

*A collection of personal essays by indigenous women*

# HerStory

**Retold**



Published by  
Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)

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**In partnership with**

Indigenous Voices in Asia Network (IVAN)

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Sida

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## Acronyms

<b>AIPP</b>	Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact
<b>AMAN</b>	Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara
<b>AWN</b>	Adivasi Women's Network
<b>BC</b>	Benguet Corporation
<b>BDO</b>	Block Development Officer
<b>BHW</b>	Barangay Health Worker
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>CWEARC</b>	Cordillera Women's Education Action Research Centre
<b>KDNG</b>	Kachin Development Networking Group
<b>ICSO</b>	Indigenous Community Support Organization
<b>IRAM</b>	Indigenous Rights Active Members
<b>IVA</b>	Indigenous Voices in Asia
<b>IVAN</b>	Indigenous Voices in Asia Network
<b>IW</b>	Indigenous women
<b>IWFNEI</b>	Indigenous Women Forum of North East India
<b>JAP</b>	Jatiya Adivasi Parishad
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Government Organization
<b>NIWF</b>	National Indigenous Women's Federation
<b>NPA</b>	New People's Army
<b>PESA</b>	Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Area) Act
<b>SGM</b>	Surya Graha Manunggal
<b>SIDA</b>	
<b>VAIW</b>	Violence against indigenous women
<b>VAW</b>	Violence against women
<b>VDC</b>	Village Development Committee
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>WWSF</b>	Women World Summit Foundation
<b>IWNT</b>	Indigenous Women's Network of Thailand





## **Foreword**

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

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

This book, as a compilation of indigenous women's "her stories", is a reflection of the conditions and struggles on the ground of indigenous women. They are the stories of Afrida, Bua-Ban, Cristina, and 9 other indigenous women who are extra-ordinary women in their own right. They are in the hearts and minds of other women and villagers because of their suffering, struggles, sacrifices, commitments, dedication and lifetime achievements in advancing the dignity of women and indigenous peoples. This is now the second volume of her story produced by AIPP to amplify further the voices and struggles on indigenous women across Asia

Their voices and their stories need to be heard and relayed. They echo the realities on the ground and their actions are inspiring reflections of what can be done. Their shared aspiration for equality and dignity for all needs the support of everyone. After all, the world will only be truly free if women and indigenous peoples are not discriminated against. When they are living with dignity and pride for who, and what they are and when they have recognition of their roles and contributions to society.

**Joan Carling**  
**Secretary General**  
**Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)**


## Introduction

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

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

In 2013, AIPP published 'HerStory of Empowerment, Leadership and Justice', off the back of the Empowering Indigenous Women in Traditional Customary Institutions project. Now we are pleased to have produced a second book-length collection of personal essays and stories from Indigenous Women change makers across Asia with the generous support of the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and in collaboration with Indigenous Voices of Asia Network (IVAN).

The following stories have been collected through the tireless dedication of our partners and friends from indigenous communities in Northeast India, Mainland India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Philippines and the Thailand. Many of the forthcoming stories have been narrated in the storyteller's indigenous language, translated into the national



language, and then translated again into English. In order to protect the integrity of the stories and in respect for the authors, the majority of the text has been directly translated with minor technical editing. The stories have passed through many ears to end at this publication, and we applaud those women who have participated, for their bravery and commitment in sharing their stories.

This publication is a reflection of the hard work of everyone involved in the Indigenous Women's movement in Asia. We hope that this collection of stories can be used to empower and promote the solidarity of all indigenous women.



Mother Petra, along with another veteran indigenous woman leader, in the Cordillera, Endena Cogasi during Cordillera day in April 1997. Photo credit - CWEARC



# Chapter 1

## Southeast Asia

Afrida, INDONESIA

Mardiana, INDONESIA

Cristina, PHILIPPINES

Petra, PHILLIPPINES

“

*How important it is for  
us to recognize and  
celebrate our heroes  
and she-roes!*

”

-- Maya Angelou, African  
American Poet

**Name:** Afrida Erna Ngato  
**Ethnicity:** Pagu  
*Halmahera Utara, Indonesia*

Her name is Afrida Erna Ngato. She used to be called as Afrida. Acting as chief of Pagu tribe, she has been given the traditional title Sangaji Pagu. This ethnic group is located at Halmahera Utara and its territory is covering 5 sub-districts and 13 villages. Afrida Erna Ngato is a person with persistent spirit in defending the rights of Pagu indigenous people<sup>1</sup>.

For ethnic groups, the ancestral land is not only means of livelihood, but also for self-identity. This domain is inherent in the social and cultural system, and this characteristic applies as well to the Pagu tribe.

However, according to Afrida, as has been written by Inggih Pambudi at Kompasiana<sup>2</sup>, the identity and language of Pagu tribe is being threatened with extinction; “Young people are no longer proud of being part of an ethnic group. They feel un-prestige if they are being called as indigenous children,” he said, “The Pagu tribe problems are becoming more complex since the presence of the extractive company PT NHM (Nusa Halmahera Minerals) around their territory”.

The government, added Afrida, has given permission to this company, and even though the company location is within the Pagu indigenous territory, there is an absence of appropriate and effective consultation with the Pagu indigenous people. Many problems have arisen because the opening of this company, starting with environmental pollution, criminalization, and even increasing difficulty to do the gardening and plantation. “We were not allowed to cross the territories which fall under the PT NHM mining concession area while we walked through the forest,” said Afrida.

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<sup>1</sup> Interviewed with Afrida Erna Ngato was being taken at Central Kalimantan, during National Assembly Meeting AMAN III, February 19-23 last year.

<sup>2</sup> Kompasiana is form of website user generate content (UGC) managed by KOMPAS-Gramedia Group, one of the biggest publishing and printing media company in Indonesia (<http://m.kompasiana.com/post/read/597822/1/suku-adat-pagu-jangan-ambil-hak-kami.html> accessed on July 7, 2014)

The Pagu indigenous people's livelihoods used to depend on their maritime resources and coconut plantations (which are processed further into copra). However, the marine products are decreasing over time and no longer sufficient, allegedly because of mining waste. Thus, it is no wonder Afrida has initiated the struggle to fight for their rights.

Risks of this struggle have been experienced by Afrida. Terror and threats have been commonly faced by her. One such terror happened on January 17, 2012. In that time, the clock has pointed to 20.30 local time.

At that time, Sangaji Pagu Afrida Erna Ngato, along with two indigenous youth (Yafet and Marlina Lopa), visited the Dusun Beringin Tabobo Village. This visit was intended to see Pagu people that live in that village, as well as to meet several parties to ask them to participate in youth agenda of the indigenous people alliance of the archipelago (AMAN) in Bogor, West Java.

But, the police had also provoked people of Baringin Village before their arrival. The police had incited villagers to commit acts of violence against Sangaji Pagu Afrida. "Throw her, I will trample her, hit her, catch her and throw her in the back," said that policeman, as written in adatlist<sup>3</sup> and blog of indigenous peoples<sup>4</sup>.

After that incident, around 9.00 PM, Sangaji Pagu was then secured by the leader of Beringin Village in his house and had asked Tomabaru people to pick Sangaji. Not long after, several people of Tomabaru came and took Sangaji home. On the way back to Tomabaru Village, group of Sangaji Pagu was then pursued by an unknown person. This person was identified as police intelligence. However, this person suddenly disappeared.

