

# MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

Indigenous and Rural Women in Defense  
of Land, Territories and Women's Rights

This issue of *Making Change Happen* (No. 5) analyzes the efforts of rural and indigenous women to defend their land, ancestral territories and rights. This issue is based on JASS' experiences in two geographical regions—Southeast Asia and Mesoamerica. It combines years of experience, research, and feminist popular education on the central issues of power, leadership, women's rights and equality, with analysis of what's happening today and the on-the-ground strategies and solutions of women and their organizations connected with JASS. This issue also draws on two seminal events: the JASS Southeast Asia indigenous women's regional workshop, held in July 2014 in Indonesia, and the second session of JASS Mesoamerica's Alquimia Feminist School course on *Strategic Leadership for Indigenous and Rural Women in Defense of their Rights*, held in Nicaragua in May 2014. The reflections of the rural and indigenous women who participated comprise much of this booklet. We dedicate this issue to them, and to their struggles for their rights, their lands and the survival of the planet.

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# MAKING CHANGE HAPPEN

## Indigenous and Rural Women in Defense of Land, Territories and Women's Rights

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“We defend the land not because it belongs to us but because we are part of it.”

*Women in the Alquimia Feminist School*

This issue of *Making Change Happen* examines the threats, challenges, strategies and aspirations of indigenous and rural women within the greater JASS community. Why this focus? There is plenty of evidence to indicate that indigenous and rural women are facing increasing difficulties throughout the world. A group of indigenous women from JASS Southeast Asia identified multiple new challenges including “multinationals, militarization, discrimination, racism, public policy and laws that threaten indigenous people and indigenous women in particular”, in addition to gender-based violence and the invisibility of women.

“The rights of indigenous tribes have been suppressed for a long time. So how can an indigenous community strengthen itself? It also has to help indigenous women organize themselves. Indigenous women have to be aware of their own experience as a source of strength, analyze their own situation, learn to fight for access to resources, and eventually gain control over their future. This is the power of organizing.”

*Marlien Elvira “Vivi” Marantika, indigenous woman from Kuralele tribe of Maluku, Indonesia*

There is undoubtedly an urgent need to name and push back against these challenges and build networks to support and protect indigenous peoples, especially women. Yet it is not victimhood that compelled this collective analysis. It is what indigenous and rural women have to *offer* by way of alternative solutions that motivated our effort.

In this work we bring together two of JASS’ central organizing processes—the long-term work of our partners in Southeast Asia and the two-year course led by JASS Mesoamerica’s Alquimia Feminist School. In Southeast Asia it was the first time a workshop had been devoted specifically to bringing together indigenous women, although since the beginning in 2007 indigenous activists have been part of our activities and networks. In our work in Mexico and Central America with the feminist leadership school, the focus was a conscious choice made in 2010, but efforts to support and share their alternatives and organizing strategies has just begun.

This issue of *Making Change Happen* offers information, concepts and reflections from women, not just for other activists concerned with these issues, but also for policymakers, leaders and others concerned with the pressing economic, political and environmental issues of our time. We believe that indigenous and rural women’s strategies to build strong communities in the midst of powerful dislocating and destructive dynamics offer innovative solutions to some of the world’s pressing problems.

This work has convinced us, more than ever, that indigenous women are not only critical to defense of their territories and resources—they are central to sustaining the planet. Their voices must be heard.

*Lisa VeneKlasen, Executive Director, JASS (Just Associates)*



## INTRODUCTION

Several recent events spurred our thinking and helped us to create a loose working group on the issues confronting indigenous and rural women. The first was the July 2014 meeting led by JASS Southeast Asia. The meeting brought together indigenous women from Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Myanmar. The group began with questions such as “Where are women in the indigenous people land rights struggles?” “What is the work that indigenous women activists do in the communities?” “What are the challenges that they face?” “How are women regarded in customary laws?” They also addressed the need to identify strategies to spotlight indigenous women’s issues on national, regional and global levels.

The other was the second course of the Alquimia feminist leadership course for indigenous and rural women. There, thirty women from Mexico and six Central American countries gathered to discuss concepts of identity, power and leadership in relation to their lives. The week-long session in May 2014 deepened understanding and friendships. It also left participants with a strong desire to learn more about the specific circumstances that other indigenous and rural women face in different communities, to follow the common threads and weave greater unity.

Finally, the United Nations World Conference on Indigenous Peoples (WCIP) in New York in September 2014 catalyzed our resolve to begin speaking out and creating the forums for doing it. The official meetings were marked from the beginning by limitations due to lack of real representation and a tendency to speak *about* indigenous peoples, without fully including them. But placing the issues on the international agenda nonetheless created an opportunity. Other events coinciding with the WCIP, including the Climate Change Summit and Cairo+20 discussions also touched on critical issues of resource rights and protection, relationship to the earth and women’s rights that are at the center of our agenda.

It was time to speak out and to make our voices heard.

This publication is a result of that resolve. It was written by many hands. The country sections that follow were each prepared by the women living and organizing in that country. Their knowledge combines data with on-the-ground experiences. The brief descriptions reflect their own current situations, while sharing those with others enabled us to pool knowledge of global tendencies and banking organizing ideas and experiences. The analysis draws on years of collective and individual experience in popular education and grassroots organizing, research and concepts, and many joyful and tearful discussions of the interplay between it all.

 “Indigenous women rely on the forests, on the river—on all of their natural surroundings for survival. When private companies encroached on their land—things changed. For profit, these private companies cleared the forests and made the river polluted. Indigenous women’s lives changed for the worse. We were ultimately forced to change our way of life.”

*Magdalena Kafiar, indigenous woman from Biyak tribe of Papua, Indonesia*



“It is ordinary for us to have differences but it is extraordinary for us to unite them.”

*Magdalena Kaffar, Papua, Indonesia*

## CONCEPT OF INDIGENOUS

“Indigenous peoples” is a concept under international law that corresponds with a well-defined set of individual and collective rights, including to lands, territories, and resources. Identification of indigenous peoples is the basis for recognition of their collective rights. With different names in different places—including Native American, first peoples, aboriginal people, etc.—“indigenous peoples” is a common denominator for more than 370 million people, spread across some 90 countries around the world.<sup>i</sup> In Asia, rough estimates place the indigenous peoples’ population at 100 million. In Mesoamerica, indigenous people make up more than ten percent of the total population—in Guatemala they are more than half. All countries also have large rural populations, although both rural and indigenous populations are dwindling as urbanization and out-migration rise.

Given the diversity of indigenous peoples, there is a broad international consensus that a universal definition is neither necessary nor desirable. Census methods such as language have been criticized as being too restrictive. Instead, the recommended approach is to identify the peoples concerned in a given country context, putting particular emphasis on their self-identification as indigenous peoples.<sup>ii</sup>

The International Labour Organization (ILO) offers criteria for identification, emphasizing self-identification. To this end, the ILO Convention 169 (1989) established a series of key rights and procedures to protect indigenous communities.

Rural women face many of the same challenges as indigenous women. As the race for control and exploitation of natural resources intensifies, they increasingly participate side by side in battles in defense of land, territories and rights. The peasant cosmology and economy is similarly land-based and closely tied to traditional knowledge of cycles of nature, agriculture and community cooperation. Although dominant society has used ethnicity to divide people, we find more and more that rural and indigenous communities face common threats to their way of life and have much the same commitments and values. These commonalities go beyond sharing lands and territories and are the basis for forging bonds and alliances in many parts of the world.

Today, indigenous and rural women are seen as the enemy by the powerful promoters of a form of “development” that prioritizes exploitation for economic gains and profits without regard for its impact on lives and the environment. This strategy is increasing inequality, fueling violence and destroying natural resources. The forests, shores, rivers, wildlife and plants that are part of their

### **Convention No. 169 of the International Labor Organization on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples<sup>iii</sup>**

**Non-discrimination:** Article 3 states that indigenous peoples have “the right to enjoy the full measure and fundamental freedoms without hindrance or discrimination.” Other articles protect the general rights of citizenship without discrimination, apply all provisions to male and female indigenous persons without discrimination, and prohibit discrimination of indigenous workers.

**Recognition of cultural differences and other specificities:** Formal recognition that “their ways of life, customs and traditions, institutions, customary laws, forms of land use and forms of social organization are different from the dominant population. It requires that these differences be taken into account in any measures that affect indigenous peoples.

**Consultation and participation:** All provisions of Convention 169 are based on the principle of consultation and participation,

requiring that “indigenous and tribal peoples are consulted on issues that affect them... and that these peoples are able to engage in free, prior and informed participation in policy and development processes that affect them.” The Convention notes that this applies to specific development projects and to broader governance issues, and specifies procedures for consultation.

**Right to decide for development:** Article 7 states that indigenous peoples have the right to “decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being and the lands they occupy or otherwise use, and to exercise control over their economic, social and cultural development.”

Most nations have signed and ratified the Convention, making its terms binding under national law. However, its terms are routinely violated. ILO 169 remains a hallmark in indigenous rights and many indigenous organizations cite its terms to demand non-discrimination, the right to consultation (as in the community consultations on mining projects in Guatemala) and a voice in development.



“If you want to see the face of indigenous peoples, you have to look at an indigenous woman. She is the face of what indigenous peoples go through.”

*Olvy Oktaviani, Dayak Benuaq community, Indonesia*

communities are targets of a heated global competition led by inadequately regulated agribusiness, mining, oil production and large-scale development, despite extensive economic research that in the long-term, the costs of such endeavors outweigh the benefits. Every day we hear more reports of brave women beaten, accused of terrorism, thrown in prison and even murdered for defending their land, natural resources, territories and their rights.

### **Our Power for Change: A Feminist Analysis of Power and Defense of Territories**

We define power as **the degree of control over material, human, intellectual, and financial resources exercised by different sections of society.**<sup>10</sup> Power is dynamic, exercised in the social, economic, and political relations between individuals and groups, and can be used for both positive and negative ends.

Many of the world’s greatest problems are generated by a life-denying use of the exercise of “power over” to dominate, usurp and control. From confrontation grows resistance and life-affirming powers we call “vital powers” or “transformative powers.” These are:

#### **Vital/Transformative powers**

1. **“power to”:** The unique potential of every person to shape her or his life and world.
2. **“power with”:** Collective strength based on mutual support, solidarity, collaboration and recognition. Respect for differences and conscious and broad alliance building are key here.
3. **“power within”:** Our sense of self-worth, self-esteem and self-knowledge, grounded in our ethical value base
4. **“power for”:** Our capacity to envision the change we want and need is the motivating force of our actions. It bolsters our will, orients our actions and feeds our hope. Power is at the center of our analysis because it is central to our lives. The concepts are just the first steps to understanding both what we’re up against and the resources we have to develop strategies and solutions for change.



