraging the modesty of women and causing grievous hurt under the Indian Penal Code. They were also convicted under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act for offences committed against members of Scheduled Tribes.

The judgment has been welcome by many as 'historic' in the judicial annals of the State of Manipur for the speedy trial and handing down the

harshest punishment available under the law. It is hoped that the judgment will be seen as a future deterrent against violence and crime against women.

Written by Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, IWFNEI

Name: Deukala Kumari Gharti Magar

Ethnicity: Magar

Rolpa district, Nepal

Being a part of the revolution entailed many risks and sacrifices.

I am Deukala Kumari Gharti Magar, forty-one years old, from Jangkot VDC in Rolpa. During the ten-year armed conflict (1996-2006) between the state and the Maoists, I was a committed Maoist carder. Being a part of the revolution entailed many risks and sacrifices. Nevertheless, I chose this path with the aspiration of changing the situation of sharp inequality, oppression and discrimination faced by a large section of the population, including indigenous women.

I became a member of the district-level Nepal Magar Society in 2007. As a member of the Nepal Magar Society, I got an opportunity to participate in the training organized by the AIPP Project through NIWF in 2011. The training was extremely valuable to me because it exposed me to the situation of indigenous peoples, the specific challenges of indigenous women, importance of customary laws and institutions and the importance of women's participation in such institutions. Prior to my participation in the training of AIPP, I was only involved in political activities. After the training, I realized the importance of spreading awareness of customary laws and institutions and women's rights.

The AIPP project also helped us to form a women's network "Magar Mema Bagal Utthan Samaj Rolpa" (Magar Women's Upliftment Society). The network has seven active members. I am the chairperson of the network and Naumali Pun Magar is the vice-chair. The group conducts monthly meetings and collects NRs 50 (0.5 USD dollar) from its members for fund generation. The network mobilizes to mediate during cases of gender-based violence (GBV) in the community.



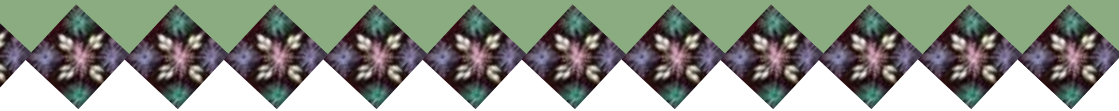
Deukala (NIWF)

I would like to share an incident in my community with reference to the training manual on Empowering Indigenous Women through participation in Customary and Traditional Institutions, provided in 2012 by the AIPP. The training manual has helped our network to resolve many issues in the VDC relating to GBV. The training manual is an important tool that compiles a broad range of important information relating to international human rights instruments, specifically on the rights of women and Indigenous Peoples. National laws, policies, institutions and available remedies relating to women's and indigenous people's issues, gender-based violence, international human rights mechanisms, information on leadership skills and advocacy, format of complaint forms for cases of human rights violations, and the history of the women's movement are all included in the manual.

Last year, a man in the neighbouring community raped a Magar woman. The perpetrator belonged to the 'upper caste' Chhetri community. Following the incident on the 10th of Nov 2012, Naumali Pun Magar, vice chair of the network, called a meeting to discuss the rape case. The meeting had participation of local representatives of all major political parties, community leaders, police and other active members of the community. During the meeting, Naumali used the information regarding laws, international human rights instruments, national policies and mechanisms relating to the rights of women that were listed in the training manual. She held the training manual in her hand and pointed out the specific laws that protected the rights of women.

Naumali proposed a compensation of NRS 50,000 (500 USD) to be paid to the victim by the perpetrator, and an apology to the woman in front of the community. All the participants of the meeting agreed to this proposal and the case was then settled at the local level. Above all, the victim was satisfied with the collective decision led by Naumali. It avoided the long and bureaucratic hassles of the Nepali police and court system. The influence made by the vice-chairperson in the decision has given further recognition to our network in the community.

Translated by Subha Ghale, NIWF



Chapter 3

Indigenous Women in Decision Making Roles

Contributors:

Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, IWFNEI

Shanti Marina Kerketta, AWN



Name: Mukta Horo
Ethnicity: Munda
Ranchi, Mainland India

A woman with intelligence and a deep sense of integrity was born in February 1961 to Father Masihdas Purty and mother Jayanti Purty. She was born in Mukrundi, in the Keyasarjom village from the Ranchi Singhbhum boarder at Ranchi. She started her schooling in Vijaygiri near her village and continued up until 3rd grade. She moved to a boarding school, St. Luke' Balika Vidyalaya at Maranghada, at Ranchi (presently at Khunti District) for further studies. She studied there up to 9th grade when she got involved in a relationship with Junas Horo, a 24 year old boy pursuing his degree course at a local college.

At the tender age of 15 she became a single mother with a baby girl and she had to drop her studies. Suddenly everything in her life changed, the society disowned her and her family. Her parents were under continuous pressure from the community and they were distanced from all kinds of social activities. Meanwhile Junas was sent to jail for two years. For a girl of 15, the agony she went through completely shattered her dreams. The only good thing was that Mukta and Junas got engaged just before he was sent to jail and during this period her parents supported her.

After two long years of patience and determination, she maintained in her own words, "I'll catch my man." She was continuously in touch with Junas while he was in jail. When Junas was released from jail, he wrote a letter asking Mukta's parents to send Mukta to his place in Paan Sak-kam, near Dassam waterfalls, Bundu, at Ranchi. After some time they got married, a baby boy was born and she was happy housewife looking after her family. When her children grew a little older, Mukta's brother-in-law died and since his wife wasn't mentally sound, Mukta had to take charge of their only son too. Responsibility increased and they had to move back to Maranghada for the children's education.

It was in Maranghada, in the Khunti District, that Mukta's real journey started. Her husband Junas was a member of the Indigenous Development Committee. His social activism at times irritated Mukta resulting in

strong differences and a less than peaceful atmosphere at home. Unhappy with her husband's disappearance from the house and him giving more

“Unhappy with her husband's disappearance from the house and him giving more time to social activities, one day she followed him to the meeting which became a turning point in her life.”

time to social activities, one day she followed him to the meeting which became a turning point in her life. The meeting was about the regional legislation Chottanagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 (CNT), which included a discussion on the issue of the Munda people's traditional institution and its role under the Traditional Customary Law; particularly the involvement of women in the CNT Act and customary system. The impact of her first public meeting in Sukanburu was great and a real eye opener. There has been no looking back since then; her keen interest in the social problems and issues and the development of solutions always challenged her.