However, those who terrorized and threatened Afrida, have not discouraged her to keep fighting for Pagu indigenous people. Not only to fight the extractive industry which has threatened the source of livelihood of Pagu indigenous people, but also to defend the Pagu language from extinction. And this struggle has been appreciated by researcher and analysts concerned with language matters.

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<sup>3</sup> Adatlist is a mailing list organized by Indigenous People alliance of Archipelago (AMAN)

<sup>4</sup> <http://jurnaltoddoppuli.wordpress.com/2012/01/18/kronologis-kasus-pelecehan-masyarakat-adat-pagu/>

According to M Hisyam, one researcher of LIPI<sup>5</sup> (Indonesian Institute of Science) which had posted on a web news portal Journal National<sup>6</sup>, the use of Pagu language has been decreasing because of both social change and prestige in language status.

“At school, children of Pagu are also tough Bahasa and not many teachers comprehend this Pagu language. As a result, children do not feel confident to use their native language because they feel that their Pagu language is lesser from Bahasa,” he said.

“Currently, there are awakening movements of Pagu indigenous people led by Sangaji Afrida Erna Ngato, which realize that the indigenous people awakening should be started from attitudes that uphold the language and culture. If they admit as a society group, they need to prove that they have language and culture which shows their self-identity,” he added.



The fights of Afrida have not yet come to end. However, slowly but surely, it starts to show the result. Afrida's struggle to revive language and culture of Pagu indigenous people is beginning to show the impact. Even though

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<sup>5</sup> LIPI = Indonesia Institute of Science, is a government agency that focused on science research

<sup>6</sup> Web news portal in Indonesia (<http://www.jurnas.com/halaman/17/2012-12-30/230304>, accessed on July 7, 2014)





Afrida meeting the former Vice President of Indonesia.  
Photo credit - Secretariat of the Vice President

it does not look like as heroic as fighting the mining company directly, the rise of language and culture of Pagu indigenous people will be used as the basis for doubling resistance to repel the mining company which has destroyed their sources of livelihood. Keep fighting Sangaji Afrida Erna Ngato!

**“We were not allowed to cross the territories which fall under the PT NHM mining concession area while we walked through the forest,” said Afrida.**

*Written by Firdaus Cahyadi (AMAN)*

**Name:** Mardiana Deren  
**Ethnicity:** Dayak Ma'ayan  
*Sarapat Village, Borneo Island, Indonesia*



Mardiana Deren. Photo Credit - AIPP

My land was deforested by an oil palm company, Surya Graha Manunggal (SGM) that claimed the river, lake, and forests which are sources of livelihood for my people, the Dayak Ma'ayan in Sarapat Village, East Barito in Central Kalimantan, Borneo Island. We were not displaced, but are surrounded by the plantations. SGM got an oil palm concession area of 26,000 hectares in 2007 and then another 75,000 hectares in 2009. They began clearing 5,000 hectares in 2010 and another 4,800 hectares in

2011. By 2012, they cleared about 111,000 of our land covering three sub-districts of East Barito.

We tried to fight against the plantation. There was no response from the local government to our demands. Part of our protest was to perform our traditional ceremony to invoke our ancestor's spirits to help us. The traditional ceremony was performed in the middle of the plantation because we believe that in the land, forest and water, the spirits are living but invisible to the human eyes. Usually, we call the spirits to help us during work, and also

**One week after the ritual, two plantation workers almost died because they were sucked by a sandy area. In our interpretation, the spirits realized that the two women victims were just working for the company.**

during healing ceremonies. I officiated in the ceremony which involved community dancing ritual, using wax which is considered a medium to call on ancestors' spirits for protection and blessings. Even this sacred ceremony was met with resistance and violence by the company. They wanted to control the performance of the ritual but insisted on proceeding and in the

end; we were allowed to perform under tight security by the police and company security.

The forest is the source of our life. The company destroyed our forest. We were worried that we cannot pass this to our children. The ceremony called back the spirits to come back to the destroyed forest, and it seems the spirits were angry. One week after the ritual, two plantation workers almost died because they were sucked by a sandy area. In our interpretation, the spirits realized that the two women victims were just working for the company. The natural resources on which we depended for livelihood were destroyed or disappeared due to the clearing operations, including the trees, rattan, medicinal herbs, other wild products and animals. Water sources had become polluted. Access to their forests was denied and our daily subsistence has been affected.

Since 2008, together with my community, we would go to the forest to fight against the arrogance of the company. In 2009-2010, we also tried to mediate, and tried to negotiate with the government at the sub-district administration, district, provincial to national levels, but there we got no response. In 2010, with the help of our organisation Aliansi Masyarakat

Adat Nusantara (AMAN), we filed a complaint with the National Human Rights Commission of Indonesia and we got the Commission's ruling that SGM has only 330 hectares of concession out of the 685 hectares of Dayak Ma'ayan forest. Unfortunately, until now the decision is yet to be enforced.

When the company started their operations, we were informed only about the benefits. Later, conflicts arose between the company employees and us because outsiders, even as far as Java, were employed by the company, not the people from Sarapat. One of their promises is that the concession would bring jobs to the local people.

I am a nurse and I use my education and experience to help my people. In the hospital where I work, I am always being bullied and have experienced psychological and verbal abuse there when the hospital staff learned that I was leading my people against the company. At one time, I was unilaterally re-assigned to a far place in order to get me away from Sarapat. With the help of my organization AMAN, I complained about this discriminatory and arbitrary move and was able to get my job back.

Many of my village mates do not know and do not get socialization on law and government policies. so we were facing a great challenge and fear of the company which seemed to be always above the law. For example, many of us were sent to jail again and again, even families together, causing a lot of worries for them when they only know is that they were exercising their customary law. We tried to find a strategy on the application of law and policies by having customary meetings led by the customary leader and the community leader with the goal of finding a collective decision. Under Dayak Ma'ayan customary law, issues are resolved through deliberations facilitated by a lead "judge" under the customary or traditional council. The purpose of the deliberations is to reach a decision that seeks to provide a deterrent on offenders rather than criminalizing them. This judicial system is not recognized by the government though and thus indigenous peoples in Indonesia continue to be discriminated in many ways. In my hometown, as a last effort, I will go back and organise a network of the villages to fight for our rights to our land. It is important to do that. Earth is mother, forest is our breath, and water is our blood.

*Written by Mardiana Deren*

**Name:** Cristina Camiling  
**Ethnicity:** Maeng-Itneg  
*Tabo, Abra, Philippines*



Cristina Camiling. Photo Credit - CWEARC

Born during the Japanese occupation, Cristina Camiling, 75 year old barangay health worker of Mtuagan, Tabo, Abra had witnessed and experienced a lot of atrocities. Also, she is an exemplary woman who has defied the stereotype roles of women in the community and who had been selflessly giving health services to the needy. She is a mother who has supported her children in their chosen fields including those who chose dangerous paths as long as it is for the good of all.