“While the dynamics, boundaries, and actors continue to shift, the struggle for power continues to be fundamentally about access and control over resources and over the ideas that seek to legitimize who gets what, who gets left out and why. Today, the ferocious scramble to control and exploit resources—from land and forests to technology and human DNA—is a scramble for power, including a scramble for whose voice counts and what matters most where discrimination and oppression based on gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, location and other factors come into play.”

*Lisa VeneKlasen, JASS*

At JASS’ Alquimia leadership course, the motto is “Building collective power and strategic leadership for indigenous and rural women in defense of their rights.” The school has hosted many wide-ranging discussions on how to confront “power over” and how to tap into vital powers.

Participants in the school were asked, “What does leadership look like to you?” Their drawings before the workshop invariably showed a central figure, much larger than the rest, surrounded by small and passive subjects. At the end, the drawings had changed: they showed same-sized figures in a circle. And that’s not all—other figures entered on the scene: animals, fish, mountains, fire and light, sea and little children crowded the drawings of leadership at work.



“I always thought to be a leader was to be the big figure and only talk about issues and rights and all, but without including natural resources. And now I see that it isn’t like that—to be a leader is much more than that, it includes everything and for everyone.”

*Ada Inés Osorio, Honduran Miskito*



“Contemporary global pressures such as urbanization, climate change, deforestation and globalization [...] are tending to increase the vulnerability of indigenous communities to disaster.”

*Kelman, Merce, Gaillard<sup>v</sup>*

## CROSS-REGIONAL TRENDS

As our organizing on indigenous women’s rights proceeds, the cross-regional similarities and shared struggles emerge. Although we always suspected patterns, we were surprised that the struggles of indigenous women in places as disparate as Honduras and Indonesia could reflect so many common themes. Dress and language may be worlds apart, but the worldviews have far more in common with each other than they do with, say, their own governments, which too often see indigenous lands and territories as dollar signs, and their communities as obstacles to “progress”.

In all regions, powerful transnational corporations and governments intensify efforts to take over the earth’s dwindling resources. Water is damned and siphoned off to factories, plantations, cities and hydroelectric plants. Hills are stripped for hidden minerals. Forests are razed and beaches roped off for wealthy resorts, and lands are designated protected areas open for energy exploration.

Rural and indigenous peoples remind us that the land cannot be separated from the community within it. And to dislocate people from the land often requires violence. For rural and indigenous women, home is more than four walls and a roof. Home is a freshwater spring outside a Cambodian village, a stretch of virgin beach on a Costa Rican island, a cloud-topped mountain in Southern Mexico or a Honduran farming valley.

Given the relationship and co-dependence indigenous and rural communities have with nature and the earth, in Mesoamerica, natural resources are known as natural *goods*, dispelling the notion that the water and minerals found in nature are meant to be extracted and exploited, and instead presenting a model in which they are meant to be used wisely, preserved and shared equitably.

From mountains to coasts and lowlands, the scenery changes and the coveted resources vary, but the actors and forms of destruction that indigenous and rural women in Southeast Asia

### Global Pressures on Indigenous and Rural Women

Stories from around the world echo common themes. Women face the same challenges and with globalization, they even confront the same companies, international policies and financial systems that promote an economic model based on extraction of resources by transnational companies.

**Mining projects:** Higher prices and more demand for minerals has led to conflicts, displacement and expropriation as indigenous lands become valuable to companies seeking the minerals that lie beneath. Women often lead community organizing against mines that would pollute their waters and uproot their families.

**Monocrop plantations:** African palm for oil, sugar cane and other monocrops are destroying biodiversity, reducing production of basic foods and displacing indigenous and rural populations. The push to change agricultural uses to these export crops has pitted communities against governments and corporations, and, in Guatemala, has led to several assassinations of women activists.

**Militarization:** Militarization in the name of the war on drugs in Mexico and Central America and counter-insurgency programs in the Philippines has made women less safe. Indigenous and

rural women report abuses at the hands of security forces. In many cases, soldiers and police forces are being used to protect companies seeking to impose projects on indigenous lands, as seen in Lenca territory in Honduras.

**Climate change:** Women play an invisible yet leading role in adapting to climate change-related events—rebuilding communities destroyed by storms, gathering scarce water from drought-stricken lands, and finding ways to prevent and mitigate effects on their families and communities.

Indigenous and rural women in island and coastal communities are experiencing severe climate change disasters. Storms ravage their villages and rising sea levels threatened their lands. Inland, unusual droughts, floods and extreme weather events reduce the narrow margin of survival for farming communities. Women of the Philippine organization *Innabuyog* are rebuilding following a series of typhoons. Cyclical droughts in northern Mexico have become permanent features of climate change, making rural livelihoods unsustainable. Salvadoran coastal peoples face rising sea levels that are wiping out the mangroves they depend on. In these places and others, indigenous and rural women have united defense of the environment with demands for their rights as women and indigenous peoples.



“We’re fighting for our specific rights as women within the movement for collective rights. In our country wind energy projects and hydroelectric dams take over more and more territory. We are saturated—with transnational companies, within women’s spaces and within the realm of indigenous peoples. We are often very saturated, because we have to fight in so many ways.”

*Claudia Angel, Zapoteca, Southern Mexico*

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and Mesoamerica report are surprisingly the same. This constancy reflects the global landscape of what environmental activists are up against; namely, diminished environmental regulation and enforcement, lack of corporate accountability and even government complicity in environmental crimes. As leaders, it is often indigenous women who confront these abuses and have to adapt their families and communities to the consequences of the destruction.

## **VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN LEADERS AND ACTIVISTS**

Indigenous and rural organizations around the world are working to block government land concessions to transnational companies, made without consent or legal process. They demand that states respect basic rights, the environment, and cosmivision of indigenous communities. States and companies have responded by treating activists and their movements like criminals, using violence in an attempt to dismantle grassroots resistance. Activists face assassination, kidnapping, defamation, sexual violence, torture, house raids, and harassment.

Mesoamerican and Southeast Asian women have played a fundamental role in the protection of human rights throughout history. Although women participate in and even lead peasant-indigenous efforts to maintain their land, territory and autonomy, they are often invisible. As women leaders they assume risks, but the lack of recognition of their roles places them in even greater danger.

Rural and indigenous women today are active in defense of land and territories, despite their historic levels of exclusion and discrimination as women. For women who defend rights, being a leader involves overcoming major social, cultural, economic and religious obstacles. Prevailing norms sustain a patriarchal social order and undermine the individual and collective development of women. Women who speak out and organize for change have to first question these norms and step out of traditional roles. Standing out puts them at greater risk for backlash. They fight for the rights of their peoples and their land while simultaneously confronting entrenched *machismo* within their own communities. Since women are the primary caregivers, they often carry a heavy burden of balancing their role to provide for their families and sustain their cultural practices, while attempting to break down the barriers of sexism and discrimination.

Due to this double burden, awareness, activism and networks of support and protection are vital for the strength and sustainability of their leadership.

The commonalities across borders and oceans revealed in this study lay the groundwork for cross-regional solidarity, cooperation and mobilization that can strengthen their local work and sustain them individually.



“We are living in a system that globalizes minds, and globalizes existence. It does not recognize other ways of living. In k’iche we say: ‘We make our own decisions here, this is our territory, our grandparents lived here, we live here and our sons and our daughters will live here. Our decision is to respect life.’ Turns out that this does not match the model imposed by the world powers and transnational corporations. With our fight we have turned into the main obstacle of transnational corporations, oil mining and hydroelectric and other multinationals.”

*Aura Lolita Chávez, Council of K’iche’ Peoples in Defense of Life, Mother Nature, Earth and Territory (CPK), Guatemala*



“... we need to know how to make women understand and to feel that they are needed, to be part of the community. They need to be part of their family, their tribe, their community. Because basically women still believe that their role is only to serve the men.”

*Magdalena Kafiar, Papua, Indonesia*

## SOUTHEAST ASIA

In Southeast Asia, indigenous women are among the leaders in broad coalitions of rural and indigenous peoples fighting against land grabs. Because indigenous peoples' issues have been sidelined for so long, not many people are aware of the history and the current strength and breadth of indigenous peoples' movement in the region. Malaysia has a very strong women-led indigenous movement among the Orang Asli of Peninsular Malaysia. Indigenous movements in the Philippines center on the Cordilleras region in the north. In Cambodia, the indigenous peoples' movement has deep roots in the remote province of Ratanakiri. In Indonesia, indigenous peoples have more opportunities to strengthen and unite their action, particularly through a national alliance of indigenous peoples that has been in existence for more than a decade. Women's indigenous and ethnic groups are multiplying in Myanmar as the political landscape of the country changes.

In July 2014, eight young indigenous leaders from the Philippines, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and Myanmar gathered to share experiences and analyze the challenges and the strategies they've developed in response. The participants shared best practices in organizing women to defend resources and revealed creative ways for building women's collective power to advance indigenous women's rights and justice agenda in the region. In sharing these experiences, the participants gathered in the JASS Southeast Asia indigenous women's workshop agreed: "Now is the time to make our voices heard."

Indigenous peoples in Southeast Asia live in areas rich in natural resources. Their lands and territories have become targets for resource extraction and large-scale development projects by multinational companies. Indigenous communities are confronted with the adverse impacts of mining, logging, large-scale plantations and infrastructure programs. These projects are usually authorized and implemented without the consultation and consent of affected communities and without compliance with minimal international environmental and labor standards. Massive displacement of indigenous peoples, the loss of their livelihood and the denigration of their culture are just some of the adverse effects.<sup>vi</sup> The lack

of corporate and government accountability compounds the problems. Indigenous women face the brunt of these impacts.

Indigenous peoples make up a large proportion of the poor and vulnerable population amidst the rich resources in the region. Displacement and loss of livelihood saddle indigenous women with additional burdens to make ends meet. Their family responsibilities sometimes force them to seek additional ways to earn a living, as laundry workers, cooks, or domestic helpers. Some women move to the cities to work; some become victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation or, as in the case of the Dayak- Benuaq of East Borneo, maintain "illicit" affairs with oil palm plantation workers just to survive.

Several trends in Southeast Asia have had particularly dire impacts on the lives and livelihoods of indigenous and rural women:

### Land Grabs and Development Projects

Under the guise of "development", governments of Southeast Asia continue to promote and grant mining projects, logging operations, mega-dams, and other investment projects, both national and frequently transnational, that are having an enormously destructive impact on indigenous lands and lives.

### Defining Land Grabs

The International Land Coalition defines land grabs as "acquisitions or concessions that are one or more of the following:

1. in violation of human rights, particularly the equal rights of women;
2. not based on free, prior and informed consent of the affected land-users;
3. not based on a thorough assessment, or are in disregard of social, economic and environmental impacts, including the way they are gendered;
4. not based on transparent contracts that specify clear and binding commitments about activities, employment and benefits sharing, and;
5. not based on effective democratic planning, independent oversight and meaningful participation."<sup>vii</sup>



“How can one company occupy 6,000 hectares of land and yet they cannot present proof that they own the land? Multinational companies and transnational companies are very strong in Indonesia. And in Indonesian regulations, the government has the right to dispose of a land or to assign a piece of land to private companies.”

