Unheard and Unseen No More: Asian Indigenous Women Tell Their Stories and Recommendations to the World

“Despite the struggles already faced by indigenous women, there is still a long way to go, but we are strong and resilient. We will continue to fight for these issues.”

Lucy Mulenke of the International Indigenous Women’s Forum (FIMI) declared during the Asian Indigenous Women’s Network (AIWN) side event conducted on 27 April as part of the 20th United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) that took place on 19 to 30 April 2021.
The side event, entitled “Unheard and Unseen: Indigenous Women’s Path to Empowerment and Sustainable Development,” highlighted the plight and contributions of indigenous women in Asia in the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals.

According to Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, AIWN convener and the former UN Special Rapporteur for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, “There is a lot to be said about the positive work that indigenous women are doing in relation to the world’s collective fulfillment of the SDGs.” She also underscored the pivotal necessity of further empowering them and protecting their rights.

Uttara Tripura of the Women Resource Network (WRN) in Bangladesh asserted that, indeed, indigenous women’s organizations need to enhance their analytical capacity to clearly understand their context as they formulate effective responses to the challenges of discrimination, poverty, and violence [against women]. “Governments and related agencies, including indigenous women’s’ organizations, should take actions to change their unjust systems that are discriminatory against women, particularly indigenous women, creating effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions to realize SDG 16,” she stressed.

She shared that the WRN was able to successfully increase the participation of indigenous women in the different local government institutions and assert their appointment in various traditional governing bodies in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in her country. She added that, through the Network, rampant violence against women in the area was highlighted in various civil society platforms’
work, analyzing and identifying its root cause to generate sustainable solutions for this atrocity.

Subsequently, Chhing Chippa Lhomi of the Nepal Indigenous Women’s Federation, the Nepal Indigenous Women’s Forum, and the Center for Indigenous Peoples Research and Development stressed the same need for indigenous women’s inclusion in the different decision-making processes while combating the discrimination made against them in the community.

“There is definitely a need to recognize women as political actors and not mere beneficiaries.”

Meanwhile, Vasavi Kiro, an Uraon representing Jashpur Jans Vikas Sanstha, Jharkhand and Adivasi Mahila Mahasangh CG Indigenous Women India Network, and Torang Trust, appealed for the criminalization of these acts of discrimination and violence against indigenous women. She mentioned that many indigenous women in India were being unfairly persecuted as witches, aside from the other rampant incidences of domestic violence carried out against them, and that “various policy-making bodies must help stop these crimes.”

Indeed, “Indigenous women face numerous struggles as they reclaim their traditional roles in achieving communal peace, standing at the forefront to diminish conflict,” Kesheli Chischi, a Suma Naga from the Indigenous Women’s Forum of North East India, concurred.

Ancilla Twiseda Mecer, a Dayak representing Yayasan Karya Social Pancur Kasih-Institut Dayakologi, repeated the call for the active participation of indigenous women in all decision-making processes.
This includes, among others, “the lack of many indigenous women’s access to their basic rights,” according to Angelina Ortiz. Ortiz, a Mansaka from the southern Philippines, representative of the Silingang Dapit sa Sidlakang Mindanao (SILDAP-SE) also asserted the necessity of creating programs specifically intended for indigenous women and youth. This was seconded by Maribeth Bugtong-Biano of the AIWN secretariat who illustrated that “Indigenous women in Asia are experiencing fundamental challenges including the lack of recognition as indigenous women and access and inclusion to decision-making bodies.” She, then, restated AIWN’s primary aim of ensuring that “indigenous women are not left behind.”

Yon Fernandes Larrinoa, leader of the Indigenous Peoples’ Team of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), could not agree more. He underscored the necessity of indigenous women to harness an “informed decision to forward their inclusion and recognition” in the different decision-making bodies. At the same time, he related the need to address the issues of climate change, food insecurity, and population increase by adopting indigenous practices and indigenous food systems to achieve sustainable development.
Beatrice Duncan of the United Nations Women enthused that “[UN Women believes] that every indigenous woman and girl should receive the highest form of education.” She emphasized that having better education is a key element to empowering indigenous women and eradicating the myriad forms of abuses perpetrated against them.

“The world has a lot to learn from indigenous women,” Duncan declared.

The AIWN side event is a key derivative of the two book volumes titled as this online seminar which showcase the struggles faced by Asian indigenous women and their corresponding responses to these challenges. With support from FIMI and the Indigenous Women’s Fund (AYNI), these volumes were co-published by AIWN and Tebtebba and are now available for download through both the AIWN and Tebtebba websites.

The event was led by various panel speakers from the different indigenous peoples in Asia and several panel reactor representatives from FIMI, FAO, and UN Women.

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