She decided to devote her entire life for the social cause. Regular meetings and trainings made her smart and strong. Later on, the All India Development Committee was formed and they became a member of this society. Mukta and Junas became active in empowering and strengthening the Parha, in the Khunti area, in the Sonepur Pargana (pargana is an administrative unit).

The main focus of the Committee was to save the community forests and their land from rampant cutting and industrialization. In order to strengthen the movement and to restore indigenous traditional customary systems of governance, Mukta and her family shifted to their native place at Paan Sakkam in 1994. With support from like-minded people Mukta and her husband started mobilizing and organizing the community in and around the village. The implementation of the provisions in the central law *the*

Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Area) Act 1996⁹ (PESA) gave impetus to the existing movement in Maranghada. The movement to save their natural resources – *Jal, Jangal, Jameen* – *water, forest and land* became a strong movement.



Mukta Horo (AWN)

At the self-governance front, under the leadership of Mukta four Tolas (hamlets) came together and established a gram sabha (lowest unit of the local government) and formed a village committee. Seeing the success of this model, other villages followed and organized village committees.

⁹ After the independence of the country in 1947, the government implemented the Panchayati Raj, a local governance system in India. However, it failed to meet the specific needs and aspirations of adivasi (original inhabitants of the land/indigenous peoples) in the 5th and 6th schedule areas. (A large number of areas predominantly inhabited by adivasis had been declared as excluded and partially excluded areas during the British colonial period. Following India's independence, these areas were bought under the 5th and 6th schedules respectively and the constitution of India provides special arrangements for these areas). The Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Area) Act 1996 came into existence after the failure of the Panchayati Raj system in the scheduled area. In the meantime, as required by the PESA in which states with scheduled areas had to enact state legislation, the Jharkhand state enacted a new Panchayat Act in 2001.

Subsequently twelve gram sabha came together to form a Parha. Parha is named after the Munda community's traditional institution, which is organized on clan basis and use to be represented by men only. However in this Parha, gender balance in participation, in both qualitative and quantitative terms is strictly followed.

In 1998, in recognition for her commitment and active involvement in social issues, and her leadership quality, she was crowned as the Parha Raja. A Turban of honour was placed over her head in a traditional ritual, in full public presence, near Dasam waterfall, in Paan Sakkam, This means head or chief of twelve villages namely Paan Sakkam, Bera, Hanjan, Labga, Husrihatu, Murgidih, Dami, Daudih, Taimara, Ardeh, Labda, Pancha and Kolenghatu. Husrihatu Parha is a mixture of communities that includes Horo, Tuti and Hansa. Other communities, including Nai, Kumhar, Lohar, Chamar, Charwaha, and Dalits, were accommodated according to their needs and to help in the rituals of the Munda community.

She is the first and only woman ordinate as Parha Raja in a male dominated society. It was not easy to hold a position of decision making as such. As Mukta advocates for the Adivasi rights, she also underlines the need for development in her group of villages (that is the Khuntkatti area) in the interest of the Adivasi people. The state development schemes have not been extended to these areas because of the disillusion of the state for the scheduled areas and more particularly for the Khuntkatti area. The root of the Khuntkatti system is said to have been established long before the Hindu period (dating back to before the Mugal period) and before British colonial rule in the country.

Her work mainly involves working with the men folk, as she has to deal with issues relating to land, water, the forest and its products, where men folk had authority and command before Mukta. This makes her very special in terms of respect in her community. Her dignity shows in some of her landmark decisions.

One family with a case of incest was excommunicated. The community wanted them to leave the village in this Khuntikatti area without any of their belongings, not even the cloths they wore. Mukta being a woman, sensing this as an inhuman act, resolved the situation and simply asked

them to leave the Khuntkhatti area. After the pronouncement of the judgment she was kind enough to tell them in person to come and collect their belongings at night.

In another incident she recalls police picking up innocent village boys shepherding their herds in the area and putting them into the jail accusing them of highway dacoits. Mukta took a serious note on the situation and called a meeting. They drafted a letter and gave it to the police saying not to pick any of the boys from the area unless the Parha hands them over to the police if found guilty and that they can handle the situation in their area. Both sides agreed to this and thus the problem was solved in a peaceful manner.

Her approach is democratic and she holds regular in meetings that consist of one Munda, one Munda Pahan and two women from each village i.e. fifty per cent participation of women. It means twelve villages, four persons from each village equaling to forty eight persons, which includes one Parha Raja, two men, two women equaling fifty three.

She says there were few cases relating to woman where the accused was warned and fined. She makes sure the women get their share of freedom and rights. Unmarried women are given equal share in their paternal property, which after her death again comes to her brother's family. Similarly if the married woman's husband dies and she has only girl children, the property is transferred in to the wife's name, which after her death would otherwise go back to her husband's brothers. In any case land cannot be sold.



Mukta Horo (AWN)

According to Mukta women in this Khuntkhatti area are capable of taking up important roles in the community. Women's empowerment is associated with knowledge and awareness of the situations around oneself and power of decision-making. Women's representation in the local and traditional institutions within the community is also exceptional as women are seen as equal human beings in their community. She emphasized the need for women's education regarding their rights and with it how they can protect the land, water, forest and make use of its product for the overall growth of the community. She wished if only she could have studied more. Lack of funding is another hindrance in achieving the Khuntkhatti of her dream. Her strong message for today's women is "Equip yourself with knowledge and more technical orientation, know your rights, be humble and poised, the rest shall follow you."

Written by Adivasi Women's Network

Name: Kaireila

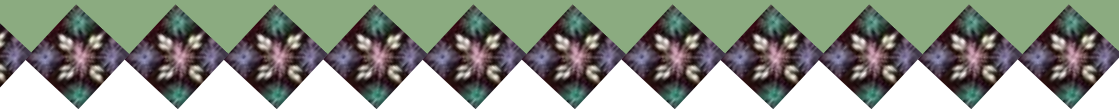
Ethnicity: Naga

Ukhrul district, Northeast India

Indigenous women have always played an important role in sustaining her society. She is in the forefront as a nurturer, care giver and peace keeper and in the production of food, management of the land, natural resources and economy. Yet, political decision-making has continued to elude her and remains the domain of men. Thus, any story of a woman who participates actively in the decision making of a community, stands out.

Kaireila's story is one such story. Like the rest of our history, folktales and songs that have been passed down orally from generation to generation, it is also difficult to give a time frame to her story in the absence of written records. But from the stories as told by her step son, she was actively participating in the village governance as late as the early 20th century.