*Vivi Marantika from Maluku province of Indonesia*

Land grabs in Cambodia have been devastating to indigenous peoples. The online newspaper, Phom Penh Post, reports that in Kong Yu village in Ratanakiri the development plan involves converting 500 hectares of indigenous land into a rubber plantation in the Patch Commune, without consultation or agreement by the community. The communities’ culture and animist practices are embedded in their land and environment; the environmental, social and cultural impacts of this project will destroy their community and threaten their continued existence.<sup>viii</sup>

Legal and illegal logging and mining lead to massive displacement and dispossession of indigenous peoples. In the Philippines, laws appear to protect the land rights of indigenous peoples, but in practice the remaining forest reserves and mineral deposits located in indigenous territories are not protected.<sup>ix</sup>

As trade and financial agreements increasingly weaken basic safeguards, government policies and structures benefit private companies at the expense of indigenous communities. In Indonesia, by regulation the government has the right to assign land to private companies. In the Philippines, the Mining Act of 1995 allows mining companies to exploit natural resources. Indigenous communities that stand up to defend their lands and territories against these destructive projects, are subjected to the increased presence and abuse by military and security forces and systematic violations of their human rights.

## MILITARISM IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The presence of military and armed forces in indigenous communities is common especially where there is organized local resistance against a “development” project. Governments also deploy troops in counter-insurgency operations under “national security laws”; too often the result is more violence.<sup>x</sup>

The militarization of indigenous territories in response to protests has resulted in killings, arbitrary arrests and torture of indigenous people. It escalates conflicts and leads to forced displacements, massive environmental degradation, food insecurity, ethnocide, and the weakening of the distinct socio-cultural systems of indigenous peoples. Indigenous women are even more vulnerable due to their roles. As leaders and community builders, indigenous women are even more vulnerable to the impacts of increased militarization.<sup>xi</sup>

The Philippines was recently named the most dangerous place in Southeast Asia for environmental and land-rights activists. **Kalipunan ng Katutubong Mamamayan ng Pilipinas** (KAMP,

or Alliance of Indigenous Peoples) found that Aquino government forces have killed 44 indigenous people since 2010, in “extrajudicial killings”, or politically motivated killings, of indigenous peoples’ leaders and community members whose lands were affected by the development of large-scale mining projects, and from the implementation of the counter-insurgency program.

“Eleven indigenous peoples are slain by government forces each year. These are brutal killings of indigenous men, women, and children from indigenous communities all over the Philippines.”

*Piya Macliing Malaya, spokesperson of KAMP*

In some cases, unscrupulous state agents, including the military, use customary laws to divide indigenous communities and weaken their organized resistance. According to Maria Ricca Llanes of Innabuyog, there are reports that the military sometimes uses the *Bodong* system—an indigenous peace pact system in the Cordilleras of northern Philippines—against the indigenous peoples by killing indigenous activists and making it appear that another clan carried out the murder so as to create tribal war among the clans and break the indigenous peace pact.

## RAPE AS A TOOL OF WAR

In militarized areas in the Philippines, Philippine military personnel sexually abuse women and girls. From 2010 to 2012, the Center for Women’s Resources has documented at least seven cases of abuse, ranging from sexual harassment to rape and gang rape by the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ (AFP) regular units and its paramilitary wing, the Citizens Armed Forces Geographical Unit (CAFGU). Most victims are minors and several have been indigenous women.

Many cases of rape by state agents such as the police and the military go unreported. In areas with large military presence, groups have documented an increase in the cases of rape, particularly in the Cordilleras. According to Maria Ricca Llanes, the AFP specifically targets indigenous women, especially in villages where there is heightened resistance against “development” projects, to weaken the organized communities’ resolve.



“Gender-based violence is a stark reality that indigenous women face. The invisibility of indigenous peoples, especially of women, cuts across cultures and remains pervasive in the region. And, while women activists and indigenous women are aware that certain old traditions and preservation of indigenous peoples’ customary laws can be beneficial to the communities, certain customary laws can also be discriminatory and even oppressive to women.”

*JASS’ indigenous women’s workshop, West Java, Indonesia, 2014*

In Myanmar, **Kachin Women’s Association** (KWA) has documented gang rapes in Kachin State, where a civil war is ongoing. Indigenous women victims are as young as nine years old, and half the victims in cases documented in 2011 were killed after being raped. KWA recognizes the rape of women, committed rampantly in and around Kachin State as a “systemic and calculated war tactic”, rather than a random act of violence.

“Not only is the government not protecting civilians or stopping the Burmese troops, Thein Sein and Aung Min are denying human rights abuses. Now that the fighting has increased, government troops will use this pretext to continue raping, torturing and killing.”

*Moon Nay Li of KWA in a 2011 news report*

Reports indicate that the perpetrators are the military, government personnel, employees of corporations, and some armed groups. Sadly, the majority of these survivors will not see justice. Communities need stronger and sustained campaigns to bring about redress and justice and more effective public safety.<sup>xiii</sup>

## NON-RECOGNITION OF CITIZENSHIP

Historically, indigenous peoples in Asia have been subject to colonization, nation-state building, and globalization. Based on human development indicators, they are overrepresented among the poor, illiterate and malnourished. This is further compounded by the States’ continuing non-recognition of their collective rights as indigenous peoples and the expropriation of their lands and resources for state-sponsored development and corporate investments.<sup>xiii</sup>

According to the **Asian Indigenous Peoples’ Pact** (AIPP), many Asian states don’t recognize the existence of indigenous peoples within their territories, let alone their unique rights. States claim that all their citizens are “equally indigenous” to assimilate indigenous peoples into the mainstream national culture. Discrimination against indigenous communities, who are often

perceived to be backward or against development, is rampant. Many government programs, like compulsory education or relocation programs, dilute indigenous culture and identity in the name of assimilation.

In some cases indigenous people are not recognized as citizens of their countries, making indigenous communities even more vulnerable to violations. This is most pronounced in Thailand, where almost half of the indigenous population does not have Thai citizenship because they do not have the necessary documents, such as birth certificate.<sup>xiv</sup>

## WOMEN’S VOICES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA<sup>xv</sup>

### THE PHILIPPINES

The Philippines is a culturally diverse country with an estimated 14–17 million indigenous peoples belonging to 110 ethno-linguistic groups. They are mainly concentrated in Northern Luzon (Cordillera Administrative Region, 33%) and Mindanao (61%), with some groups in the Visayas area.

Many of the Philippine indigenous peoples have historically lived off the country’s forests in the mountains, practicing nomadic agriculture that allows the forest to regenerate. But that practice and livelihood are now endangered by the massive displacement of indigenous peoples to give way to giant corporations’ mining, logging and energy projects.<sup>xvi</sup>

The Cordillera region is the home of the Cordillera people or the Igorots, seven ethno-linguistic groups spread across the provinces of Apayao, Abra, Kalinga, Mountain Province, Ifugao, and Benguet. Women and men tend rice paddies, along with other economic activities to feed their families. In areas within the Cordilleras, ongoing mining and energy projects livelihoods.

**Innabuyog**, a JASS ally, groups women’s organizations in the Cordillera made up mostly of indigenous peasant women who rely on the land to feed their families. Innabuyog brings together women from the urban poor, youth and students, migrant workers, lesbians, academics, and women working in churches and private institutions.

Innabuyog, founded in March 1990, grew out of various community struggles of indigenous peasant women defending their land, life and resources. Its membership grew from 20 women’s organizations to over a hundred as a result of long organizing work that combined education and training, research, networking,



“We take part in women’s day celebrations. We are active in the health campaign—especially in light of the impending privatization of state hospitals throughout the country.”

*Ricca Llanes, Innabuyog*

mass campaigns and mobilizations. Innabuyog now has provincial chapters in Abra, Kalinga-Apayao, and Mountain Province and municipal chapters in Benguet.

Women organizing in the Cordillera face many obstacles, they confront many threats to their land and way of life. An influx of corporate mining projects has reduced rice farming. Devastating typhoons related to climate change have destroyed communities in recent years.<sup>xvii</sup> Innabuyog compiles information on the impact of climate change on women’s organizing and carries out relief drives for typhoon-affected communities. It also seeks to strengthen the many ways indigenous women in the region maintain their families and communities: passing on knowledge of how to cultivate on the steep mountain slopes, pooling community labor and other resources, local pest control, soil fertility practices, and linking forest and fishery use for sustainability.

Ricca Llanes notes that women in the organization are strategizing with a gender focus, meaning they are taking into account the impacts on and realities of women’s lives. *“We take part in women’s day celebrations. We are active in the health campaign—especially in light of the impending privatization of state hospitals throughout the country.”*

Recently, the Philippine military forces conducted continuous aerial bombing of indigenous communities under the Aquino government’s “counter- insurgency” program in the Cordillera. Ricca Llanes and other women are providing psychosocial accompaniment of women and children affected by the bombings.

## MALAYSIA

The approximately 180,000 indigenous Orang Asli community organizes around the right to their traditional lands, faced with constant attempts efforts to seize their lands by corporations and the government, without community consultation and with disregard for their right to self-determination. These attempted, and at times successful, land grabs by the state in practice deny the Orang Asli’s right to choose a path of development that draws on the collective needs and history of the community. Government laws prohibit villagers from cutting down a tree or using the natural resources found on their indigenous lands without permission from authorities, while the state has granted numerous permits to companies for exploitation.

Government legislation has further infringed on the rights of indigenous peoples of Western Malaysia, reducing the number of acres of land accessible to families and restricting the right to

ownership to the head of household, often precluding women. Most indigenous women do not have the option to fight for land rights and economic justice through policy and legal avenues, so the Orang Asli have created a grassroots movement of women, men, and youth to respond to this void. The movement is firmly grounded in the community. After 53 years of independence, the Orang Asli have managed to bring policy-makers and local government leaders to the table to ensure that land issues and women’s rights will be protected. They hope to engage at an even higher, national level over the next few years.

 “My settlement is in Tekir Mantra (Temuan). Although we have our Orang Asli community, I cannot locate my exact settlement in the map. Yes, our community is invisible. That is the problem with my country. They make the Orang Asli invisible... I am a trainer for community mapping. My group is known as the Temuan people. Some people in Malaysia do not even know that the Orang Aslis exist. This is another concrete example of the problem of our ‘invisibility’”.

*Asmidar Vira, Orang Asli community*

For Asmidar and other women of the Orang Asli people, mapping and building alliances to be visible and organizing to be heard are vital to their survival and the survival of their communities.