## **Life during the war**

During the interview with her on September 2012, she recounted that because of the war, they had been transferring from one place to another. Her father was killed by the Japanese soldiers together with other men in Sitio Baoyan in Boliney, Abra. After that, she recalled that she and her mother went to Belwang in Mt. Province because it was a peaceful place. They returned to Tubo after the war. She was able to finish grade four in Tiempo. Her mother remarried so she stopped her schooling in order to help in household chores and also in the farm. “*Saan gamin a napateg ti eskuwela idi ngem siak ket talaga kuma a kayat ko nga agiskuwela,*” (Education was not important then but I really wanted to continue my studies).

## **Defying arranged marriage, asserting freedom of choice**

Women in her time allowed their parents to make decisions for them especially when it came to marriage. During her teenaged life, her parents were already pressuring her to marry but she was very firm on her decision not to. She recalled that she had a lot of suitors and her parents were even choosing for her. Every time her parents forced her to entertain a suitor, she would escape and live with her relatives in the neighbouring village for several days. She said further that early marriage was the practice in those days. The parents would choose a husband for their daughter even prior to menstruation. The man, who was called *kadkadwa* or companion, and the girl, would live together once the girl had her menstruation.

Christina defied her parents’ choice thrice. Her reason was that she would only marry the man she wanted to be with. She got married at the age of 20 and bore nine children but only six survived. Being a mother, she experienced difficulties in terms of health. It was very disheartening, she said, to watch her children suffer from scabies during *peste* (pest infestation). One of her children died from that *peste*.

“*Makabulan na laeng idi diay anak ko ket amin metten a tao ket magaddil. Isu a naminduwa a nagsukat ti kudil ken kuko na ngem natay met latta ta naapektaran idiay uneg.*” (My child was only a month old when everyone had skin disease. His skin and nails changed twice but he still died because his internal organs were affected.) In addition, because of the difficulty of transportation and inaccessibility of health services in their village, her epileptic child died.

Her family and village survive through farming. They plant diversified crops in their swidden farms in order to augment their rice harvest. During lean months, they sell crops from their swidden farms in Manabo in order to buy their basic needs such as *bagoong* (fish paste), salt, soap, and gas. In addition, she weaves *saguy* (fish traps) to sell. When she was nursing, she would weave in order to help with the family expenses.



Amtuagan Rice terraces

## **Being a community health worker**

Since 1984, she served as a Barangay Health Worker (BHW) seeing the need for health service in their area. She attended trainings given by the municipal health unit. During Martial Law there was a group of the armed revolutionary movement near their barangay. She also attended several health trainings that the group facilitated.

The common illnesses she treated were pin worms, fever, diarrhoea, and TB among others. She strove to gain expertise in administering injections and doing acupuncture. After the trainings, she would always read the modules given in order to improve her skill.

**Oftentimes, she was called to report to the military camp but that did not intimidate her. She stood firm in her conviction about what was right.**

Despite her age, she continues to serve her community with her skills in health. After this writer interviewed her, she attended to a patient nearby who could not stand. She said, she had to do acupressure and advise her on what food to eat and what to avoid.

Salin Balingoay, Cristina's niece said that until now, her aunt is still called to deliver babies in the village because she is trusted and known for her experience. Salin adds that even at present, health service is very poor in their barangay and that the people have to rely on traditional health knowledge and practices in order to survive.

## **Fearless human rights defender**

When her husband died in 1991, one of her daughters decided to join the armed revolutionary movement. Cristina said it was very painful for her to see her daughter off but she could not do anything because her daughter was intent on joining. As a result, Cristina experienced being interrogated by the military. Oftentimes, she was called to report to the military camp but that did not intimidate her. She stood firm in her conviction about what was right.

When she heard that her daughter was about to give birth, she immediately went to their camp in the mountains to deliver the baby. At that time, she was already a well-known *hilot* who was always in demand because the villages were far from the hospitals or clinics. Her daughter was very



weak after giving birth so she had to finish all her chores in the village at daytime and go back to the mountains in the evening to do her daughter's laundry in the morning.



Cristina and family

**She went all the way to Camp Bado Dangwa in the far province of Benguet to call for the release of her child and other political detainees. Along with activists, she endured the scorching heat of the sun while raising a placard that said, “Palayain ang mga Bilanggong Politikal!” (Free all Political Prisoners!). She added that she used to hear about demonstrations in the news but now she was part of it.**

When her daughter was arrested, she went all the way to Camp Bado Dangwa in the far province of Benguet to call for the release of her child and other political detainees. Along with activists, she endured the scorching heat of the sun while raising a placard that said, “*Palayain ang mga Bilanggong Politikal!*” (Free all Political Prisoners!). She added that she used to hear about demonstrations in the news but now she was part of it. She realized that there was really something wrong with the system because those who were sacrificing for the country were the ones imprisoned.

She is also a defender of ancestral land rights. She was among those who fought against the entry of Newmont Mining Corporation in their community in the late 1990s. She said that there were a lot of job offers from the company but they were not fooled. She added that the experiences of other provinces in the Cordillera with large scale mining were enough reasons to resist.

“*Nu kas pangarigan man adda nga agpayso trabaho nga ited da, saan mi latta a kayat ta makadadael met,*” (If ever it was true that jobs would be offered, we would still refuse because it (mining) is destructive).

*“Nu kas pangarigan man adda nga agpayso trabaho nga ited da, saan mi latta a kayat ta makadadael met,”* (If ever it was true that jobs would be offered, we would still refuse because it (mining) is destructive).

*Written by Alma Sinumlag (CWEARC)*

**Name:** Petra “Tannaw” Macliing  
**Ethnicity:** Bontoc  
*Mainit, Mountain Province, Philippines*



Mother Petra urging Innabuyog leaders to remain steadfast in the struggle for land, food and rights. During Innabuyog’s 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary, 8 March 2011. Photo credit - CWEARC

Petra Macliing hails from Mainit, Bontoc Mountain Province. She is a widow and a mother of ten (10). Petra is the second wife of Mr. Macliing. Macliing and his first wife were separated because the first wife could not

bear a child. He and Petra were married and they had ten (10) children, all girls. When their tenth child, Fran was just a month old, Mr. Macliing died of liver disease, leaving Petra to tend and support their ten children.

Mother Petra, as she is fondly known, is diligent and hardworking. She balanced housekeeping with business and farming. Being a widow and with ten children to support, she did not despair or lose hope but, bravely faced the trials and hardships of providing the needs of her ten kids. Her efforts fared well as she was able to send all her ten children to school and they each gained their own fields of professions.

Mother Petra is a person who always anticipated the best possible outcome in every endeavour.

In 1973, Benguet Corporation (BC), a big mining corporation in the country tried to explore the gold deposits of Mainit. BC put up a tent as temporary shelter for the workers at Malivu in Luklutan, the place targeted for the mining operation. When the community people learned about the plan of BC, about 200 men and women went at once to drive away the intruders.

When BCs workers refused to heed the community, the people barricaded the area, dismantled, burned the tents and threw their equipment into the river. Still the BCs officials and workers did not leave the area. So, the community decided to guard the area. The men were having a dialogue with some BC officials, while the women were on their guard. In the early morning, the women sensed that the men were furious and that a fight

**--“Protect the land as this the source of rice seedlings that nourish, like CWEARC, which has become the fuel of knowledge and welfare of women. The span of, more than, two decades has yielded fruits of hard work, patience and courage. More and more women are bravely speaking out, giving education and leading organizations and villages”.**

between BCs workers and the community could start. So, the women bared themselves in front of BCs workers, as an expression of their opposition to BCs plans. Petra is one of the women who led the community to oppose BC’s scheme.