Kaireila was from the Talui village in the Ukhrul district, Manipur. She was the only child of the chief of the Shimrah clan. She married the Chief of Talui, Minthing Shangcham. It is said that she would drink rice wine



*It is said that she would drink
rice wine from the jug/pot
when the meeting of the vil-
lage council was in session
- instead of pouring it in her
drinking vessel as a woman
should do;*

from the jug/pot when the meeting of the village council was in session - instead of pouring it in her drinking vessel as a woman should do. She carried baskets meant for men across her chest, just like men did, instead of carrying them on her head. When sitting down, she sat cross legged which was unheard of in those days and was not considered the right behaviour of any self-respectable woman. In many ways, she was breaking the norms that had been laid down for women.

For the Nagas, as a custom, once a girl marries, she has to leave her parental home and live with her husband. After she got married, her father came to live with her new family. This was very rare and even rarer among the family of the chief of the clan. Many times she tried to make her father leave her home but he refused to do so. Even when he was needed to perform his duties as the chief of his clan, he chose to stay with her. When he died, Kaireila informed her father's clan so they could perform the burial rituals. But the clan asked her to perform the burial rituals for her father instead. They gave all her father's property to her instead of the legal heir from the Shimrah clan.

*The members
honoured her
judgment.*

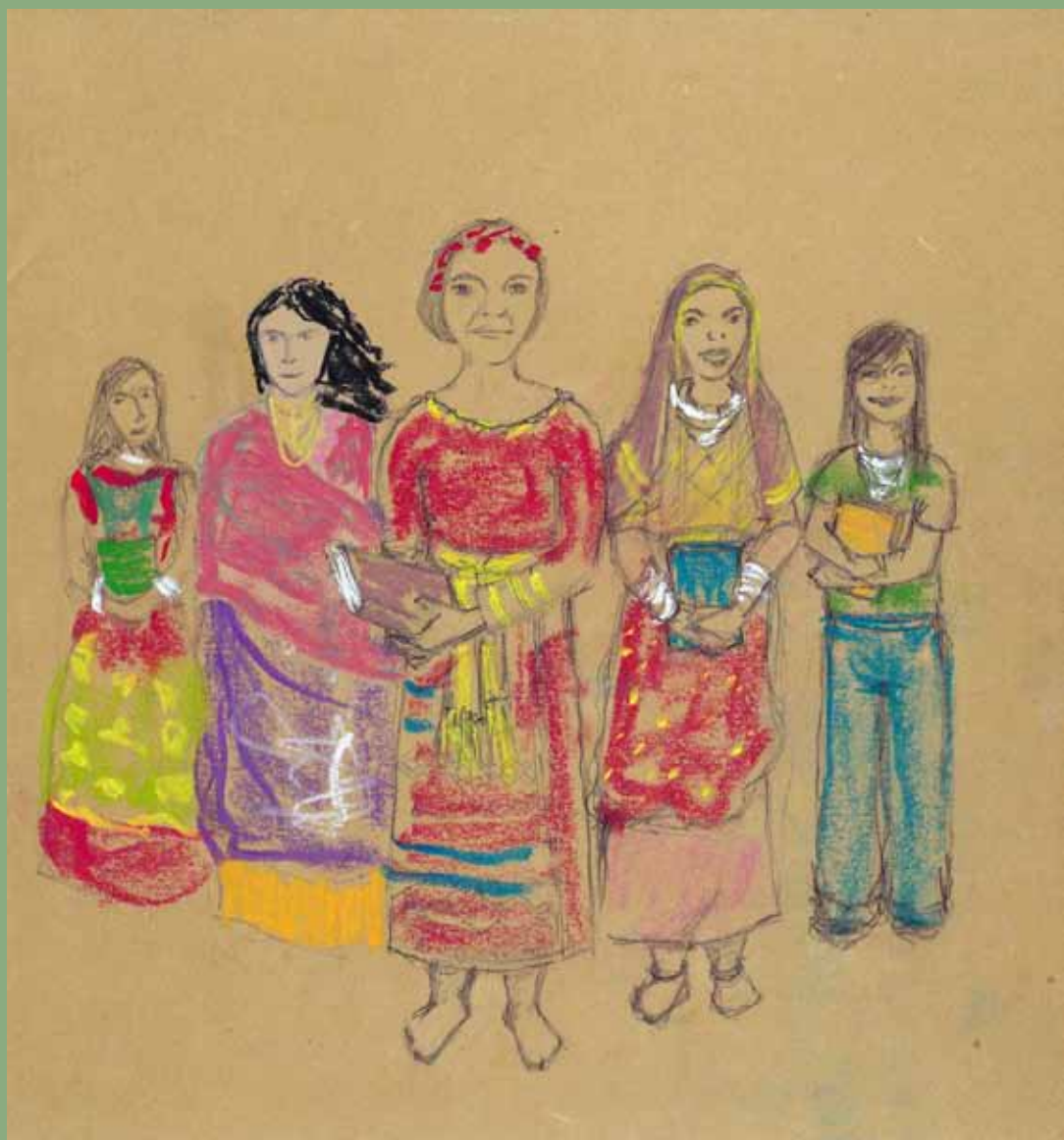
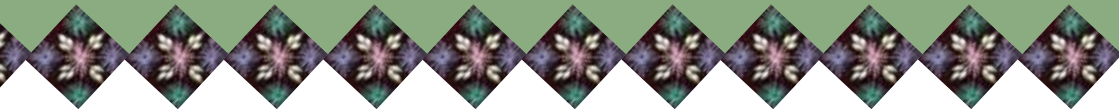
Each Tangkhul village existed as a republic, having its own set of customary laws, traditional institutions, governance structure and territorial boundaries. Each village's governance is looked after by the village chief along with the Village Council with representatives from each clan. After her marriage, she took up the responsibilities of running the village af-

fairs. It is not known whether she was formally handed the responsibilities, but it was only in exceptional situations that we saw women playing an active role in decision making and being accepted as such by men. She was known for her wisdom. She was looked up to by the men from her village and when important matters that concerned the village were discussed, often, the decisions were made depending on her opinion. She would also run the village court and hand out judgments. The members honoured her judgments. When the village council had to make any representation outside the village, Kaireila would travel with the members of the village council.

Kaireila's role in the male domain was not limited to the village affairs but even in her home. Kaireila was issueless so her husband took a second wife, Thingnengla. Three sons were born to Thingnengla: Phungshim, Shailei and Mayarping. Kaireila and her family brought up the three sons and divided the family property, i.e. farms, forest lands and fields among them (which should have been done by her husband). Division of the property is, generally, in the hands of the father. The decision may have been taken by the mother and father together but openly, it is for the father to declare/decide. So, Kaireila's role is exceptional in this regard.