## MYANMAR

The main ethnic groups living in the seven ethnic minority states of Myanmar are the Karen, Shan, Mon, Chin, Kachin, Rakhine and Karenni. Other main groups include the Nagas, who live in north Burma and are estimated to number about 100,000, constituting



“People blame women in rape cases. So we help women speak up. There is domestic violence in our community but no one speaks about that.”

*Mi Aim Pakao, Mon activist, Myanmar*

Although the country’s official name is the Republic of Myanmar as a result of a 1989 decision by the current military regime, many opposition groups use the name Burma because they do not recognize the military government’s legitimacy. Given this complexity, in this analysis we have chosen to leave the name as the activists have written it, using both terms.

Myanmar has one of the most diverse populations in Southeast Asia, with 135 indigenous cultures and languages. Members of the largest group are referred to as ‘Burmans’, while all citizens of Myanmar/Burma, regardless of ethnicity, are known as ‘Burmese’ nationals.

another complex family of Tibetan-Burmese language sub-groups. To these long-established minorities should be added more recent arrivals, who now constitute substantial numbers in the country, such as the Indians, Pa-O, Wa, Kokang, Palaung, Akha, Lahu, etc. As of 2013, there are no accurate figures on the relative size of Myanmar’s ethnic groups.<sup>xviii</sup>

The Mon people live mostly in Mon State, Bago Region, the Irrawaddy Delta, and along the southern border of Thailand and Myanmar. One of the earliest peoples to reside in Southeast Asia, the Mon spearheaded the spread of Theravada Buddhism in Indochina and contributed widely to Burmese culture.

The eastern Mon assimilated to Thai culture long ago, while the western Mon of Burma were largely absorbed by Bamar society but continue fighting to preserve their language and culture and to regain a greater degree of political autonomy. The Mon of Burma are divided into three sub-groups based on their ancestral region in Lower Burma: the Man Nya from Patheingyi (the Irrawaddy Delta) in the west, the Man Dwin in Bago in the central region, and the Man at Mottama in the southeast.

The **Mon Women’s Organization** (MWO), a JASS partner, provides information, tools and skills to women, especially within Mon villages inside the country and on the Thai-Burma border.

Pakao, a young Mon activist from Myanmar, describes her work in MWO, “As part of our Capacity Building Training Program, we hold gender training and gender seminars for men, leadership training, rights and laws (training), civic education training, and gender-based violence workshops. As part of our Sustainable Development program, we have a savings group, we set up women’s groups, we conduct fundraising activities and we maintain a cooperative shop for women.”

“Sometimes Mon women do not even know the customary laws in society. They do not know the laws or their rights. That is why we provide these trainings,” Pakao notes. MWO also meets with religious leaders and political leaders, building bridges between influential leaders and the Mon community.

The organization helps women in rape cases, holds women’s meetings to discuss health and taking care of their bodies and participates in the 16 Days of Activism campaign to stop violence against women.<sup>xix</sup> MWO is also active in pushing for women’s inclusion in the country’s peace-building efforts. Mi Kun Chan Non, a representative of the MWO, served as one of the only two female observers of the Mon peace talks in 2012.

## INDONESIA

Indonesia is home to more than 1,128 ethnic groups. Most of JASS allies are members of the JASS-inspired **Forum Aktivist Perempuan Muda** (FAMM-Indonesia or Young Indonesian Women Activists’ Forum) and some of them are located in Maluku province, Papua, East Borneo, and Nias Island. Given the span of the country, the following analysis is divided into regions.

### Maluku Province

The Maluku Islands, or the Moluccas, are an archipelago in Indonesia, located east of Sulawesi, west of New Guinea, and north and east of Timor. Marlien Elvira Marantika, or Vivi, is a member of FAMM-Indonesia and also one of the leaders of the Maluku-based organization, **Humanum** (Group of Maluku for Humanity).

Vivi describes the organization’s work and the struggle for women’s participation in traditional forms of government: “Our organization works in West Seram, one of the many islands in Maluku. Our ritual ceremonies in Maluku are celebrated in a *baileo*, which is also where our meetings are held to discuss policy or anything about the village. But in the village, our experience is that women can contribute in the *baileo*, but only through the ceremony.”

The organization holds discussions with local women. “Most of the time, they come with their children,” Vivi explains, “so we hold activities for the children too so the women can focus on the meetings.” The local government is called *saniri* and the organization advocates for the political integration of indigenous women in the local government process. The region also confronts corporate gold mining interests that operate or seek to install operations on traditional lands, such as the islands of Buru and Halmahera islands, and the abundance of its oil reserves is likewise a target of oil companies such as CITIC Seram Energy.



“How do we fight the private company that put its claw in our tribe? The company is being aided by the media; the media always just presents the good side to everyone. That is why I think we need to create a network to help my tribe in facing the palm oil plantation company and the media.”

*Magdalena Kafiari, Papua, Indonesia*

### Papua

Papua, a province of Indonesia, comprises most of the western half of the island of New Guinea and nearby islands. The region is administered as two provinces: Papua and West Papua. The eastern half of New Guinea is Papua New Guinea. The population of approximately 3.6 million comprises ethnic Papuans, Melanesians, and Austronesians. The region is predominantly dense forest where numerous traditional tribes live such as the Dani of the Baliem Valley, although the majority of the population lives in or near coastal areas. Although the official and most commonly spoken language is Bahasa Indonesian, estimates of the number of tribal languages in the region range from 200 to over 700, with the most widely spoken including Dani, Yali, Ekari and Biak. The predominant religion is Christianity (often combined with traditional beliefs) followed by Islam, while the main industries include agriculture, fishing, oil production, and mining. One of the world’s biggest deposits of copper and gold ore is located at Tembagapura, in the west-central part of the province.

Magdalena Kafiari explains that her organization “conducts focused group discussions about women’s participation and women’s role.” She notes that usually a woman’s role in her community is “to get married, have a child, and serve the husband, and so on.”

*“We have traditional gatherings. Women prepare food for the men’s meeting; women serve the men, but they are not involved in the decision-making. The women can only serve.”* Arranged marriages are part of the tradition. If a man wants to marry a woman, he must bring a woman from his family to marry into the family of the woman. In some cases, young girls are forced into marrying much older men.

Papua has one of the highest illiteracy rates in Indonesia. Magdalena says, “Most of the people, especially women, are illiterate so we teach them how to write.”

There are 26,000 hectares occupied by private companies in Papua. “The people eventually became laborers in their own land, especially women and children. The children no longer go to school; they work in the plantations instead. There is widespread logging in our area.” Magdalena adds that technically the logging is legal since the big private companies have been granted permits by the state without prior community consent. The expansion of mining has also affected the region, with complaints against mining companies for violations of human and environmental rights on the rise.<sup>xx</sup>

### East Borneo

Dayak is a group of tribes that are comprised of various indigenous peoples on the island of Borneo, who are divided into about 450 ethno-linguistic groups. Despite some differences, these groups share physical features, architecture, language, an oral tradition, customs, social structure, weapons, agricultural technology and a similar worldview. The original Dayak identity and their cultural, economic, religious and political life have been preserved through their oral tradition.

JASS and FAMM-Indonesia work with the *Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara* (AMAN) or **Indigenous People’s Alliance of the Archipelago**, a national alliance of 1,163 indigenous communities throughout Indonesia. Olvy Oktaviani, a young activist explains that the alliance “aims to promote the rights and sovereignty of indigenous peoples across Indonesia” and aims to build stronger indigenous bonds and customary institutions, provide legal defense and advocacy for indigenous rights, strengthen customary-based economic systems, and promote the rights of indigenous women and youth.

Olvy works on a project to map indigenous communities in the area and build a database on the number of tribes; legal cases on land use, land rights, and conflicts; building community profiles. Her main responsibility is to organize grassroots groups of men and women within the indigenous people communities. She holds campaigns, mobilizations, and leads networking on indigenous peoples’ rights. Usually, around 45% of workshop participants are women, most of who are mothers who married at a young age. The capacity-building workshops foster confidence for indigenous women to speak in public about their problems.



“The coal mining operation destroys our land. Our community tries to literally stop the tractor of the mining companies because of this destruction.”

*Olvy Oktaviani*



“If you are a civil servant, your bride price is high. But even if a woman has a high bride price, it means nothing because she has to help her husband pay back the debt he owed for paying the bride price to her family.”

*Dina Lumbantobing, Batak tribe*

### Nias Island

Nias is an island off the western coast of Sumatra and covers an area of 5,121.3 km<sup>2</sup> (1,977.3 mile<sup>2</sup>), including minor offshore islands. It is mostly a lowland area rising to around 800 m (2,600 ft.) above sea level, with 788,132 inhabitants.

In Nias, JASS works with long-time ally **PESADA** (Perkumpululan *Sada Abmo*), a Sumatra-based NGO founded in 1990. PESADA is dedicated to fighting ethnic discrimination, and promoting women’s economic empowerment and rights through the model of an alternative women’s credit union.

PESADA’s Dina Lumbantobing is a local organizer who has been a founding leader in JASS Southeast Asia. Dina comes from the Batak tribe and is working for the rights of the sub-ethnic tribe of the Bataks called the Pakpaks.

Dina notes that the Batak is a very patriarchal ethnic group. One of the issues that women face in Nias Island is *jujuran*, or bride price. Bride price, also known as bridewealth or bride token, is an amount of money or property paid by the groom or his family to the parents of a woman upon the marriage of their daughter to the groom.

## CAMBODIA

Cambodia has 24 ethnic minority groups that make up an estimated 1.4% of the population. Indigenous communities are not mentioned in the constitution and were not acknowledged by any legislation until the 2001 Land Law granted them the right to establish communal land tenure.

Ratanakiri is a province of Cambodia located in the remote northeast. It borders the provinces of Mondul Kiri to the south and Stung Treng to the west and the countries of Laos and Vietnam to the north and east. In recent years, logging and mining have scarred Ratanakiri’s environment, long known for its beauty.

For over a millennium, Ratanakiri has been occupied by the highland Khmer Loeu people, who are a minority elsewhere in Cambodia. During the region’s early history, its Khmer Loeu inhabitants were exploited as slaves by neighboring empires. The slave trade economy ended during the French colonial era, but a harsh Khmerization campaign in the 50s and 60s after Cambodia’s independence again threatened Khmer Loeu ways of life. The campaign was designed to bring villages under government control,

limit the influence of insurgents in the area, and “modernize” indigenous communities. Some Khmer Loeu were forcibly moved to the lowlands to be educated in Khmer language and culture; ethnic Khmer from elsewhere in Cambodia were moved into the province, and roads and large rubber plantations were built. After facing harsh working conditions and sometimes involuntary labor on the plantations, many Khmer Loeu left their traditional homes and moved farther from provincial towns. The Khmer Rouge built its headquarters in the province in the 1960s, and bombing during the Vietnam War devastated the region. Today, rapid development in the province is altering traditional ways of life.