Petra and the other women took the remaining equipment and brought it to BCs office in Bontoc. Because of the determination of the women and the community, the plan to mine Mainit did not eventuate. As Petra

said, “there is gold in our mountains but it won’t help us-it’s the rice fields that help us.” Mother Petra went on to help in the campaign against the construction of the Chico Dam and against the Celophil Resources Corporation. Both these projects affect the ancestral lands of the people of Mountain Province.

From a staunch indigenous woman leader to a respected elder, she was a leading figure in local movement building in her own province and the setting up of organizations for the Cordillera indigenous peoples’ movement, the precursors to the Cordillera Peoples Alliance in 1984.

Mother Petra mobilized women during the election in 1988, to uphold clean and honest elections and guard the votes of the people. She led a group of women to negotiate for the peaceful release of 7 policemen who were held as prisoners-of-war by the rebel group, New People’s Army (NPA). The women insisted to the Philippines National Police to let the women handle the release of the captured police to their families. These actions eventually led to the formation of the Montanosa Women’s Federation, now Binnadang-Innabuyog, of which she is one of the founders.

In 2009, Mother Petra was an awardee of the price for Women’s Creativity in Rural Life, by the Women World Summit Foundation (WWSF). She was recognized by Innabuyog as one of the indefatigable leaders of the Cordillera women’s movement, in 8 March 2011. Along with 3 other indigenous women’s leaders from the Cordillera, and 100 rural women from all over Asia, she received the award to mark 100 years of resistance by the Asia Rural Women’s Coalition, in October 2012.

Despite her advanced age, she continues to shower the entire movement with her wisdom. She gave this remark during the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Cordillera Women’s Education Action Research Center (CWEARC) in 2007--“Protect the land as this the source of rice seedlings that nourish, like CWEARC, which has become the fuel of knowledge and welfare of women. The span of, more than, two decades has yielded fruits of hard work, patience and courage. More and more women are bravely speaking out, giving education and leading organizations and villages”. Such messages continue to inspire other women in the region and beyond.

*Written by Alma Sinumlag and Vernie Yocogan-Diano (CWEARC)*



Mathia. Photo Credit - IWFNEI



# Chapter 2

## South Asia

Mathia, NORTHEAST INDIA

Hotoli, NORTHEAST INDIA

Munni, MAINLAND INDIA

Bichitra, BANGLADESH

“

*A woman with a voice is by definition a strong woman. But the search to find that voice can be remarkably difficult.*

”

-- Melinda Gates

**Name:** Mathia  
**Ethnicity:** Naga  
*Senapati, Manipur, Northeast India*



Mathia. Photo Credit - IWFNEI



It was between the years 1992 and 1995, when the Kuki Naga clash was at its peak, that Mathia was feeling restless in Maharashtra, hearing all the news from home.

*“Killing one another is not right in the eyes of God or men”,* she says. After her eight month course in Maharashtra finished, she would come home and start what she had aimed to be doing. She had seen those weary Kuki travellers at Mao bazaar, who no longer came down from the buses to eat and relax (which they usually did before the clashes began), fearing they would be beaten or killed. On one of these days, she began to go inside the buses, calling them to meet their needs and assuring them that the Mao mothers will protect them. *“Sometimes, I was the only one.”* she remembers. Yet she continued. And at times she would get inside the bus and go till Senapati just to make sure that the passengers were safe. It was for this deed, that she was continuously criticized by her own people.

In August 1994, she boarded a bus to go to Imphal for some work. She was talking with some of her friends without realizing that the bus had stopped moving. Then someone tells them that two people, supposedly a Kukis mother and a daughter had been kidnapped by some Naga rebels. So she ran to the spot where the mother and daughter had been nabbed. She recalls the scene of long Daos (machete) and guns in that spot and says, *“Even today I don’t want to think of it. They slapped me when I begged them not to kill them.”* She rushed back to the National Highway, asking the people there to help her. *“No one came for help, not even the women who prayed and fasted.”* She went three times but could find no one. When she returned, the rebels beat her with a log. Even after they beat her, she was still convinced to save the two lives.

Then the men started to threaten her, saying; *“If you want to save these two, we will kill you instead.”* So she requested them to write the reason on paper and hand it over to her brothers. She also requested them to hand over the two women to the nearest police station or church so that she can be sure they are safe, if they really meant what they said.

**“Even today I don’t want to think of it. They slapped me when I begged them not to kill them.”**

She still remembers how the rebels opened up the bags of the two and threw away the Bible written in Lushai. Mathia picked it up and handed

**Mathia could sense that the men were confused and were talking among themselves in Nagamese, “*Ki kuribo (What do we do)?*” Then they shoved all three women and told them to run away.**

it to the mother who held it in her chest, trembling and crying. After much negotiation, Mathia could sense that the men were confused and were talking among themselves in Nagamese, “*Ki kuribo (What do we do)?*” Then they shoved all three women and told them to run away. All three of them fell on the ground,

then got up and ran as fast as they could. Mathia was hugely criticized from within her own community for this very deed, but today her community couldn't be prouder because of her. “*It's more than 20 years now,*” Mathia remarks. Today Mathia is the Speaker in her village council Rabounamei and a pastor in charge of the prayer centre; Mowzhu of the Mao Baptist Association. In all the village council meetings, Mathia would start with a scripture and a prayer, a new tradition that the rest of the village has followed. Known for her wise decisions and truthful replies, the menfolk in her village would often joke about her not realizing that she is the lone woman among the men. Nevertheless, the council would remain dysfunctional in her absence. “*It's just a small example, I didn't do a big thing.*” adds Mathia.

*Written by Vibi Yokha & Khesheli Chishi*

**Name:** S Hotoli Zhimomi  
**Ethnicity:** Sumi Naga  
*Dimapur, Nagaland, Northeast India*



Hotoli. Photo Credit - IWFNEI

At 92, unlike her peers, S Hotoli Zhimomi can still walk without any difficulty and her memory remains as sharp as any young person. But what is more, the charismatic Hotoli, at 92, is still the Chief of her village, Sukhato under Niuland block. Sukhato village was established in 1967 with the permission of the government. Besides being a chief, Hotoli was also the first female evangelist of the Western Sumi Baptist Association.

In 1977, February 18 (she still remembers the dates clearly), Hotoli's husband, the village Chief, passed away. Their only son was only 12 years old then. And even though the husband had brothers, they all refused to take over his chieftain responsibilities and instead entrusted it on Hotoli, believing that she would be an able leader. As soon as she took over the chieftainship following her husband's demise, neighbouring villages started encroaching on the lands of Sukhato village, somewhat underestimating and undermining the strength of a lady chief. During 10 long years of land disputes, Hotoli played a major and key role in settling through non-violent resolutions. Some of the villages where she helped settle disputes are Hozukhe village, Niqueqhu village and Hakhuzhe village.

