

“We Must Combine Our Efforts”



In recognition of the similarity of the struggles Indigenous women face around the world, we recently had the privilege of talking with Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, a Kankanaey Igorot from the Cordillera region of the Philippines. She is the past chairperson of the Cordillera Peoples' Alliance, a coalition of Indigenous peoples in the Cordillera, Northern Philippines. She is Executive Director of the Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center, Inc., an NGO doing education, organizing, and projects among Indigenous women in the region.

Interview with Victoria Tauli-Corpuz

Tell us about the founding of the Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center.

Indigenous peoples in our region of the Philippines began to organize in the mid 1970s when the World Bank funded construction of four large dams along our Big Chico River. This project would have relocated 300,000 Bontoc and Kalinga peoples, but these people successfully fought against it. After this struggle, organizations were started on the local and provincial levels. The Cordillera Peoples' Alliance, which is the regional federation of these organizations, was organized in 1984. Although women were very much a part of this struggle, they didn't have their own organizations. So in 1985, we thought it was time to organize our own women's center to train women to become leaders in their own right. We created The Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center and took the lead in establishing organizations in the region.

What is the primary purpose of the Cordillera Women's Education and Resource Center?

First, we wanted our women to take a more active role in the struggle for the defense of our ancestral lands and for self determination. So we attempt to bring in more women and educate them on these issues. At the same time, we are aware that women are marginalized. In our traditional communities, Indigenous decision-making structures are very male dominated. We felt this was not good for women, and therefore efforts should be made to improve this situation. Women must be equipped to participate more effectively in the community decision-making process. And thirdly, in many of our communities agriculture, which is the main economic activity, relies heavily on women. But when it comes to cash crop production, or when corporations hire, women are marginalized. When, for instance, the mines hire workers, they hire

only men, and the women become housewives. As housewives, women are not part of the community's economic activity as they are when they are subsistence farmers. We are studying how these modern developments have further marginalized women.

Tell us more about the traditional role of women in your community.

Well, as I said, the women are the subsistence farmers. They are the ones who fetch water, keep the seeds, and take care of the children. Childrearing is sometimes shared since women go to the fields, then the men stay in the village and take care of the babies.

Where do you believe machismo, or male domination, came from in your society?

For us, as the majority population, machismo was introduced by colonization. Before colonization, although they were not part of the formal decision-making process, women were consulted about their opinions. When the colonizers came, they declared that women should stay home and take care of the children. That was not our traditional belief; housework was shared. The male-dominated beliefs of our colonizers seeped through our communities. For instance, we had a courtship system in which women could also do courting, and martial separations were permitted with appropriate grounds. When the colonizers came with their religious beliefs, they told us this could not be, that it was immoral and that we could not separate from our husbands. Our colonizers brought and reinforced male domination in our traditional societies.

Do Indigenous communities in the Philippines have recognized territories?

We occupy our land, but the law states that our land is public land. We have a law in the Philippines which

says all lands that are 18% slopes or above are considered public lands, and therefore cannot be owned or sold. Almost all our lands are 18% slopes or above. Because of that law, virtually all the people in our community are considered squatters on our own lands. So we are working to have that law repealed. In 1986, when there was a constitutional commission, we lobbied to put a clause in the constitution recognizing ancestral land rights of Indigenous peoples. That law was incorporated into the constitution, but until a bill enabling and defining the law is passed, we legally do not have an ancestral land law in our country.

What other crucial issues are facing your community?

There are still ongoing logging operations. The logging companies attempt to drive people away from their land. However, mining is one of the biggest issues that we face because our region is very rich in minerals. Seventy-five percent of gold exports come from our region. The government is relaxing the laws to allow corporations to invest and open mines. These corporations receive 75-year leases. They operate strip mines and open pit mines. We have been resisting further expansion of these mines.

The Philippine government ratified GATT last December. How will this affect Indigenous peoples?

It will have a tremendous affect on Indigenous peoples, especially in terms of their rights to their lands. It will make it very easy for the government to say that since they are a signatory to GATT, we must open our land for investments. They also have been encouraging us to produce cash crops like cut flowers and asparagus. With the production of cash crops, our agriculture shifts from subsistence production for domestic consumption to producing high-value crops. This will force our agricultural production to become part of the entire world's market economy.

How is the Human Genome Diversity Project affecting Indigenous communities in the Philippines?

Some Indigenous peoples have been targeted for genetic collection, and some collection has probably already occurred. On the list of the Human Genome Project we have the Ifugawes, who come from our region; my own tribe; and the Aetas, a group of Indigenous peoples from the Central Luzon, Southern Tagalog, and from the Visayas. Late last year we got a copy of a letter from Dr. Camara, one of the medical doctors from the Aloha Medical Mission of Hawaii, wherein he enclosed a letter from Hoffman-La Roche,

asking that they be allowed to participate in their medical missions to the Aetas in Pinatubo. Their intent was to collect DNA materials from the Aetas by collecting blood, mucosal scrapings, and hair roots. This sounds very much like the Human Genome Diversity Project. I find this grossly unethical and immoral, because what they plan to do is to participate in a humanitarian mission to the Aetas who were displaced when the Pinatubo volcano in the Philippines erupted. So, in effect, they are using a medical mission to obtain genetic resources.

We did work with the Foundation on Economic Trends (FET) in Washington DC. who filed a petition on behalf of itself and other organizations, including our own, for a moratorium on the Human Genome Diversity Project which at the time was promoted by the National Institute of Health in the US. So the FET filed a suit against them, but the whole project was transferred to the National Science Foundation (NSF). Suing the NSF will be more difficult because they are a semi-private, semi-governmental organization. These are the steps we have taken to pre-empt the attempts of the project to gather genetic material.

Do Indigenous peoples in the Philippines deal with issues similar to those of other Indigenous peoples around the world?

We really have many issues in common, like ancestral land rights, traditional ceremonies, autonomy, and self government. Because of that communality, we were able to combine efforts to contribute to the draft the UN working group on Indigenous peoples developed. We should not underestimate what our lobby contributed to that draft.

Do you have any messages for women in Mexico, South and Central America?

We were part of the group that organized the International Women's Conference held in Samiland (in Norway) in 1990. As a result of that conference, we developed a resolution saying we would do regional organizing among our women. Latin American women did their own organizing, which I think is great. On our part, we built up our Asian Indigenous women's network. Now we must combine our efforts and come together again so we can produce an excellent Indigenous Women's Agenda to be presented at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in September. We should make an effort to outline the issues of Indigenous women, whether they are in the North or the South, and then present these issues. We can also sponsor a series of activities in Beijing where Indigenous women can speak out. ☺