Ratanakiri is sparsely populated; its 150,000 residents make up just over 1% of the country’s total population. Residents generally live in villages of 20 to 60 families and engage in subsistence agriculture. Ratanakiri is among the least developed provinces of Cambodia, its infrastructure is poor, and the local government is weak. Health indicators in Ratanakiri are extremely worrisome with almost one in four children dying before the age of five. Education levels are also low; three quarters of the population is illiterate.

Hyang, a Khmer Loeu from Ratanakiri province, is partnering with JASS Southeast Asia and is a member of the **Highlanders Association**–Ratanakiri. Highlanders Association is a civil society advocacy network of indigenous ethnic minority people in Cambodia and is considered the first network of its kind in the country. The network aims to increase the capacity of indigenous men and women to preserve land, forest, natural resources, water sources on which their livelihood depends and giving voice to the people to influence the decisions affecting them.

Hyang’s organization conducts outreach to people in community on land issues, domestic violence, hygiene, women’s rights and child’s rights (access to school). Like West Papua in Indonesia, Ratanakiri province of Cambodia has one of the highest rates of illiteracy in the country. Most of the Khmer Loeu children are schooled only at home. Highlanders Association also mobilizes people to struggle on the issues they face such as land issues. The Cambodian government does all it can to prevent the people from mobilizing themselves for land rights.

What are the challenges that the Khmer Loeu community face? Hyang says “*Local authorities are not friendly to support these outreach activities that we do, especially if we touch on sensitive issues—such as land rights. Another challenge is the difficulty in mobilizing women.*”



“In the communities there’s a lot of machismo and the role of women is minimized. It’s been hard for the organizations to attend to the situation of women and even though they listen to the problems, you evaluate the situation and then what? What do you do to change the situation?”

*Matilde Perez, Guerrero, Mexico*

## MESOAMERICA

Indigenous and rural women on the frontlines in Mesoamerica—a region comprised of Mexico and Central America—are taking the lead in the world in defense of resources and rights. Nations in the region share the impact left by colonization and social inequalities, and by the current presence of organized crime and drug trafficking networks and increasing militarization.

JASS’ work with indigenous women leaders in the region began in 2010 through workshops to provide skills and networking for indigenous and rural women to make their voices and movements visible through information, communication and technology tools. Building on this work, in 2013, JASS’ Alquimia Feminist School brought together 30 rural and indigenous women from seven countries for a two-year sustained process that aims to share experiences, reflect and learn. These women are successfully deepening their analysis on the common issues affecting their lives and sharing knowledge among themselves and with other women and men around the region.

Inequalities in the region are expressed in all walks of life. They show up in the distribution of income, in access and control of basic services and productive resources such as labor, land, capital, information, technology, natural resources (or natural goods, as some indigenous peoples call them in reference to the relationship of harmony with nature), housing and political participation. Indigenous peoples of the region, who mainly live in rural areas and the rural population in general bear the brunt of these inequalities, and indigenous women confront the largest obstacles to exercising their rights, improving their living conditions and participating in decision-making that affects their lives and those of their communities.

Despite their marginalization, indigenous peoples in the region constitute a significant percentage of the rural population and the population in general in the region—12% in Mexico and approximately 60% in Guatemala, while occupying 56% of national territory in Guatemala, 11.2% in Honduras and 12.3% in Panama.

Up until the middle of the last century, in some contexts, and particularly in Guatemala, it was thought that indigenous peoples “had no soul” and therefore were not considered citizens with rights. The progress made in the recognition of indigenous peoples,

and in particular indigenous women, is the fruit of enormous efforts by these populations to demand respect for their rights and bring to light their contributions, vital knowledge and alternative proposals for life to the world.

Historically, indigenous peoples in the region, and to a lesser degree rural populations, face three main problems:

1. Lack of access to land and lack of respect for their territories, and forced displacement as a result of land grabs, racism and discrimination;
2. Lack of bilingual education, particularly for girls; and
3. Poor health conditions. Militarization and extreme violence, particularly against women, have aggravated the precarious conditions.

Since indigenous peoples are mostly located in the rural areas, they conserve an immense cultural wealth and are the stewards of lands with great biodiversity. As such, their territories are the constant targets for exploitation and environmental degradation by large transnational and national companies seeking, in the words of one indigenous woman leader, to “*take from under the earth, because they already took everything above ground*”.

The serious social, economic and political problems that women face are the result of patriarchal cultural patterns inherent in society, and of a restrictive development model that violates the rights of the large majority of the population especially vulnerable populations such as indigenous and rural women. These include:

### VIOLENCE AND MILITARIZATION

After decades of military dictatorships and occupations, the region is seeing a process of re-militarization. Although some state actors tolerate and even collude with organized crime, governments have adopted military force as the strategy to combat drug trafficking, resulting in the militarization of broad parts of the country, especially in the countryside where resources are concentrated, often occupying or invading the territory of rural and indigenous peoples. This effort has been reinforced since 9/11, the ramping up of security and military aid as a critical piece of US foreign policy, and the abundance of weaponry and private firms involved in these endeavors.



“We demand that the World Bank and International Monetary Fund stop financing development projects without prior consultation of the communities involved. We call on the international community to respect our nation, our people, our territory. We are not third-class citizens. We have dignity and we will continue in the struggle.”

*Participants in JASS' Alquimia Feminist School*

This combined context of organized crime, complicity and a breakdown in institutional controls cultivates violence. Violence against women in all spheres of life (domestic, workplace, family, social, cultural) is notable, reinforced by a macho social order, in which discrimination and subordination of women prevails, affecting their physical, emotional and social safety wellbeing. Cases of femicides—murders of women that have sex-based characteristics—have increased and become more brutal, reaching the highest rates in the world.

Drug traffickers and mafia target women's bodies to demonstrate territorial control, exercise vengeance among cartels and terrorize the population. Torture and dismemberment of women in Guatemala, Mexico and other countries in the region is a tactic to install a reign of terror.

Armed forces and paramilitaries are a standard feature of extractive projects. As part of this trend, the privatization of citizen security patrols, often comprised of former members of the armed forces and state security forces, terrorize villages and communities to defend their interests.

Although violence against women crosses class and culture, rural and indigenous women encounter greater obstacles in confronting it given the context of triple discrimination they face and the existence of beliefs and values that perpetuate and justify gender violence in family, religious, community and social life of women. They also have greater difficulty in accessing justice due to sexist and racist systems that primarily serve elites and the urban population.

## **RACISM AND CITIZENSHIP**

For indigenous women, racism and sexism together create an additional wall of discrimination: in the economy where they are paid less and denied basic labor protections, in access to justice where they are insulted and ignored by judges, and in politics where they are denied their full rights as citizens.

Racism against indigenous peoples in the region is institutionalized and cuts deep into daily life. Post-colonial states retain what's left of colonial practices and do not take into account the characteristics and particularities of native peoples and *mestizos*—mixed races. Racial discrimination silences indigenous peoples, negating their contributions and rights. Racism is a critical aspect of *power over* that subordinates indigenous peoples by permeating norms and beliefs that one group is superior over another.

## **MIGRATION AND HUMAN TRAFFICKING**

Extreme poverty and rising levels of violence have propelled out migration even beyond the rates that characterized the period of internal conflicts in the eighties. In recent years, forced recruiting of children, especially boys as young as eight or ten, into gangs has compelled mothers to flee to the US, often times to join family members who have already left. Honduras currently holds the highest emigration rate due to widespread violence, human rights violations and government's inability to respond and protect its citizens.

For women, the journey presents particular hardships. Reportedly, six out of ten women are raped on the journey through Mexico. They are also prey to kidnapping or taken under false pretenses for sex trafficking and sexual slavery

## **THE EXTRACTIVE ECONOMIC MODEL**

In past decades, public policies to promote an economic model based on “free market” policies that encourage foreign investment, deregulation and fast-moving unfettered capital, have promised to create jobs, raise incomes and bring development opportunities to communities and countries. These policies have failed to reduce poverty and have had a devastating impact on indigenous and rural communities. In practice they have favored a few at the expense of the majority. They have caused displacement of whole indigenous communities, division among people, a rise in conflict, deterioration of health and destruction of biodiversity, and a significant rise in risks of natural and environmental disasters. In the region, companies and governments who are leading this development model are steamrolling destructive projects with short-term benefits that have long-term negative impacts, and directly threaten indigenous' rights to land and cultural sovereignty. These megaprojects are linked to extractive industries, privatization of natural resources and goods, structural adjustment in the economy, exportation of mono-crops, and the use of water for commercial purposes.

Frequently, governments grant land concessions to private extractive industries that cover vast areas of indigenous traditional territory sparking conflicts as communities seek to protect and conserve their lands. The imposition of these projects is often accompanied by repression and violence. States frequently offer the service of military and police protection free of charge to multinational corporations and investments, such is the case in La Puya, Guatemala where a mining project threatens the local indigenous population and the Rio Blanco hydroelectric plant in Honduras, where indigenous peoples lands are being forcibly seized without prior consent as mandated by law.



Most of the people don't know how to respect women's rights. We get our lands and our inheritance taken from us because many men don't recognize our right to land as women. This has an impact on the family and among families.”

*Apolonia Placido, Mixteca from Guerrero, Mexico*

## WOMEN'S VOICES IN MESOAMERICA

### MEXICO<sup>xxi</sup>

Mexico's indigenous population represents around 12% of the total population—that's 13 million people from 62 different ethnic groups—concentrated in the southern and southeastern states. In the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas the majority of residents are indigenous.

According to the National Commission on the Development of Indigenous Peoples, 60% of the 7.4 million Mexicans who live in extreme poverty are indigenous.<sup>xxii</sup> They live in the poorest parts of the country where there are low human and social development indices, and high migration numbers. The main activity is subsistence farming.

In 2003, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, reported that Mexico's indigenous peoples suffer violations to their most basic human rights due in large part to agrarian and political conflicts in indigenous areas and to failings in the legal system.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Competition for natural resources in México has led to severe environmental and social problems that have all worsened in the past decades, including widespread deforestation, desertification, erosion of soil, water pollution, destruction of shoreline due to tourist development. In many indigenous areas, “biopiracy” or the patenting of biodiversity, has attracted researchers and companies. Without an adequate regulatory framework, bio-prospecting places indigenous rights at risk by prohibiting communities from traditional practices that use patented goods, such as medicine and nutrition. Private economic interests and the rise of organized crime, are logging forests on indigenous lands without consent of the communities. Given widespread government corruption at the local levels, the destruction of forests is being condoned by government officials through vague permits and opaque procedures.

Indigenous organizations and communities have mobilized in defense of the environment and of natural resources. They confront local bosses (*caciques*), and activists are increasingly facing persecution and even death for speaking out.