In more ways than one, Kaireila broke the male domain. Her story has been taken as an example against the absence of women in decision making; that women are equally capable as men in making decisions and participating in the traditional institution which even today is run by men with few exceptions.

As narrated by Kaireila's step-grandson to Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, IWFNEI



Chapter 4

Indigenous Women Experiencing Empowerment

Contributors:

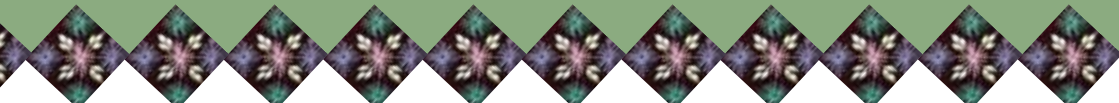
Faith Jane Coteng, CWEARC

Chonchuirinmayo Luithui, IWFNEI

Shanti Marina Kerketta, AWN

Subha Ghale, NIWF

Vernie Yocogan-Diano, CWEARC



Name: Kumari Rajbanshi
Ethnicity: Rajbanshi
Jhapa District, Nepal

“We need women’s participation, not mere representation. Real participation involves raising awareness and awakening in women.”

Kumari Rajbanshi, aged 30, was born as one of six children in a Rajbanshi family. Like the majority of the Rajbanshi community, her family lived in the Ailani land - squatting on government land - of the Garamani Village Development Committee (VDC), Jhapa district, Nepal. Kumari says that although Rajbanshi are indigenous to this area, the state policies on land have displaced them from their own land. The loss of land has also resulted in loss of their indigenous culture, tradition, and livelihood. Kumari narrates the connection of her community to the land, “Rajbanshi are indigenous to this place. The ‘upper-caste’ dominant group of people who migrated from hills tricked our naïve Rajbanshi people into giving away their land to them. Now majority of my people live as squatters.” She says that in Jhapa, the customary practices of Rajbanshi are more prevalent in places where the Rajbanshi population is dense. In places where the Rajbanshi community is thinly spread, the customary practices are hardly present. When asked about the status of women in the Rajbanshi community, she explains, “Women’s status is very low in all spheres - education, health, and awareness about their rights as women and indigenous women. Participation of women in our own customary/traditional institutions is minimal.” Nevertheless, she shares how women are gradually realising the importance of education and becoming more aware about the implication of exclusion in their society.

When Kumari was growing up, her parents used to make their livelihood by selling bhuja, rice puffs, in the local market. Her father used to work occasionally as an agricultural laborer in the neighbourhood and sometimes as a construction worker. It was difficult to raise six children with the meagre income of her parents. When Kumari was 14 years old, her

parents were ready to get her married off. Kumari says it is a common practice to get young girls married off. She considers herself fortunate because her elder brother intervened and convinced their parents that she was too young for marriage. This allowed her to pursue her education and pass her SLC exam (School Leave Certificate, grade 10). This was a big achievement in her Rajbanshi community where the educational level in general is very low.

“Now you should get married and get your citizenship through your husband”

Considering the low educational status of women in her community, it was a big achievement when she passed her SLC exam (grade 10). She recounts a condescending remark by a Brahmin man in her community who said because she was educated; “You should not marry a Rajbanshi now”. Later, when she went to the district office to apply for her citizenship, the same man tried to discourage her from getting her citizenship and said, “Now you should get married and get your citizenship through your husband”. She shares how it is common for women from her community to encounter such harassment by men from dominant groups. How women who are dark-skinned and have Rajbanshi features still face harassment and discrimination based on the intersectionality of ethnicity, gender and class.

After her SLC exam she had the financial burden to make some income for herself. She joined the local radio -- Kanchanjunga FM – hoping to make some income. She and five other colleagues from the Rajbanshi community were hired as trainee correspondents. Although she and her colleagues worked hard to gather stories for the radio program, they were not given a single penny for the work they did for the entire two years they worked for the station. She says that the main coordinator, who was a Brahmin man, exploited them.

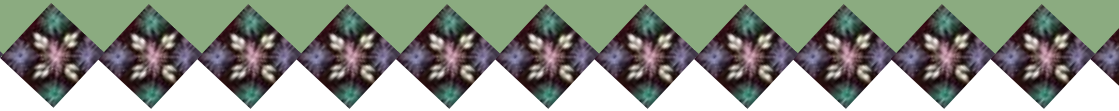
She had enrolled in the government college at the same time and although she joined to pursue her education, she did not have enough financial support to prioritise and continue her education. After two years she quit her work in the local radio and joined hands with a group of Rajbanshi youths

to publish a local newspaper in the Rajbanshi language. Although they had five girls and eight men in the team, she felt that the women were discriminated against by the men and not given important decision making positions. For example, all the women were given the responsibility of news correspondents while the men took the more important positions as editors. Realising the discrimination faced by the women, she left her work after two years so that she could form an organization solely for Rajbanshi women. She was determined to do something to change the situation. She says, "If women remain discriminated in every front, they won't be liberated." She gathered 11 more women from her Rajbanshi community to establish an organization to address the challenges faced by Rajbanshi women. Based on their own experience, the goals of their organization were to raise awareness among Rajbanshi women and to also help find job opportunities for women.

She collected Rs 100 (approx. 1 US dollar) from each member and a total amount of Rs 1100. With the funds they were able to register and establish Rajbanshi Mahila Samaj (Rajbanshi Women's Community) as an NGO on 5th September 2005 in the Jhapa district. Similarly, Kumari and her friends were able to raise funds of NRs 15,000 (approx. 150 US dollar) for the organization by performing traditional singing and dancing during Tihar festival. With the funds, Kumari as a Chairperson of the Rajbanshi Mahila Samaj and Nirmala Rajbanshi, treasurer, travelled to Kathmandu to register their organization at the Social Welfare Council and also to get affiliated with the National Indigenous Women's Federation. "It was a great moment for my organization to be part of a national-level organization like NIWF, which is working for the rights of indigenous women," says Kumari. Now Rajbanshi Mahila Samaj also operates in the Morang and Sunsari districts through their regional branch offices known as district councils. The district council monitors and supports Rajbanshi women at the Village Development Committee level.



Rajbanshi Mahila Samaj (NIWF)



The first event organized by her NGO was a small gathering of around 50 people of the Rajbanshi community to discuss the future course of their organization. They had invited men and women from a wide range of backgrounds such as teachers, local leaders, social workers etc. The ideas and support they got from the community continues till this day.