Choosing peaceful tactics for conflict resolution has been her major agenda as village Chief. The story is often told, of how this lady chief, in 1979, hid the weapons of her own village people when a dispute arose between them and a neighbouring village. Some neighbouring villagers had attacked her villagers while they were working in the field. Hotoli knew that if her own people retaliated back, it will certainly lead to a lot of bloodshed. Understanding the gravity of the situation, she hid the machetes and other harmful weapons of the menfolk in her village.

Also in 1963, Hotoli and her daughter were put in jail, where they stayed for five months because of her husband's involvement in the Naga freedom struggle whilst he was alive.

**She believes that leaders are not here to enjoy the comforts of life but to serve and help their people.**

They were first put in Dimapur jail and later shifted to Ghaspani jail. As she narrates her story, Hotoli remembers the dates so clearly of how they were arrested on October 25, 1963 and their release on March 23, 1964.

In another incident, in 2003 Hotoli mediated a land dispute between her village and Hakuzhe village where she requested both the parties to reconcile in the spirit of Christian solidarity. Using religion as her weapon for peace-building, she requested both the parties to come to the church and forgive each other. It is also important to note that Hakhuzhe villagers in the past had forcefully coveted her village lands, but even still, she was willing to forgive them. Since the 2003 reconciliation, no land dispute has arisen between the two villages.

After her son reached maturity, the chieftainship was passed over to him. However in 2006, her son too passed away and, the responsibility was again conferred to her.

Her stance on non-violence is not the only element that makes her an exemplary leader but also the fact that she prefers to keep a low profile of herself and that she chooses to live a life of simplicity. Staying in a humble hut, she serves as an example to other leaders. She believes that leaders are not here to enjoy the comforts of life but to serve and help their people.

Hotoli is survived by 11 grandchildren and 1 great granddaughter. She is waiting for her grandson to finish his Bachelor of Arts (B.A) so that once his studies are over, she can retire and let him take over the chieftainship.

*Written by Vibi Yokha*

**Name:** Munni Hansda  
**Ethnicity:** Santhali  
*Jhilli, Jharkhand, Mainland India*



Munni Hansda. Photo credit - AWN

Munni Hansda is a name that spells strong determination, self-reliance and a born leader for Santhali community, in the north eastern zone of Jharkhand. Born in a small hamlet named Jhilli, of Dumka District's Kathikund Prakhand in Jharkhand, she is the youngest daughter of five siblings

(one brother and four sisters). Her father, Munshi Hansda, passed away when she was just four months old. She grew up experiencing hardship. After her father's death, her mother, Shobha Hansda had to work as a daily wage worker to feed her five little mouths.

After the death of her father, the villagers tried to throw her mother out from the house by labelling her to be a witch. But Shobha Hansda was a strong and courageous lady; she never gave up and fought and succeeded a lawsuit, in 7<sup>th</sup> decade of 20<sup>th</sup> century, to retain the family land and house. In those days it was considered a big achievement for a woman. The villagers were amazed by her achievement and started calling her BDO (Block Development Officer) and Munni, "*BDO Bitti*" (BDO's daughter). Munni Hansda grew up watching her mother juggling the household chores, children and fighting to save her land. For Munni, her mother was a hero and a perfect role model to look upon and to follow in her foot prints. Although she grew up in acute poverty, her morale was always high.

Munni Hansda was enrolled in Pithkhori Primary School, in her village Jhilli in Kathikund Prakhanda, for her primary education and middle school in Adarsh Middle School. She completed her Matriculation in Baunsi, Banka District (now Bihar). After Matriculation in 1987, she got married to Daniel Murmu and after a brief interval, continued her studies and completed her Intermediate examination from Dr. Jagannath Mishra College, Kathikund in 1992.

Soon after her marriage she joined a year silk weaving training course (1987-88) from Badla Foundation in Mihijam, West Bengal. Her husband Daniel Murmu was working as a manager in Samagr Vikas Parishad. She became a trainer in the same organization between 1988-89 and trained 30 women on silk and handloom weaving under the flagship of Samagr Vikas Parishad. In 1990 she moved on to work as a trainer in Lok Jagriti Kendra, Madhupur and continued working there for the next eight months. Between 1992-94 she started organizing women under the flagship of Lok Peedith Salah in Jagdishpur. This was the time when her husband Daniel Murmu registered his own organization, ADIVASI KALYAN PARISHAD, and Munni was selected to be the secretary in 1995. With the advent of this organization, she had a wider platform and the liberty to expand. She started training women on various skills i.e. incense

sticks, papad, Manipuri bags etc. and in 1996 they opened their office in Madhupur. The people of Madhupur were so impressed with Munni Hansda's work that many other organizations and groups came along to work towards the empowerment and betterment of the society.

Mineral rich, Madhupur as a small town in Jharkhand, has every potential for growth. While working in Madhupur she felt the urge to go back to her interior village in Kathikund and work for the community, specially the women. The community donated 1½ bigha land in Navadih village in Kathikund for starting the work. In this area she also organized the women and formed many women's groups. She started training women on various topics i.e. women's rights, laws, domestic violence and how to fight against DV. She empowered the women of the area and later these women groups helped solve the problems and family issues of the community. These women's groups were so empowered and aware of their rights and duties that they created pressure, through sit down strikes and demonstrations to the government if they found any officer not rendering his/her responsibilities or refusing to do the duty towards the community. These women groups also helped villagers, for their block level works and boycotted the officers who demanded bribes for doing work.

When the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Area) Act (PESA) came into existence in 1996, Munni Hansda started disseminating awareness of the Gram Sabha's (customary government) power, among the villagers. Along with strengthening Gram Sabha, she also created awareness of Forest Land Act, Right to Information (MGNAREGA) and awareness on the importance of educating girl children and women. In Kathikund area, from time to time she organized compact campaigns against alcoholism, in order to eradicate this social evil. The impacts of her efforts were evident in the newly empowered community who fought together for their rights. Places like Taljhari in Sahibganj, Barhate, Borio, Bowarijor, Teenpahar, Pakur, Litipara, Hiranpur, Amrapara, Maheshpur, Pakuria, Godda, Sundarpahari, Gopikandar, Kathikund, Shikaripara, Dumka and Ramgarh are the areas where she did dense awareness drive on PESA Act, Girl's Education and anti-alcoholism. The result; Munni Hansda had full support of the community to save their land in a yearlong fight against the company that had come to acquire it.

### **Land and Munni Hansda**



Kathikund near Dumka, with small hillocks, is covered with lush green tropical forest full of teak trees, many other habitats and medicinal plants; the dwelling place of the indigenous Santhal community, who are mainly dependent on agriculture and forest for their livelihood and their small required economy. People are very innocent and very rarely have touch with the outside world; literacy rate is very low and health indicators are worse; they are not exposed to the government facilities that are spending millions of rupees in their name and do not know that they are sitting on the heap of mineral rich land for which the whole world is crazy about.