Between 2000 and 2010, the federal government granted concessions covering some 35% of national territory to foreign and national companies. In the state of Guerrero, indigenous peoples have organized to defend their territory against the incursions of large mining companies. The presence of transnational mining

companies has led to environmental degradation, violations of the collective rights of indigenous peoples and of agrarian and labor rights.

Half the mining concessions in Guerrero cover territory where the **Community Police and the Regional Directive of Communitarian Authorities** (CRAC) operate. CRAC is a citizen organized security group that polices its own community and its neighbors in an attempt to protect people from violence at the hand of corrupt military units and organized crime. CRAC is comprised of mostly men, but is co-led by Felicitas Martinez, an indigenous woman from the ma'phee community and JASS ally. Other groups where indigenous women and men are organized, like Tlachinollan, the municipality of Xochistlahuaca, Procesos Integrales para la Autogestión de los Pueblos (PIAP), community radio stations and the local diocese of Tlapa, have also held assemblies to ratify their rejection of mining projects on their land. They have managed to suspend part of the proposed projects, but the communities and the CRAC are concerned about a current proposal to convert the zone into a “biosphere reserve”, which would take control away from the indigenous communities while allowing companies to exploit the resources for profit.

Given the repercussions of mining on indigenous communities—including disease, insecurity and loss of indigenous identity—conflict is likely to exist for years, especially as the government and companies push the exploitation of minerals located under the fields where indigenous farmers grow coffee and other crops. The government claims to have 50-year concessions although communities were never consulted as legally mandated.

Another major problem is violence against rural and indigenous women. In 1996, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Yakin Ertürk, said, “... *Violence against women in Mexico can be described as the tip of the iceberg that hides below the surface more complex systemic problems that can only be understood in the context of, on the one hand, gender inequality rooted in society and, on the other, a judicial and governmental system divided on various levels that does not respond effectively to the crimes of violence, including gender violence.*”<sup>xxiv</sup> She added that indigenous women face systematic lack of access to justice and suffer four levels of discrimination—for their sex, their ethnic origin, the fact of being poor and their rural origins.

### HONDURAS

With a population of 8.4 million inhabitants, Honduras is a multiethnic country with six indigenous communities: Lencas,



“If the UN really represents or supports indigenous peoples, we ask them to back up the peoples. Because the law is there, but it isn’t respected and there is no justice. It’s important that they help enforce the laws.”

*Apolonia Placido, Mixteca from Guerrero, Mexico*

Misquitos, Tolupanés, Chortis, Pech, Tawahkas, and Garífunas. The Latin American Demography Center (CELADE) and the Development Fund for Indigenous Peoples of Latin America reported in 2008 Honduras has a population of 855,886 indigenous persons 11.2% of the total population, with 84.6% located in rural areas. Of the indigenous population, half are women.<sup>xxv</sup>

“We women who are part of an ethnic group confront two kinds of realities, both with a high degree of violence. The first reality is the violence generated by our position as women—we confront a patriarchal system that reduces us as individuals with rights. The other reality we challenge is the violence of the state and the big businesses that have taken over and robbed what little is left of our territories. Honduran women are persecuted as women, indigenous, poor and as defenders of our rights.”

*Lilian Lopez, Lenca from Honduras, COPINH (Civil Council of Popular and indigenous Organizations of Honduras)*

Currently the Honduran government heavily promotes concessions of indigenous territories for mineral extraction, hydroelectric dams, tourism projects or luxury hotels. It has delivered licenses for environmental management to foundations signed up with UN-REDD+ (Reduction of Emissions for Deforestation and Degradation of forests) and approved the law of Economic Employment and Development Zones, better known as “model cities.” Though defeated in a national referendum, the “model cities” strategy proceeds, designating whole sections of the country for investment and development to private interests and promising

minimal government regulation. Critics argue that this will ultimately lead to privately owned countries within Honduras.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The Mining Law of 2013 grants the federal government the right to indiscriminately grant concessions throughout the country, stripping the right to consultation and prior consent from indigenous peoples. To date there are 155 approved concessions for metal mining and 198 for non-metals. Betty Vasquez, of the **Santa Barbara Environmental Movement**, reports that the government has granted some 300 concessions covering nearly one-third of the country.

The country has at the same time become a staging ground for drug trafficking. Drug-traffickers have mounted labs, landing strips, and other facilities, with the apparent compliance of state actors. They are a new figure in the looting of indigenous communities, robbing them not only of their lands but also of their tranquility and security.

Honduras today faces the worst crisis of violence in its history. The Citizen Observatory of Violence reported that in 2012 the homicide rate was 85.5 per 100,000 inhabitants, earning Honduras the title of murder capitol of the world according to UN. Legislation intended to reduce violence has in practice remilitarized whole areas of the country by significantly increasing funding for the armed forces with minimal checks and controls. In 2013, the government decreed a security tax to fund arms purchases, enabling the government to buy more weapons, luxury vehicles for patrols and to cover the expense of mobilizing the armed forces. It also created the Military Police Unit (Decree No. 168-013) to confront organized crime and common delinquency, and essentially handed over the task of forest management to the Armed Forces.<sup>xxvii</sup>

In spite of massive public spending to build up the armed forces and create the new military police, violence has increased. According to a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, between 2005 and 2013 there was an increase of 263% in the violent deaths of women. The National Survey on Health and Population for 2011–2012 reports that 27% of women between the ages of 15 and 49, and 37% of women between 45–49 have suffered physical violence at some time in their lives. Data by the state does not classify indigenous women in particular.

Honduran civil society has never been more active in denouncing corruption and holding leaders to account. Women are leading some of the most important strategies to challenge and remedy these injustices. The following are some places and projects in



“My struggle is to ensure that there is dignified justice for Mexicans and for indigenous women of Mexico. This is to say, I want to leave a seed for generations to come; I have a little girl and I hope she is able to enjoy the right to justice.”

*Felicitas Martinez, Community Police of the Costa Chica and Mountain in Guerrero, Mexico*

Honduras where people movements are protesting, and where indigenous and rural women are playing a key role in the defense of land, territories and rights:

**Desa Company and SINOHYDRO.** The company in the community of Rio Blanco in Intibucá, financed by Chinese investments, has not been able to build a hydroelectric plant thanks to the organizing efforts of the local indigenous Lenca community. The government has responded to the community's efforts to stop the plant with high levels of repression leading to the assassination of Tomas Garcia and trumped up criminal charges against Berta Caceres, both leaders of, the **Civil Council of Popular and Indigenous Organizations of Honduras** (COPINH) spearheading the effort. She was accused of sedition, usurpation of lands before a national court that issued a decision to provisionally close the case.

**San José de la Paz-Aguacatal** in the department of La Paz. When mining concessions rose to 38, affecting 22 communities, residents protested that they had been tricked by the company since it failed to provide promised housing and lighting. Some had sold their lands and other families were evicted without receiving any type of compensation. The main investor in the company that has failed to live up the agreements is the Deputy for the Department, Gladis Aurora Lopez of the ruling party.

**San Francisco de Opalaca, Intibucá,** where a mining company and a hydroelectric company are affecting 22 communities. Corrupt local authorities, including the mayor, are stripping residents of communitarian land titles to grant concessions to the company, a clear sign that the state is complicit in violating the rights of indigenous communities.

**Vallecito,** where companies that grow and process African palm, oil companies and drug traffickers are devastating communities. In July 2014, Miriam Miranda, leader of the **Black Fraternal Organization of Honduras** (OFRANEH), and a leader against the palm oil industry in her community, was kidnapped by a group of heavily armed men, despite having precautionary measures<sup>xxvii</sup> from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. Miriam managed to escape from her captors and is still fighting. In this region, groups have denounced the complicity between the Armed Forces and police with groups of drug traffickers, paramilitaries and private security guards.

## GUATEMALA

Guatemala is made up of Mayans, Garifuna, Xinka and mestizos. With its profound cultural and biological diversity and important natural resources, the country is globally strategic. According to the 2011 census, Guatemala has 14,713,763 inhabitants, of which 52% are women and 60% indigenous, with more than four million indigenous women. Half the population lives in poverty, with the highest poverty among the Mayan population, where 30% of the adult population did not finish grade school. Half the children suffer chronic malnutrition<sup>xxix</sup>; 50.6% of indigenous women are poor and 27.5% live in extreme poverty, with high rates of pregnancy among girls and adolescents often due to sexual abuse.<sup>xxx</sup>

Sexism, racism, and xenophobia are rampant, most heavily affecting indigenous and rural women. The absence of statistics broken down by ethnicity, gender and age in government data reflects the prevalence of institutionalized racism and makes it impossible to evaluate the real conditions of indigenous and rural women. Indigenous and rural women rarely have access to public services due primarily to entrenched racial and gender discrimination, and the failure to enforce the rights of indigenous peoples.

The high concentration of wealth in the hands of a few families reinforces the lack of access to and unequal distribution of land. The majority of indigenous women who work the land are left with little to no economic opportunities since they are excluded by laws, and lack of financial services and housing. Although indigenous women are increasingly working in the formal labor market, they continue to work in the home and with families, which is rarely, if ever, valued, shared or compensated sufficiently. In Guatemala, indigenous women are often used and paraded by government to show off the cultural richness and folklore of the country to promote tourism.

The hierarchy of the Catholic Church has strong influence in Guatemalan society, and has worked to suppress the rights of the LGBT community and reproductive and sexual rights.

The brave testimonies of dozens of indigenous women in the recent genocide trial of former dictator Ríos Montt served to reveal the deep misogyny that exists in Guatemalan culture. Today thousands of women continue to be abused, raped, enslaved and exploited sexually, tortured and murdered in Guatemala. In 2010, the country registered 707 femicides—one of the highest rates in the world. Twelve transgender persons were assassinated, and 40,000 cases of physical, psychological, or economic violence against women were reported that same year. According to the report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Independence of



“For rural and indigenous women, one of the challenges is to make visible our political, economic, cultural and social participation in the territories. We’re developing creative models in this network for life that don’t depend on the economy so much as on the idea of reciprocity, collective labor, redistribution of goods—without necessarily circulating in the monetary system controlled by the world powers.”

*Aura Lolita Chávez Ixcaquic, maya k'iche', Guatemala*

Judges, Prosecutors and Lawyers, only 2% of homicides committed are brought to trial. An increase in organized crime, especially of cartels from Mexico, for drug trafficking, kidnapping, extortion, and sex trafficking of women, has increased militarization and violence which has increased the dangers indigenous and rural women face while reducing their freedoms.

For example, the massacre in Totonicapán during a state of siege in Huehuetenango, left six people murdered and 30 more wounded when the army shot indiscriminately to break up a protest. In May 2012, during a state of siege declared in Barillas, Huehuetenango local residents were illegally evicted, a community leader was assassinated, and dozens of defenders of land rights and indigenous territory accused of crimes. The government sent in armed forces to subdue the indigenous community’s opposition to a hydroelectric plant Hidro Santa Cruz S.A. after the company and the state refused to recognize a prior community decision against the plant.