Now through Rajbanshi Mahila Samaj, Kumari has made a platform to advocate for the rights of Rajbanshi women by getting support through various organisations. Through support from organizations like National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN), United Nation Development Programme (UNDP), TEWA, and National Indigenous Women's Federation (NIWF), Rajbanshi Mahila Samaj has delivered training for Rajbanshi women in the Jhapa, Morgan and Sun-sari districts. The trainings have covered a wide range of issues, such as the "Role of Rajbansi Women in the Constituent Assembly", ILO 169, UN Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and 1820.

In 2010, Kumari was elected as the Secretary for Public Relations and Organisational Outreach of NIWF. She considers it one of the biggest achievements of her life. One of the highlights of her experiences as a secretary at NIWF, was her exposure to the activities of the AIPP Project, *Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions*. Participating in the trainings was an eye-opener for her. She shares her excitement, "It had never occurred to me that understanding our indigenous culture, customary laws, questioning the role of women in our traditional institutions, weighing the strengths as well as the limitations of the customary institutions, was a way towards understanding ourselves, it was a way towards our empowerment. I realized that Rajbanshi women need to begin with claiming our space and questioning discrimination in our own customary institutions and Rajbanshi society, before we demand inclusion in state institutions." It was this realization that motivated Kumari to initiate similar training and awareness for the women in her community through her Rajbanshi Mahila Samaj. She shared the information and knowledge she had gained during the AIPP training with all the staff and members of her organization so that they could transfer the knowledge to other Rajbanshi women in Jhapa, Morang and Sunsari.



Kumari Rajbanshi (centre) (NIWF)

As a change agent in her Rajbanshi community, as a wife, and a mother of one, Kumari is a source of inspiration. Realising the importance of education for women, she recently enrolled for plus two (intermediate level) at Geeta Mata College in Kathmandu. She is currently in her first year and hopes to be able to complete her education with flying colours. She wants to continue working for women in her community throughout her life.

As told to Subha Ghale, NIWF

Name: Rose¹⁰

Ethnicity: Bontoc

Mountain Province, Philippines

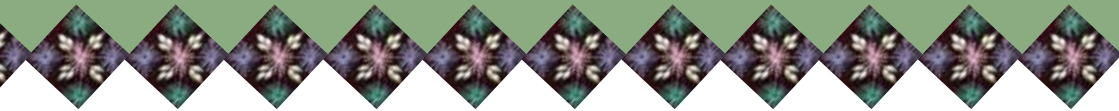
“In my whole life as a mother, a public school teacher and a woman, I never came across human rights”, she conveys. And she was with children, with mothers, with women most of the time. She went on to say, “I envy

¹⁰ Name changed

participants here who are peasant women but are more aware and articulate on women's human rights, than professionals like us who do not have the awareness." Such were Mother Rose's words during the skills-share on indigenous women's leadership on August 2012, seemingly an enormous awakening for her. That was her 9th month of involvement in the project. The contact with Mother Rose was made during the data gathering for the baseline data of her community Calutit, from November to December 2011. She was included in the list of trainees in the inter-community training on indigenous women's human rights and on leadership skills in Bontoc (second year of the project), which was conducted in February 2012. It was her first training on indigenous women's human rights in her lifetime. From thereon, she sustained her involvement in all project activities in Calutit, in the community seminars, community meetings and dialogues and community networking and mobilization. She even joined one of the inter-community trainings in Sagada in 2012. She did not only limit her active involvement in the project but on other mobilizations and public fora organized by provincial organizations in the Mountain Province, Binnadang and the Cordillera Peoples Alliance.

Mother Rose hails from a traditional indigenous upbringing in Calutit, Bontoc where she was born on the 29th of October 1932 in Calutit, Bontoc. She is the last child of five siblings. Pounding the rice grains and fetching water were her early training and daily routine as a child. Her father worked as a security guard after his service to the US Army during the Spanish-American War, making her family's status different in their village. Her first teachers were nuns from the Roman Catholic Church who taught them the Niponggo language. Among the five siblings, she was the only one who dared to go to school. The interest for school at that time was low; parents would prefer their children to help them in agricultural production. Because Mother Rose showed her strong desire for school, she made it. According to her, none of her sisters and brothers demonstrated the same interest for school. While in school, she lived in the "Funyag" or the convent during her school days where most of the local pupils were kept.

She recounts that while in Grade 2, they evacuated to the mountains as the Japanese - American war raged. The houses and the convent used for the school, and which housed the school children, were bombed. Only the building of the Anglican's All Saints Parish remained standing



“It was a common knowledge that there was an ‘exclusive’ building where comfort women were placed and where the Japanese soldiers go whenever they like”,

in town. “From the tunnels that were our shelter, I witnessed all the terrors of war. It was a common knowledge that there was an ‘exclusive’ building where comfort women were placed and where the Japanese soldiers go whenever they liked”, Mother Rose narrates. Mother Rose was with her family and other members of the community who

evacuated for safety. They did the evacuation whenever bombings were done. Once calm returned, they rushed back to the village to check what, especially of their food resources, remained. She witnessed dead bodies of soldiers and even village mates who were not able to escape the bombings. There was hunger, as the village folks could not concentrate on their agricultural production. Hunger eventually led to certain diseases like diarrhoea, which caused death especially among the children.

When the war ended, Mother Rose continued her study at the Bontoc public school and stayed in All Saints dormitory until she graduated in grade 6. The teachers were American missionaries who taught them English, which was a shift from the Niponggo instruction that she had in the Catholic mission. Mother Rose recalls, “Transferees were not accepted to the high school run by the Catholic Church as the school’s rule so I went to Kalinga Academy along with my friends. The school is located in the adjacent province of Kalinga. But the tribal wars placed us at risk there, so I transferred to Saint Mary’s High School in Sagada”. Tribal wars, which were usually sparked by boundary and territorial conflicts, were common at that time between Kalinga and Bontoc tribes. Sagada, an adjacent town to Bontoc was one of the centres developed by the American missionaries.

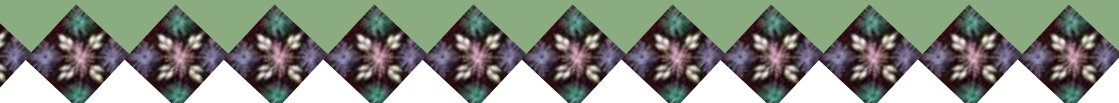
She graduated in high school in 1953 through a scholarship provided by Miss Davis, an American missionary. After high school, her father received his pension from being a US scout so he sent Mother Rose to college. She enrolled at the Baguio Colleges Foundation, taking up an education course. In college, she wanted to take part in school activities. She got elected as an officer in their class but was intimidated to run for campus-level leadership since most of the officers were males. After college, she took the competitive examination for teachers and passed it.