Hence, in the year 2005 some people came for the survey of the land for coal mining and quality testing of coal in Domanpur and Saltaha areas of Badamalki of Kathikund Block, Dumka District, of Jharkhand. The people of the area also came to know about the upcoming Dam and Hydal Power Plant Projects in the area, and therefore they informed Munni Hansda about this. About 170 villages were feared completely drowned under the water reservoir, and 60 villages would have been displaced upon construction of Hydal Power Plant. Munni Hansda, swung into action and sat, along with the villagers, to make them aware of the technicalities of the laws, pros and cons of the mining/dam/ hydro power projects and displacement; she made strategies and took a leading role in protesting against the mining in the area. When the villagers got the intimation of the land acquisition from the government; Munni Hansda, referred to the constitution CNT/SPT Act and raised the power of the Gram Sabha. The company tried to bait the community and said that it is ready to pay Rs. 1000/- month/acre and work in order of merit. Munni Hansda called a meeting of all villagers to find out how many people are eligible for employment from the area and found out that only 5 of them had passed 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

The villagers conjointly started protesting the land acquisition proposal by the government. In the meantime, Hopna Baskey (Munni's co-associate) was arrested in 2008. Munni Hansda and the villagers together made a strategy to make a bulk arrest, to the extent that they even included the cattle to give arrest. (This tactic was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent movement, to build pressure on the administration; it is a common practice in India and is very effective still today) One day when Munni Hansda and her acquaintances were coming back

from different villages after preparing the list for arrest; her other co-associate, Charan Kumar was arrested by the police. The news spread like a wild fire over the same night and the villagers came out and collected in all sides of Kathikund Police Station with logs, sticks, bows and arrows and lanterns in their hands. Angry villagers drew a line in front of the police station and declared that the police can shoot at them if they - the villagers - crossed that line and if the police crossed the line, then the villagers men, women and children would take them by their bows and arrows. Both sides stuck by the line; none from either side dared to violate the line of control. Meanwhile the police transferred Charan Kumar overnight to the district head office from Kathikund. Early the next morning people arrived and sat down strike from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 25<sup>th</sup> August 2008 in front of Police Superintendent's office, Dumka. Students of Dumka and Santhal Pargana College joined the protest and supplied Tiffin and food for the people who participated in the sit-down strike. Simultaneously, people from all sides came in support. The police tried to block and barricade all entrance roads coming to Dumka; but the people poured in via fields and other places and kept on adding support to the struggle. The District administration and police came under pressure and released Charan Kumar and Hopna Baskey from jail on 24<sup>th</sup> August 2008 after completing all legal procedures, but commenced litigation against the people who participated in the agitation.

The struggle to save the land was actively led by Munni Hansda; she was arrested and jailed on 26th November 2008, for seven months along four of her associates. People did not keep mute after her arrest but they kept burning the torch and planned for their next move. They made strategies and decided for a big rally on 6th December 2008. On the rally day, the police opened fire, lathi-charged (baton) and threw tear gas cells at the people gathered for the rally, ordered by the then Chief Minister Mr. Shibu Soren. It was at close range, the firing which killed Saygat Marandi and Lakhiram Tudu on the spot, and many other people sustained injuries. One bullet hit Mr. Jiblal Soren's eye and made him blind forever.

At last, after a long struggle, Munni Hansda and her villagers won and were able to save their land. The stay order has been put on the land acquisition, and the land and their dwelling place was saved from drowning in the water reservoir, and hundreds of people from displacement.

In her crusade to save and protect the land and empower the indigenous community, she had to grapple with many impediments. The police administration tried to entice her husband Mr. Daniel. He lost his job as a teacher. Munni Hansda was also offered money to keep her away from the community. The administration sent some domineering persons to the village to stir up the villagers to call her name ‘tout’; but the villagers took hostage to this type of overbearing people. During this period Munni Hansda had to go through financial and mental torture, but her family members

stood by her side, encouraged her and kept her morale towering at the time of crisis. Even the villagers gave her full support and actuated by to carry forward the struggle. Till date she is still working for the community.

**Women have the power to propel the government and rock bottom the government.**

Munni Hansda says that she was never affright, because she was never been alone in this journey; the community members were always been with her through all thick and thin. The people who shouldered along with her - Daniel Murmu, Charan Kumar, Hopna Baskey, Phulo Marandi, Bale Marandi, Stephen Marandi, Burbhin Hansda, Goyna Hansda, Munshi Hansda, Dilip Hansda, Rajesh Marandi, Saimon Marandi, Sanram Marandi, Lakhiram Tudu, Baneshwar Bhiru, Somlal Murmu, Chotar Murmu, James Soren, Phulmani, Rooplal Soren, Chotelal, Bande Marandi, Luisa Kisku, Amin Tudu, Dhanopati Tudu, Salom Besra, Siblal Soren, Sunil Marandi, Gangurai and Jaidhan Murmu are the few names, whose contribution paid to save the community.

Munni Hansda says that the women should come forward in all fields as they are the power, she is not deterred; once she decide on any anything without falling in any kind of temptation. Women have the power to propel the government and rock bottom the government. Women can resolute all propositions and can stand heroic in all situations; therefore they shouldn't be apprehensive on coming forward.

*Written by Jacinta Kerketta (in Hindi) and translated by Shanti Kerketta (Adivasi Women's Network)*

**Name:** Bichitra Tirki  
**Ethnicity:** Oraon  
*Chapai Nawabganj, Bangladesh*



Bichitra Tirki. Photo credit - Suvash Chandra Hembram

July 2009: Hundreds of Indigenous peoples, from different districts of northern Bangla-desh, were walking along the highway in a 'long march' to protest against an attack by a group of local land grabbers on indigenous villagers. All the women and men present in the procession were carrying red flags. However, a woman in red sari was not carrying any flag. Rather, she was carrying her one year-old child. She walked 55 kilometres, along with her comrades, carrying her child. This picture of struggle by this brave indigenous woman brought her into the limelight. However, this was not the beginning of her struggle for the rights of indigenous peoples. She had been involved with the movement of indigenous peoples long before that. This brave woman is none other than Bichitra Tirki.

Bichitra Tirki was born in Belta Pachpakhia village in Singra, Natore, Bangladesh, on 17 September 1978. Since she was born in a poor family, she was not privileged enough to get higher education - so studied until year eight. This education could not enlighten her enough; neither could it provide her with a voice to rise. However, this lack of education would not be a barrier to Bichitra becoming a truly inspiring leader of her people - a leader whose call may gather hundreds of people of her community. She gathered her knowledge and experience from being a part of the movement of indigenous peoples for their rights, and from the people around her.

The passion for working for her community people has always been a part of Bichitra's life. This instinct of hers was further stimulated by taking part in different events and activities organized by civil society organizations and indigenous peoples organizations in her early years. Being an active and vocal person, she always attracted the attention of others. Thus her leadership quality, and zeal for working for her community's wellbeing, gradually grew. Alongside, her husband was active in the movement of indigenous peoples. As a result, she got to know about many indigenous leaders of the plains of Bangladesh. These contacts encouraged her to learn about the rights of indigenous peoples and demonstrated her ways to become a leader. After her husband died in 1999, she gradually got more involved in the movement of indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. How?