Indigenous communities throughout the country are currently facing a new challenge with the advance of large-scale African palm and sugarcane plantations for export, oil drilling, mining, and hydroelectric mega projects without consultation. These are causing major conflicts within communities. The state is criminalizing and politically persecuting those who defend the collective and individual rights of rural and indigenous peoples. During 2013, the group UDEFEGUA registered 657 attacks on human rights leaders and defenders and 18 murders—an increase of 72%, compared to the previous year. Eight indigenous women are currently facing arrest orders since 2008 for defending eviction from their lands by the Marin mine of the Canadian company Montana.

In 2012 a total of 126 women leaders and human rights defenders have been attacked, among them many indigenous leaders. These attacks include threats and warnings, criminalization processes, excessive use of force, intimidation, harassment, psychological abuse, attempted murder, and sexual violence. The main perpetrators are police, military personnel, local authorities, private security agents, paramilitary groups, family members, and organized crime.

In La Puya, women were beaten and brutally evicted by the police for opposing the mining project EXMINGUA/KCA. Community leader, Yolanda Oqueli was shot twice in June 2012; she still carries a bullet lodged near her spinal chord. Methods used in these attempted assassinations are reminiscent of those used during the internal armed conflict against indigenous communities of the 1980s.

### **In memory of Guatemalan indigenous and rural women killed for defending their lands, territories and rights**

- **Sofía Vidal Osorio**, murdered in 2009 in Izabal.
- **Evelinda Ramírez** of Ocos, San Marcos, killed in 2010 for denouncing abuses by the European electric company UNION FENOSA.
- **Catalina Mucú Maas**, q'eqchi, killed in 2011 after denouncing the usurpation of communal lands for African Palm production in the community of Quebrada Seca, Livingston Izabal.
- **María Margarita Chub Ché**, of Parará, Panzos, Alta Verapaz, assassinated for opposing violent evictions in 14 indigenous communities of the Valle del Polochic, ordered in response to the requests of and in benefit of the sugar company Ingenio Chabil Utzaj S.A.

Guatemalan organizations, with strong participation and leadership of indigenous and rural women are challenging the government to demand the enforcement of the international and regional mechanisms that protect the rights of indigenous and rural women and guarantee a full life, without discrimination or racism. Among our demands are:

- To develop complete, reliable and disaggregated data generated by indigenous and rural women
- To strengthen life systems based on the profound love that gives new meaning to health, recreation, art, science, education, and spirituality, taking back millennia-old ancestral practices of indigenous peoples, especially our women ancestors in a multigenerational commitment.

### **NICARAGUA**

Nicaragua has two autonomous regions on the Atlantic Coast that are constitutionally recognized under the Law of Autonomy. These regions cover 56% of national territory and are governed by the indigenous and Afro-descendent inhabitants. The Northern region, the RAAN, has seven municipalities and eight territories and its capital is Puerto Cabanas Bali. Its inhabitants are mainly Miskitus, followed by Afro-descendants and Mayagnas. The South Atlantic Autonomous Region’s capital is Bluefields and its population is largely Afro-descendants and Mayagnas.



“My big fear is that my children get sick, and my other fear is when there are threats from x or y person for accompanying victims. We’re defending women but we don’t have anyone to defend us. The system itself attacks us because it views us as its enemies.”

*Jessica Muller, Organization of Indigenous Women of Rio Coco*

In violation of their autonomous rights, the Ortega administration granted a concession to a Chinese company for construction of the Gran Canal of Nicaragua to rival the Panama Canal. This megaproject threatens to destroy the last reserve of fresh water in Central America.

Forty-six percent of the Nicaraguan population lives in poverty; according to the 2013 UN Human Development Report and 11.9% live on \$1.24 dollars a day (PNUD 2011). The country lacks decent jobs, and out migration, drug trafficking and violence.

Growing levels of violence, including gender-based violence, have historic roots. When the war between the Sandinista Front for National liberation and the so-called contra ended, a process began to reinsert the armed groups into society that largely failed. Most of the demobilized armed groups did not find work and many of these formed gangs or delinquent groups. In post-war Nicaragua the lack of professional police and the weakness of the judicial system have also contributed to violence.

The law that allowed therapeutic abortions for the past century was abolished and in 2013 the Assembly reformed Law 779 against violence against women to include mediation. Violence against women and children is a huge problem and women’s organizations reported 73 femicides in 2013.

Economic and political reforms to open the economy have not brought better living conditions to the population. Instead the gaps have grown. Inequalities of class, ethnic group gender or others and exclusion have become structural and chronic. The Atlantic Coast, rich in cultural and biological diversity, is seeing conflict due to land grabs and disputes over boundaries between communities. The government ignores indigenous and rural women in projects to compensate for land grabs and their role as activists in defense of territories is mostly unrecognized.

In the past two years indigenous peoples and ethnic communities of the Caribbean coast have advanced in obtaining land titles under the law that recognizes historical collective rights for communities in the autonomous regions. In 2011, 15 territories were titled—11 in RAAN, two in the south autonomous region and two in Jinotega. The north autonomous region now has title to 216 communities, covering nearly 2.25 million hectares.<sup>xxxii</sup>

However, a land title is not a guarantee of improvement in living conditions for indigenous peoples. An influx of mestizos migrating

to indigenous lands and territories is breaking the harmony between nature and society and causing conflicts between mestizo and indigenous groups around who manages resource use in the surrounding communities. Some of the territorial governments do not assure prior and informed consultation on decisions affecting the indigenous inhabitants. Deforestation due to logging, and pollution of rivers, massive destruction by new colonizers and the expanding agricultural frontier conflict between Honduras and the Waspam border continue unabated.

Rural and indigenous women in Nicaragua demand access to lands and justice to eliminate violence, access to healthcare, protection of lands and territories in indigenous territories of the RAAN, access to quality education, security and the right to preserve and practice our customs and traditions and conserve our Mother Earth from pollution, climate change and other threats.

## COSTA RICA

Costa Rica has a high human development index, but as one researcher put it, “*Within the unequal development of Costa Rica as a Latin American country there are historic and structural conditions that have relegated certain ethnic groups to geographic isolation, discrimination, exploitation and exclusion from social, political, economic and cultural development.*”<sup>xxxiii</sup>

As rural and indigenous women, we are far from the glowing statistics and suffer inequality and discrimination as ethnic groups and as women. The 2011 national census shows that there are 51,709 indigenous women in the country, of which 29,880 live in the countryside. The overall illiteracy level is only 2.8%, but among indigenous women in rural areas it reaches 13.83%, and only 5.8% have finished secondary school. Cahuita, among the 10 districts with the highest indigenous population, has a 5.5 times higher rate of maternal mortality. Indigenous women face challenges in access to education, closing the gap in healthcare especially maternal healthcare, and other basic conditions for freely choosing and fulfilling life projects.

Costa Rica has signed major international agreements on indigenous rights, including the ILO Convention 169 and has 68 institutional offices linked directly or indirectly to the issue of indigenous and rural peoples and women. However, most are not specialized in indigenous issues. There is little direct coordination between the state and indigenous peoples and associations for integral indigenous development are weak or non-existent.



“We have 45 projects operating in the San Carlos River watershed and more in process in terms of permits and departmental studies. We’re also doing a local and national campaign against genetically modified organisms, asking for a law to ban their use the same way we accomplished the prohibition on open pit mining.”

*Heidy Murillo, San Carlos, Costa Rica, UNOVIDA*

Indigenous communities confront difficulties in exercising their rights, the largest being access to land. Extensive non-indigenous land ownership in indigenous territories has eroded control over their resources and territories. In Terraba and Zapaton more than 85% of the land is in the hands of non-indigenous. Although the state recognizes indigenous territories and their rights to possession and communities technically have the power to manage their natural resources, there are no indicators on compliance due to the complex web of institutions and organisms.

In Salitre, violence and para-militarization by non-indigenous peasants reached alarming proportions in 2014, with the branding of an indigenous man, the isolation of several indigenous persons for several days by cutting off their road and the burning of several ranches, endangering the lives of men, women and children inside. In Terraba the dispute over the hydroelectric plant PDH Diquís led to violence in the first months of 2013.

Indigenous communities have organized to block hydroelectric plant that would flood indigenous lands in the south, deforestation, and land recovery in their territories. This has caused mixed responses from non-indigenous inhabitants and even some indigenous people with conflicting interests within the communities and between these and local areas. Main obstacles include the lack of coverage of these conflicts in the media; disdain, stereotypes and prejudices toward indigenous peoples; the structural violence of the system and a complex but insufficient institutional structure.

## **EL SALVADOR**

In El Salvador statistics shows that the rural population has the least opportunities of improving housing, attaining higher education and having access to Internet.<sup>xxxxiii</sup> Women have fewer opportunities to attain an educational level above their parents’ (61% versus 72%) and rural areas have fewer possibilities than urban.

Women in our country are recognizing that they rights, and that they live in a state of violence and must empower themselves to be able to denounce what is going on in their homes, workplaces, study centers and everywhere there’s violence. The signing of the Peace Accords in 1992 brought demilitarization, but the problem now is threats from gangs, or *maras*. Women are especially vulnerable to extreme violence from these criminal groups. During the period of armed conflict women’s organizations were born that sought protection and respect for human rights and that continue to fight alongside other national and international organizations for women’s rights.

Climate change, environmental destruction and the risk of drought, extreme flooding and destruction of ecosystems affect health and society, but women’s interests, and needs are not represented in movements to conserve the environment. It’s necessary to adopt a gender perspective and examine the adverse effects to women and children, who make up the majority of the poor and most depend on the natural resources that are threatened. Climate change also increases women’s workload, in the labor market and in reproduction and domestic work. In rural El Salvador, the task of getting water for the family is typically a woman’s responsibility and it becomes more difficult when access to clean water becomes a challenge. Extreme climate conditions such as storms, floods and cyclones leave women with more work and pressure both during and after the disasters, due to their responsibility to feed families and care for young children, old people and the sick and wounded.

Many women are involved in organizations fighting for the right to water in the country, train rural women in agriculture with a ecofeminist strategy, running reforestation programs in environmental high-risk zones, developing programs to raise awareness and use organic fertilizer to replace chemicals and pesticides. In 2011, the Salvadoran government began a national water reform program. One of the major achievements of the reform process is the elaboration of the General Law on Waters. Indigenous and rural women have been very active in the recently formed Water Forum of organizations and institutions to coordinate water use and in opposition to all forms of privatization of water or water services, promoting the universal right to water and access.