“My first teaching experience was in All Saints School here in Bontoc when I was 22 years old. As a teacher, I did not get any negative remarks and kept a good standing”, she proudly shares. Her next assignment was in a remote upland Bontoc village, Maligcong where she was the Teacher-In-Charge. It was there that she met her husband who was also a teacher. “We got married when I was 26 years old and we were blessed with four girls and three boys”, she shares.

From a gripping past, Mother Rose suddenly shifts to a sad and bad past. It must have taken a lot of mustered courage on the part of Mother Rose to share this part of her story. Her husband became a drunkard, gambler and used other vices that were hardly found in the interior communities. He did not even help in bringing their children to school. From a school teacher, he became the director of the provincial electric cooperative, the Mountain Province Electric Cooperative (MOPRECO), which made him arrogant and irresponsible as a father. “I can’t blame my children who wanted him to go back to his village in Maligcong to fix his attitude and lifestyle”, Mother Rose expresses. She did not separate from her husband but that arrangement of sending him back to his own village was to give him a lesson. On the part of Mother Rose, it was an assertion of her freedom from pain and trouble from an irresponsible husband.

“My father was my support, he took care of my children and helped me in many ways”, she presents with a sense of nostalgia in her voice. At the height of her husband’s irresponsibility, Mother Rose was sending their children to high school and college. Alas, her strongest edifice in life, her father, died. Mother Rose doubled her efforts in making both ends meet. “I always owe an amount to everyone in our place. My last son pitied me so he stopped going to school and did whatever odd jobs available just to help me and his siblings when he was still in grade 3”, she laments. When her son reached 20, he took and passed the examination of TESDA (Technical Education and Skills Development Authority) as a welder. At present, he works as a professional welder in Saudi Arabia. Mother Rose felt how each of her children shared in the sacrifice to get them out of challenging times and finish their degrees in college. “It’s my greatest gain that all my children finished their own degrees”, she stated with pride.

Mother Rose taught for 40 years in Bontoc and in Sadanga, Mountain



Province. She retired at the age of 64 in 1996. From then on, she felt liberated from so many obligations. It was only then that she joined any organization like the retired teachers association in Bontoc, senior citizens, Calutit women's organization and now Pospos Finachnag Women's Organization. As a teacher, she was moulded not to refuse the calls of duty. Yet she now adds that it is important to be equally assertive. "As a leader, I see to it that all members are cooperating well, working and helping each other for everybody's betterment", she states. Her grandchildren tell her that it's time for her to rest but she tells them that she does not like to be in an idle situation.

Now, she rises with pride that at age 81, she can still share more with some women who are sacrificing and fighting for our rights. "I am so thankful that this was introduced to me, since in my entire life, I haven't learned these rights that we are learning now", she stresses. Her involvement in this awareness and capacity-building project of indigenous women's rights is indeed an awakening, an empowering experience. It has enabled her to share her life experiences and how she surmounted life's challenges. Before, when there was a case of violence against women, amicable settlement was the automatic response, which was not solving everything. In an ongoing case that her organization along with Binnadang is working with, she boldly expresses, "I cannot imagine how amicable settlement can pay for this heinous case of an eight year old, who was repeatedly raped by their neighbour. The perpetrators are wealthy and they say they can pay for everything. We are organized to help victims who cannot speak of their bad experiences". Both the child and her rapists are Mother Rose's village mates in Calutit. For Mother Rose, she is convinced to do everything for this child whose case is being ignored by the judicial system.

"I cannot imagine how amicable settlement can pay for this heinous case of this eight year old who was repeatedly raped by their neighbour. The perpetrators are wealthy and they say they can pay for everything. We are organized to help victims who cannot speak of their bad experiences".

Furthermore, she is convinced that justice has to be served in the fastest time to get the child to a new life. The case has been dragged out in the court. The rape case involves a 58-year-old resident of Calutit and his grandson who is about 20

years old. The rape that happened several times occurred from December 2012 to March 2013.

“With all my sacrifices, care and love for my children, my work and my life, I can say that all of these are worth my sacrifice. I am now enjoying the rewards of my personal struggles. I still have to share these rewards as a better-late-than-never indigenous woman human rights defender”, conveys Mother Rose.

Written by Faith Jane Coteng and edited by Vernie Yocogan-Diano, CWEARC

Name: Samjhana Lama

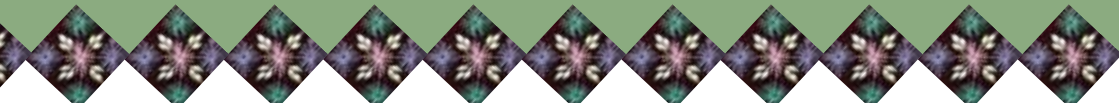
Ethnicity: Tamang

Kavre district, Nepal

I am Samjhana Lama, 27 years old, born in Panchkhal Village Development Committee (VDC), ward number 6 in the Kavre district. Although we are originally from Jaisitho VDC, Ward 7, in Kavre, my father moved to Panchkhal VDC because it is much more developed than Jaisitho in terms of facilities like roads, electricity, and schools. The Panchkhal VDC where I was brought up is predominantly Brahmin, the dominant ‘upper caste’ people. As a minority group I was not very familiar with our Tamang culture, tradition and language. We ended up adopting the culture and language of the dominant group. One of the many discriminations I faced while growing up was being labelled as ‘bhote’¹¹, a derogatory term used by dominant groups for all indigenous groups.

Unlike many people from the Tamang community who have not been able to receive formal education, my father has completed his School Leaving Certificate (SLC) (grade 10) while my mother studied till grade 6. Aware about the importance of education, my parents supported my

¹¹ Bhote is one of the indigenous groups of Nepal. However the term ‘Bhote’ is used in a derogatory manner by the dominant caste groups to refer to Indigenous Peoples. The derogatory term is problematic because it is insulting towards the Bhote community, and secondly it also reflects the attitude of dominant groups towards the indigenous groups. By lumping all indigenous communities under one ethnic group, the dominant group fails to acknowledge and respect the diversity of the indigenous community.



siblings and me to go to school. My parents made their income by running a small retail shop that sold food items. Additionally, my parents engaged in farm work, while my mother worked as a mid-wife and a social worker.

I was the first Tamang woman from the Jaisitho VDC to pass SLC exam in 2004.