Ever since Bichitra married her husband, Mangala Sardar, in 1993, she had experienced nothing but suffering, as severe financial hardship was

always a part of their lives. Her family could not even afford a house to live in. Hence, Bichitra and her husband had to live in the house of a relative of her husband. She gradually came to know that her husband Mangala was not in fact a landless person, but rather he had inherited some 48 *Bighas* (approx. 16 acres) of land from his parents. That amount of land could easily turn her family into a well-off one. However, Mangala had been forced to be a labourer on his own land, as a group of land grabbers had previously forged land documents to grab his lands. ‘I could understand how painful it is to work as a labourer on his own land. But I did not know what to do, as I did not understand anything about legal procedures,’ says Bichitra<sup>7</sup>. Then, her husband fell victim to a deadly disease. But she did not have enough money to bear his medical expenses. Being crazy enough to save his life, and finding no other choice, Bichitra went to one of the land grabbers to ask for some money as loan. Alas! Her efforts were in vein. She returned home crestfallen. But nothing could be worse than what she found after she had returned—the senseless, dead body of Mangala Sardar. At that moment, she made the vow that she would get her husband’s land back at any cost.

Since then, alongside making a living through working as a day labourer, Bichitra started her movement against the land document forgers, which continues today. She surreptitiously kept organizing the poor people of her village, most of whom were female workers like her. In addition, while other indigenous peoples are apparently reluctant to make use of the legal justice system of the country, being fearful about possible harassment from prolonged and costly court procedures, Bichitra stayed calm and used the legal justice system in order to recover the land from the land grabbers. Consequently, she kept winning cases in the court - one after another. She continued a sustained movement against the land grabbers through organizing popular public actions, together with her indigenous sisters and brothers. Yet, she was still unable to physically take over her land from the hands of the land grabbers.

In this backdrop, Bichitra attended a ‘long march’ organized by Jatiya Adivasi Parishad (JAP), in 2009. Inspired after attending the ‘long march’,

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<sup>7</sup> Mahmud, Faisal. “*Sangramer Pratik Bichitra Tirki*” (Bichitra Tirki- Symbol of Struggle), *The Daily Samakal*, 4 March 2014. <http://www.samakal.net/2014/03/04/43578>.

she was even more determined to take over the land from the hands of the land grabbers. Soon after returning home, she organized female workers in her village and finally took part possession of her husband's rightful land. She continued her movement against land grabbers both in the court as well as with people on the ground. So far, she had rescued about 22 *bighas* (approx. 9 acres) out of 48 *bighas*, of her husband's land from the land grabbers. This achievement gradually encouraged her to work more for people and become a true leader of people in her community. Hence, whenever there was an incident of land grabbing, an incident of rape, or any other human rights violations in her area, she would be the first person to go ahead and organize people to protest.

**Alas! Her efforts were in vein. She returned home crestfallen.**

**But nothing could be worse than what she found after she had returned—the senseless, dead body of Mangala Sardar.**



Bichitra Tirki



Bichitra was elected a member for the women's reserved seat of Parbotipur Union Parishad of Gomstapur Upazila. Photo credit - Suvah Chandra Hembram

Bichitra Tirki's widespread popularity was reflected in her victory in Union Parishad<sup>8</sup> elections held in 2011. She was elected a member for the women's reserved seat of Parbotipur Union Parishad of Gomstapur Upazila (sub-district) in Chapai Nawabganj. It is notable here that the support of indigenous sisters and brothers of her area, for whom Bichitra had been working for years, was the key to her victory in the elections. Furthermore, she was, and still is, the president of Chapai

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<sup>8</sup> Union parishad or union council is a local government body at union level. It is the lowest level in the governance framework of Bangladesh.



Nawabganj district unit of Jatiya Adivasi Parishad (JAP), a popular people's organization of Indigenous peoples in the northern districts of Bangladesh. As an acknowledgement of her great work for the people, Bichitra received awards from different CSOs.

While Bichitra Tirki was soaring in the sky of success, the land grabbers were making a master plan of retaliation to destroy the name and fame she had earned and to take over the land again. In late July 2014, a land grabber aged 60, from whom Bichitra recovered some land belonging to her late husband, demanded some three hundred thousand taka (approx. USD 4,000) as compensation for the recovered land. But Bichitra refused to give any money to him. On 4 August 2014, while Bichitra was working in her rice field along with her fellow workers, a group of miscreants numbering 30-35 people, led by the same land grabber obstructed her and further demanded the money. Still, Bichitra refused to give any money. The miscreants tortured her with sticks and sharp weapons. At some point she was dragged to an open space and three of the perpetrators - aged 30, 25, and 35 - forcefully raped her. Further, the miscreants looted her valuables from her house while leaving the scene. Shortly after, Bichitra was taken by her fellow workers to a local hospital and later transferred to Chapai Nawabganj General Hospital for better treatment. She survived but had serious injuries.

This heinous incident agitated people, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, across the country. Different organizations protested the attack on Bichitra and undertook a series of demonstrations in different parts of the country—from the plain delta to the green hills of the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Thousands of people got together during these actions to demand justice for Bichitra Tirki. One such protest was a 60 km-long 'long march' organized by JAP on 27 August 2014. It was the only 'long march' that Bichitra Tirki came across, but she could not join. However, needless to say, thousands of 'Bichitra Tirkis' joined in this long march for the support of their leader Bichitra Tirki.

**This heinous incident agitated people, indigenous and non-indigenous alike, across the country.**



Bichitra has publicly spoken out against her attackers - Suvash Chandra Hembram

How about the leader herself? Could the incident of gang rape and torture silence Bichitra? The answer is a clear ‘no’, as it could be seen by the incidents that followed. Bichitra filed a case with the local police station on the same day she was physically and sexually abused. So far, 10 out of 18 alleged perpetrators have been arrested by police. Unlike most rape victims, Bichitra remained strong in spirit, in spite of her serious health condition. Her courage and warrior spirit was reinvigorated. In an interview with a journalist Bichitra said:

*You publish my name, publish my photograph. Although I have been gang-raped, I am not scared. There are hundreds of thousands of indigenous sisters and brothers in entire North Bengal beside me. My (present) husband, children, family, relatives—all are with me. If I become scared of being ashamed of social stigma by getting my name-identity published, the perpetrators will remain scot-free... All of them will go behind the curtain.<sup>9</sup>*

On 31 August 2014, after four weeks in the hospital, Bichitra returned home. A group of people, led by some indigenous and indigenous-friendly members of parliament (MP), JAP leaders, and members of civil society organizations escorted her home. Did she take a break and stay silent despite the fact that her entire body was still full of pain? The answer is ‘no’. She further called on her community people, organized them together soon after she had returned home. Together with her indigenous sisters and brothers, Bichitra planted rice seedlings on her rightful land, which the land grabbers want to take over again. These lush green seedlings will grow and turn golden soon. With the golden rice, Bichitra’s golden days will come. So will come the golden days for all indigenous peoples in Bangladesh. This is the dream of Bichitra Tirki and her indigenous sisters and brothers in Bangladesh. Keeping this dream in her eyes, Bichitra says:

*I have realized it very deeply that it is not possible for the oppressed-exploited people to establish their rights without struggle-movement. I have also realized that it is not possible for indigenous peoples in the country to live a peaceful life without solidifying their power together. For this reason, I would always like to be a part of the movement-struggle against injustices, oppressions and discriminations being a part of an indigenous peoples’ organization. I believe, like me, many indigenous women will come forward one day.<sup>10</sup>*

*Written By: Bablu Chakma, Kapaeeng Foundation*

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<sup>9</sup> Rahman, Biplab. “Ami Bichitra Bolchi” (I am Bichitra Speaking), Muktomona, 31 August 2014. [http://mukto-mona.com/bangla\\_blog/?p=42505](http://mukto-mona.com/bangla_blog/?p=42505).