El Salvador also has a movement of citizen resistance to the Canadian-Australian mining company Pacific Rim/Ocean Gold in the department of Cabañas. A national campaign against metal mining recently presented to the Assembly a legislative proposal to ban mining in the country and demand that Pacific Rim withdraw its demand against the Salvadoran government for \$301 million dollars, and shut down the El Dorado mine that has environmental destructive impact. In many of these environmental battles there are powerful political and economic interests that block agreement.

The Central American Free Trade Agreement facilitates the power of environmentally destructive companies. National political and economic sectors ally with transnational corporations thanks to the kickbacks they receive from the exploitation of the national resources. The impact of environmental pollution on rural women is greater since it not only affects the quality of life in health and other services, but also leads to high-risk pregnancies, premature



births, congenital malformations in the baby at birth, cancer, kidney failure, death etc. in consequence of the lead that is ingested in the water.

## PANAMA

Indigenous peoples make up 12.3% of Panama's population, in seven peoples: Embera, Waunaan, Ngöbe, Bugle, Gunas, Naso and Bri Bri. The UN Human Development Report for 2014 reveal high inequality—the average income of the top 10% is 35 times the average income of the poorest 10%. Inequality is even worse when viewed from the point of view of rural and indigenous peoples. The average income for rural households is only 80.27 balboas and for the Ngöbe-Buglé, just 41 balboas.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Afro-descendent and indigenous populations have historically been excluded and discriminated against on the basis of their race and ethnicity.

Violence against indigenous women, especially in rural and indigenous areas, is common. They also face the violence inherent in takeovers of their territories, displacement, cultural destruction, and sexual violence in the context of militarization. Persistent conflicts include the systematic invasion of indigenous territories; insecurity along the Panama-Colombia border with the presence of guerrillas, paramilitaries and insurgents; drug trafficking; top-down megaprojects; and the interconnection of Panama and Colombia.

No data exists on violence against indigenous women, but there is a need to provide them with tools to confront rights violation. Although we live in a formal democracy, methods of repression, hostility and racist violence continue against indigenous peoples—especially women and children and adolescents.

**Case of the Ngöbe-Buglé:** contradictions between the integral community development and the impact of mining projects in their territory go back to the 1960s. Government economic policies have fueled the conflicts, endangering our territorial rights, and cultural and political autonomy established by law. In the past three years, the conflict has worsened and hundreds of Ngäbe, Buglé and peasant farmworkers have died. The Comarca Ngäbe-Buglé possesses great wealth in forests, rivers and biodiversity. Outside interests want to usurp this collective wealth—not for development of the peoples, but to benefit private economic interests of particular groups and transnational investors.

Although Panama does not have an army since it was abolished in 1994, in the patriotic parades it is evident that the National Border Service (SENAFRONT) and the National Aeronaval Service have been given war equipment and training under the justification of

the war on drugs. Violations of the rights of Ngäbes, Bugles and peasant women, children and teenagers include torture, physical and psychological abuse, sexual violence, destruction of property, invasion and other aggressions.

The strategic geopolitical value of indigenous lands, including borders, mountains and coasts and the national resources they hold in forests, rivers, gold and copper deposits, islands, beaches, mangroves, biodiversity and cultural knowledge bring problems that doubly affect women in the sphere of the family and the community. Women, especially indigenous women, live in a permanent situation of vulnerability due to the nation's security and economic policies.

Women in the Ngäbe-Bugle Comarca experience constant violation of their rights. The institutional mechanism of participation in matters that directly affect them, as a people such as land, water, mining extraction, and hydroelectric plants is frequently ignored and manipulated by government institutions. This has led to violent clashes between the people of the Comarca and security forces.

Many indigenous women press for consultation to assure that the family is at the center of decision-making and insist on considering the impact project would have on present and future generations. The national government does not guarantee consultation and participation of indigenous women of the Ngäbe. Attempts to promote consultations in certain situations to neutralize popular resistance revealed bad faith and a lack of respect since Ngäbe sympathetic to government ends were the only ones called to the consult.

Government economic policies throughout history have directly affected the Ngäbe-Bugle by going against their cosmovision of our original peoples and forcing displacement of families. The fundamental right to life of a people coexisting in harmony with nature when violated is an attack on the human rights of our culture to exist.

In incidents in 2010 in Bocas del Toro, Changuinola, and 2011 in communities surrounding the Comarca Ngäbe-Bugle in Veraguas, Chiriquí, Bocas del Toro and indigenous settlements of the Ngäbe and Bugle people and in other communities in 2012, the Martinelli government launched repression, with attacks on life and the survival of our culture, assassinating and physically injuring people to demobilize protests in defense of our rights and territories. Women of all ages actively participated.

The extractive mining model is a problem of human rights for us since they carry out or plan to carry out projects in ways that directly



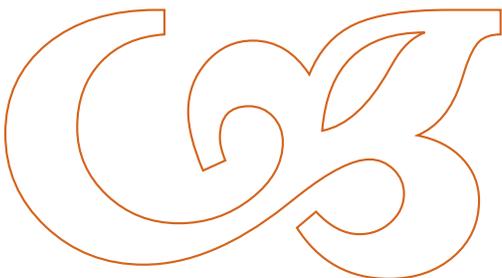
affect our families especially woman and children who suffer the consequences of being relocated from their territories of origin affecting the way of life of the families and exacerbating poverty.

**Case of the Madungandi and Wargandi Comarca:** The Madungandi and Wargandi Comarca was established by law, but with the influx of colonizers, the right to lands, life, health and development has been placed in jeopardy. Indigenous organizations (ANATI) have asked the government to inspect the area to resolve the conflict, but to date we have not received a response. Kuna indigenous women say they cannot sleep well due to the insecurity and tensions with colonizers.

**Case of the Guna Yala Comarca:** The Guna Yala Comarca registers infant mortality rates between 40-62 deaths for one thousand live births, compared to a national rate of 20.8. The HIV rate is also high, especially for pregnant women and their children. A risk factor is migration to the cities and cross border migration. There are many cases of sexual assault by the border guards against younger Kuna women.

Other current conflicts demonstrate the complex dynamics in the region:

- **Comarca Guna Yala-Senafront:** a conflict began when the National Border Guard (Senafront) carried out military maneuvers with the support of the U.S. Southern Command without prior, free and informed consent from inhabitants, ignoring the authority of the Kuna General Congress. As part of this conflict, the press has been building up a negative image of the Kuna Yala Comarca, and several media have called it a haven for drug traffickers.
- The government has refused to provide needed infrastructure, making **transportation between the Guna Yala Comarca and Panama City** extremely difficult and cutting off the region for activities that could benefit the people.





## LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE LOCAL TO THE GLOBAL

### FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

**Putting profits over people** is all too common by our governments to the detriment of the lives and livelihood of indigenous peoples. Our governments are supposed to serve and protect the people but instead collude with private companies against their own people.

We found common ground in the many challenges that indigenous women have to face. Most often, **we do not have decision-making or bargaining power** in our tribe or ethnic group. As in the case of Indonesia, whenever community meetings are held, “what the women do is mostly prepare for the meeting.” Any opportunity we gain to lead or decide is the result of a long struggle and assertion. This is particularly the case of the women of the Cordilleras in the Philippines.

**Patriarchy is deeply ingrained** in our indigenous communities. It is evident in the prevalence of domestic violence cases (as cited among the Mon women), where it is even considered taboo to talk about it. Rape is a tool of war in indigenous communities of Myanmar and the Philippines where there is on-going armed conflict.

**Continuous education about our rights**, not only as part of the indigenous community, but also as women, is crucial.

Most important; **organizing indigenous women is key**. The power of organizing indigenous women cannot be undermined. It is a continuous process that we have to sustain.

### FROM MESOAMERICA

To the international community specifically, we ask:

- **For fair monitoring of human rights mechanisms and national and international laws** guaranteeing our collective rights so the governments will respect our existence as rural and indigenous women.
- **That the peoples, the states and the nations of the world recognize and respect our forms of social, economic, political and cultural organization** as indigenous and rural peoples from the basis of our own cosmivision and reality.

- **That the nation members of the United Nations respect the rights of indigenous peoples and women** to our land and territory as part of the right to live and defend our own existence.

“Although we have many instruments on the international level and recommendations, these are not filtering down to indigenous and rural women. So it’s important to discuss the sense of the recommendations from the point of view of the women, what they really mean... and it’s necessary for them to give special attention to women. They also have to make sure that the mechanisms are more accessible and there is more follow up because for an indigenous woman without a large organization, she can’t use them.”

*Matilde Perez, Guerrero, Mexico*

There is no substitute for organizing by and for women themselves.

Indigenous and rural women are the courageous promoters of a sustainable way of life for the planet and for their communities. The lands they live on are the last refuges of nature, the lungs of the earth, the reservoirs of water that guarantee physical survival, the reserves of biodiversity that express the wealth and abundance of our world. Traditional knowledge and values of interconnectedness are an essential ingredient for improving an ailing world. We learn from each other.

As we confront the challenges, we celebrate these values of life, conserved and defended for millennia, and the spirit of struggle that supports rural and indigenous women in today’s hostile environment. In nature, family, community—reconfigured as spaces for the full human development of women—we find the hope and the joy and the sisterhood that is the bedrock of our work for change.



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- xxiv. Report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women,
- xxv. Yakin Ertürk: Mexico, e/cn.4/2006/61/add.4.
- xxvi. XVI Censo de Población y V de Vivienda año 2001.
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- xxviii. <http://www.elheraldo.hn/seccioness secundarias/unidadinvestigativa/379739-213/militares-podr%C3%A1n-explotar-los-bosques>
- xxix. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, Precautionary Measures: “...in serious and urgent situations, the Commission may, on its own initiative or at the request of a party, request that a State adopt precautionary measures to prevent irreparable harm to persons or to the subject matter of the proceedings in connection with a pending petition or case, as well as to persons under the jurisdiction of the State concerned, independently of any pending petition or case.” <http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/decisions/precautionary.asp>
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# NOTES



“Our voices are growing stronger and need to be gathered with the voices of feminist women throughout the world. We are finally breaking decades of silence. We have a long ways to go and we need to strengthen our action networks to go beyond borders imposed by structures of racist, patriarchal and exclusive states.”

*Aura Lolita Chávez, Council of K'iche' Peoples in Defense of Life, Mother Nature, Earth and Territory (CPK), Guatemala.*

## **JASS (JUST ASSOCIATES)**

JASS (Just Associates) is an international feminist organisation grounded and driven by the partners and initiatives of its regional networks in Mesoamerica, Southern Africa and Southeast Asia. JASS is dedicated to strengthening and mobilizing women's voice, visibility and collective organizing power to change the norms, institutions and policies that perpetuate inequality and violence, and to create a just, sustainable world for all.

Founded as a learning community by a group of activists, popular educators and scholars from 13 countries in 2002, JASS generates knowledge from experience with the hope of improving the theory and practice of women's rights, development and democracy.

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