I was the first Tamang woman from the Jaisitho VDC to pass the SLC exam in 2004. After my SLC, I started my job as a teacher in Bhagwati Primary School in Jaisitho VDC in

Kavre. I was also the first Tamang woman to be working as a teacher in that school. After working for two years I was compelled to resign from my job because of the pressure created by the school management. There was a conflict of interest among some members from the political parties who influenced the principal of the school to replace me by hiring someone connected to them. Although I was extremely disheartened, I had the strength to move on with my life. After that incident I joined Intermediate Level in Education (plus twelve) and completed it after two years in 2008. While I was doing my Bachelors first year in 2009, I got married.

Following my marriage I had to move to Anaikot VDC, ward 9, in Kavre, where the majority of the people were Tamang unlike in Panchkhal VDC where I grew up. Everyone in my husband's family spoke in the Tamang language [my husband could speak Nepali] and in the beginning I had difficulty understanding and communicating. But now I am glad that I can understand what they are speaking. I wish I knew how to speak my language. The changes I experienced in my life after marriage – change of location, motherhood, and added responsibilities – would not have been smooth if my husband was not supportive. I am fortunate to have a life partner who always encourages me to be independent and work for my community. Soon after my marriage, my husband left for Qatar as a migrant worker. He comes home during his holidays.

In 2010 I began working as a social mobiliser for the Local Governance Community Development Project¹² (LGCDP) of the Government of Nepal, which is being implemented in all the VDCs in Kavre. Being

¹²The Local Governance Community Development Project (LGCDP) has been implemented throughout Nepal since 2008. The project is executed by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MoFALD) through support from a broad range of donor agencies and development partners. The goal of the project is to contribute towards poverty reduction in the country through improved and more inclusive local governance and service delivery.

selected as a social mobiliser was an extremely proud moment for me because I was selected among 12 candidates who had applied for the position. This marked the beginning of my journey as a social mobiliser in my community. My role in the project is to develop yearly proposals for running women's development activities in Anaikot VDC that comprises nine Wards. I help the community to identify needs and challenges and develop activities that are needed in the community. Most of the activities focus on training and capacity building of women. However, the project doesn't have an exclusive focus on indigenous women and is targeted for all the women in the community.

One of the activities under the LGCDP project was to organise an awareness class for women in the VDC. Realising the gap in awareness level among Tamang women in my community, I decided to run an awareness class for Tamang women in the community. I was able to share knowledge on the issues of indigenous women, rights of women and violence against women including skills on organising and mobilising women.

In 2011, I was involved in the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) project through NIWE. The first training I received was on the importance of customary and traditional institutions for Indigenous Peoples. Until that training, I had not realised the significance of customary laws and institutions for our community. Understanding the interrelationship between our culture and our identity was an eye opener for me. Now I want to explore more about my culture, learn my language and be able to pass it on to my little son.

Now I want to explore more about my culture, learn my language and be able to pass it on to my little son.

Another event of the AIPP project was to build the capacity of indigenous women to network and mobilise in the community. As a social mobiliser I was inspired to form a network of indigenous women in Anaikot, where I now live. Following the networking and mobilisation activity of AIPP, I led the formation of a women's network, Mahila Janajati Sangh -- Indigenous Women's Organisation, in Anaikot in 2012. The network has 19 members and is headed by Dil Maya Tamang. I shared the knowledge on customary laws and institutions I had received from the AIPP project

in the network. I have recognised the value of creating awareness about indigenous culture and identity. Having knowledge and awareness about our indigenous culture and identity is extremely important for safeguarding our dignity and rights. Knowing ourselves is the starting point of empowerment. Skills and other kinds of capacity building initiatives need to be followed by that.



Meeting of indigenous women, led by Samjhana Lama (NIWF)

While I was forming the network of indigenous women in the community, I faced resistance from the dominant group (Brahmins in this case). They questioned me, “why is there a need to form a separate group for Tamang women?” They saw such mobilisation as a threat to the opportunities they have been accessing and enjoying. Nonetheless, I explained to them that it is important to organise and empower those women in our community who are at the bottom. I stressed that indigenous women are lagging behind in every area such as education, health, employment and other basic services. I told them that due to the lack of access to opportunities and services most of the indigenous women don’t even have the capacity to introduce themselves. After I explained, we were able to garner support from some people from the dominant groups as well.

This year I made an attempt to access two categories of VDC fund allocated for women and indigenous people through the Mahila Janajati Sangh. Although I was not able to access the fund this year, I am hopeful of receiving around two lakhs (NRS 200,000; approx. 2000 US dollars) of VDC fund through the Mahila Janajati Sangh by next year. Because of my experience as a social mobiliser in the government project, I have the professional capacity to write proposals in the required format, and navigate the bureaucratic system to access the fund. Otherwise accessing the VDC fund can be an extremely bureaucratic and complicated process for women who have not had such similar experiences, exposure and educational qualification. Having the knowledge and skills to navigate the bureaucratic maze is a form of power because it is through these hegemonic structures and loopholes that power is monopolised and abused. If we get the fund next year, we will use it to organise awareness raising, leadership and skill development training, and training on customary institutions and laws for indigenous women.

The mobilisation of indigenous women has drawn attention to the issues of indigenous women. For instance, Tamang men in the community have shown interest to support indigenous women in our community. They have committed to allocate some portion of the VDC fund [meant for Indigenous Peoples] they will receive next year for indigenous women's development. Although indigenous men have been accessing the VDC fund for indigenous peoples in the past, they have never organised activities for indigenous women. Being able to garner such kinds of support is a big achievement for us.

I am fortunate to be able to draw on my skills as a mobiliser in the LGCDP project and trainee in the AIPP project to be able work towards addressing the issues of indigenous women in my community.

As told to Subha Ghale, NIWF

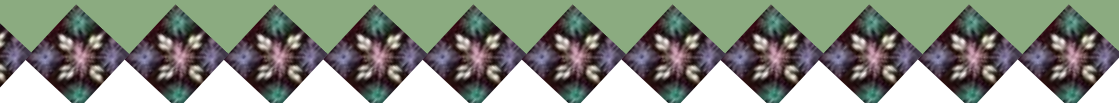
Name: Sapna

Ethnicity: Oraon

Khunti district, Mainland India

SAPNA in English means **DREAM**.

Hailing from a village called Maina, district Jaspur, in the state of Chattisgarh. She was born to Alexander Kujur and Teresa Kujur. She has three



brothers and two sisters. Sapna belongs to the Oraon Community. Her parents made no discrimination among their children and they were all raised equally.

Her ambition was to become a nun and serve the community, but each and every dream of hers came to a standstill when her father passed away after she finished her 9th standard examination. Her family went through a huge financial crisis and the children had to put off their educational journey and had to look for odd jobs to survive. The family owned some land but it was not enough to feed seven mouths. Days passed on, without any bustle; dreams died, everything seemed to be very calm from outside, just waiting for the time for emotional eruption.

One day a missed call from an unknown number on her mobile phone added wings to her destiny and she jumped to the 2nd phase of her life. After a brief courtship over the phone, in April 2010 she left her paternal home to start a new life with Jolen Bhengra, a young boy from the Uyur village in the Khunti district of the Jharkhand State. Later she found out that one of their common friends had given Sapna's number to Jolen because he wanted them to become friends. Jolen Bhengra belongs to the Munda Community; his educational level was matriculate and at the time when Sapna came to live with Jolen Bhengra, he was working in the army camp as a security man. The family mainly depended on agricultural based yields. It was a live in relationship until they officially got married in February 2013, with a baby girl – Simren, already one and half years old. It was a very bold decision on Sapna's part to come and live in a culturally different society. A different language and a different culture meant a lot of adjustments, which she quickly adopted. Jolen's family supported her and soon she became well conversant in Munda.

She was fully absorbed in her daily chores of life, unaware of the happenings in society, until one day she attended a meeting on women's issues, organized in her village by the Adivasi Women's Network (AWN). This meeting was a turning point in her life; there was no looking back after that. It seemed to be a golden opportunity for her to fulfil her begotten dream of serving the community. She participated in project activities Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions of the Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) and AWN. Through involvement in this project she became one of the main social mobilizers in her village. In her words, "Before attending the training I had no knowledge

of any of the issues in the community, but this training has helped me to gain knowledge on various issues which has strengthened me and I feel empowered. Before I was not able to talk or express myself but now I am able to talk with the government officials and am able to facilitate any meeting.”



Sapna (on the left) on International Women's Day in Khunti 2013 (AWN)

Though Sapna is under matriculate, she is smart. She is a quick learner, good speaker, actor and singer. She has even penned down some of her songs in the Mundari language.

She gleams with confidence and can now handle the issues in her community. For instance, there was a case of trafficking, where a minor girl had been lured and sent to work outside Jharkhand by a dalal (middle man). Sapna, along with another social mobilizer, identified a woman from the same community as the dalal. They summoned the dalal to be present in a meeting under Gram Panchyat and tried to persuade the said person to bring back the child. This effort proved to be futile as the dalal denied any involvement in the case. Therefore, the women of the community, led by Sapna, came together and lodged a First Information Report (FIR), which they had learnt about from this training. The police came into force and took the suspected dalal, pressuring her until she admitted her involvement and also named some of the other dalals involved in the case. After interrogation, the police left the person at night on bond, with the understanding that she would bring back the child – failing to do so

would result in a distress warrant and the arrest of her family members. The person disappeared but after a few days the child came back safely.

Sapna's ability to visualize and respond to things rationally had won her the prestigious post of Up-Pradhan/Vice President, in Gram Sabha (local government at the village level and a typically male dominated seat). She is also a recognized sahiya and treasurer of Health Samiti at the village level. In the past, women's participation in the Uyr Gram Sabha meeting was negligible. Therefore to make the women's issues and voices heard in gram sabha, Sapna and other mobilizers have made the attendance of women mandatory. Failing will result in a fine of Rs.10/- or they have to provide written permission for unintended absence. This strategy worked well and now women's active participation is evident and they have a say in these meetings. Over the past months the women are the ones who are carrying out the proceedings of the gram sabha, as the men seem to have less interest in social work. Consequently women are now maintaining the attendance, cash and minute register.



Sapna Bhengra (AWN)

Women have the capacity to bring about the change and development in the society. The only thing they have to do is a single step out of their shell.

Sapna wants to be in a continuous learning process and to emerge as a strong and good leader. She

wants the women of the gram sabha to be aware and fight for their rights. Many people have threatened her husband saying that she would be made a widow but she is not deterred by such threats. The only obstacle she faces is that of inactive males in the community and unsupportive colleagues. She said that her father in law really supports her efforts and he often says that 'everybody is working to cheat others but you are working for a good cause' and encourages her to work further along these lines. She says, "Women have the capacity to bring about change and development in society. The only thing they have to do is a single step out of their shell. Active participation in the meetings strengthens and empowers one self and unity with others."

Written by Adivasi Women's Network

AIPP at a glance

The Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) is a regional organization founded in 1988 by indigenous peoples' movements as a platform for solidarity and cooperation. AIPP is actively promoting and defending indigenous peoples' rights and human rights; sustainable development and management of resources and environment protection. Through the years, AIPP has developed its expertise on grassroots capacity building, advocacy and networking from local to global levels and strengthening partnerships with indigenous organizations, support NGOs, UN agencies and other institutions. At present, AIPP has 47 members from 14 countries in Asia with 7 indigenous peoples' national alliances/networks and 35 local and sub-national organizations including 16 are ethnic-based organizations, five (5) indigenous women and four (4) are indigenous youth organizations.

Through our Indigenous Women (IW) programme, AIPP aims to empower indigenous women through networking, education and capacity building activities with the overall goal for indigenous women to assert, promote and protect their rights as women and as indigenous peoples.

Our Vision

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

Our Mission

AIPP strengthen the solidarity, cooperation and capacities of indigenous peoples in Asia to promote and protect their rights, cultures and identities, and their sustainable resource management system for their development and self-determination.

Our Programmes

Our main areas of work among the different programmes are information dissemination, awareness raising, capacity building, advocacy and networking from local to global. Our programmes are:

- Human Rights Campaign and Policy Advocacy
- Regional Capacity Building
- Environment
- Indigenous Women
- Research and Communication Development
- (Indigenous Youth.)

AIPP is accredited as an NGO in special consultative status with the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and as observer organization with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Green Climate Fund (GCF), Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). AIPP is a member of the International Land Coalition (ILC).

'The indigenous women's voices and "her stories", as an integral part of the women's movement and indigenous peoples' movement, remain faint. This reflects the overall conditions of indigenous women as relatively more marginalized, discriminated against and dis-empowered at all levels. It also illustrates the urgent need to strengthen indigenous women's organizations and institutions, as well as their leadership and effective participation, in all matters that concern them as women and as indigenous peoples.'

Joan Carling, Secretary General, AIPP

HerStory of Empowerment, Leadership and Justice is a result of the tireless dedication of our partners from indigenous communities in the Philippines, Northeast India, Mainland India, and Nepal. This publication is a reflection of the hard work of everyone involved in the Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions project, especially the women in the communities we have been engaging with over the past three years. Here, 18 of these women have bravely shared their stories to empower and promote the solidarity of all indigenous women.

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