<sup>10</sup> Mahmud, Faisal, above n 1.



Kha Srors led her IP Art-performance to march along the road during IP day, 2014. Photo credit - ICSO



# Chapter 3

## The Mekong

Muenor, THAILAND

Norhaeri, THAILAND

Khanh, CAMBODIA

Kha Sors, CAMBODIA

Bua-Ban, LAOS

Bawk Jar, MYANMAR

“

*For most of history,  
Anonymous was a  
woman.*

”

Virginia Woolf

**Name:** Muenor or Pinnapa Preuksapan  
**Ethnicity:** Karen  
*Padeng Village, Kanjanapuri, Thailand*



Muenor and her youngest son. Photo credit -Kosol Nakachol, Bangkok Post

I am Muenor or Pinnapa Preuksapan. I am a Karen and I live in Kanjanaburi, Thailand. My age is twenty-eight, and I am the only woman born to the family of Oh-tho and Tho-hea Preuksapan. I have two siblings elder than me. We now live in Padang, Kengkrajan district, Kanjanapuri. However my memories of the old place are still fresh in my mind.

I remember that when I was ten years old, my parents and our neighborhoods lived happily in a mountainous area surrounded by forest. We had a small house made of wood, bamboo and leaves. We could survive without electricity or a big amount of money. We needed a little money only to buy salt and knives. Near our house there were our cultivating fields. We grew rice with vegetables. We possessed many fields, and each year we shifted or rotated our cultivating fields. It is called rotational farming. That was why our rice field provided us all kind of vegetables and herbs or even some beautiful flowers. Our ancestor passed on their knowledge to us that we do not to cut down big trees, like banyan tree or golden wood, and so many more that I only know in Karen names. The Mother Nature nourished us and we need to protect it to continue living. When we were there we lived in a shared space and resources. Rice was a common thing that we shared together among ourselves and even strangers.

I remember a story that was very well known at that time. Once a border police got lost into our place for a month and was almost dead, until an uncle whose name is Nor-saeh, Ko-ei's son, came across him and took him to have rice with him. It was on the same time Nirun, a village headman arrived and took the policeman back by helicopter.

After ten years, another village headman arrived again. He was Pralea Waena from Padang, a Karen village in the low-land. He told us to move into the low land and process our Thai nationality. However, we did not do so. It was only later on that we faced a crisis on our homeland, in which we were no longer secure.

The first such crisis was right after the harvest season. My family went to celebrate the ceremony of offering New Year rice for the moon. In our tradition, we believe that before you cook your New Year rice to eat, you must offer it to the moon first. That was why after the

**It was only later on that we faced a crisis on our homeland, in which we were no longer secure.**

harvest time, we brought new rice and came to join the rice ceremony at Padeng village, where my grandfather lived. After the ceremony we went back up to our place, but there was nothing left in our place. Everything was stolen. The rice we kept in our barn this year was all gone, along with our pigs and chickens. Our house was burned down and even our barn. We knew that it was the Burmese military that had settled near our place, who had come to do this. They occupied an area along the border of Thai-Myanmar called “Mae Sam Prek”. In Karen we called it “Paji” or the mountain of Paji.

Not so long from this even, we faced a second crisis to our life security. A group of Thai border police came into our land again. My parents were very afraid and started to look for a new shelter. In 1994 we travelled two nights to refuge at Padeng village. At the beginning we shared our living space with my grandfather’s family but after my grandfather’s death, we moved out to work in a farm belonging to a policeman. Still now we live and earn our livelihoods from this farm. In 1996 the villagers from upper Pangkroy also moved down to the lower Pangkroy village. The upper Pangkroy is known also ‘Chai Phean Din’ literally means the central of the mother land. All of us were forced to live in a non-abundant land and which was limited in cultivating land. That was why later on, some villagers that were originally from the upper Pangkroy, went up to cultivate their rice on their old fields again. Otherwise they had nothing to eat. No villagers from my village dared to return. Those who have no cultivating land; they could only become laborers like my family.

Another fresh memory is my first arrival in Padeng village. I was still young like others that were starting going to school. I wanted to and I did. In fact, I worked and studied at the same time. I got paid thirty to fifty bahts a day. Adults were usually paid a hundred. However my study collapsed when I was grade ten because I did not have Thai nationality. After that I met Billy and he helped me do the registration until I got the national identity card. We married and now have five children. The first is ten years old and the youngest is only two years old.

Billy was one of the village representatives working with Aor Bor Tor Huey Mae Preing, a sub district administrative organization. With the Karen network, he cooperated to collect rice for our people - who



actually can grow rice for themselves, but there was no cultivating land for them. They are not able to even help themselves. He is calling for the land rights.



Muenor, Billy and their son, before he went missing in 2014. Photo credit - Muenor

**But since then no one has seen Billy.**

However, Billy has disappeared since 17 April 2014. The last thing I heard from him was that he would travel outside the Kankrajan checkpoint to give friend eight bottles of honey. There is a witness and record that he was caught by an officer named Kasem Lueh-rid and was sent to the head of the Kankrajan national park, named Chaiwat Limlikitak-sorn. However Chaiwat said that he had already released Billy on the same day, at the T-junction of Baan Mae Ka. But since then no one has seen Billy.

This tragedy reminds me of the whole experience that happened previously. I learn that there is no ‘justice’ given for minorities. Looking into myself, I am powerless and overloaded with burdens and responsibilities. I have been trying to call for justice for Billy, five times already. But it is still a question with no answer. I have five children to take care of and every time I travel to Bangkok to ask for justice, I have to travel with my youngest son he is almost two years. Not easy at all, but for justice I will never give up. My third son always asks for this father. When is he coming back? It really hurts when the children ask for father and really hard when they are sick.

Billy used to say “if I go missing, don’t waste time to look for me just know that the national park did it - but you have to follow up to help the village ask for justice for our Karen”. I will following up Billy’s mission no matter what happens.

I am thankful for those who supported me with hearts and hands especially my human right advocacy, and our Karen network.



Muenor will keep searching for Billy and fighting for justice for the Karen people.

Photo credit - Burgaq Mazev

Looking into the near future, I want to see a law correspondent investigation into such issue, to protect a disappeared person’s rights. I no longer want to see victims like Billy and our family. Lastly, I would like to thank you for raising my voice up and always supporting me after my husband Billy is away. Thank you very much.

*Written by Pinnapa Preuksapan, translated by Rain (IWNT)*

**Name:** Norhaeri Tungmuangthon  
**Ethnicity:** Karen  
*Mae Wang, Chiang Mai, Thailand*

I am Norhaeri Tungmuangthon, I live at Mae Win, Mae Wang, Chiang Mai. My family cultivates mainly rice for us to eat and we grow other crops to earn our livelihood. I am now thirty-nine years old and married already. I have two children. I placed myself to attend formal education until grade twelve. When asked to talk about myself, I usually talk about my work experience on fighting for justice.

My first experience on fighting for justice occurred within my village and I remember that at that time, I was just about fourteen or fifteen years old. It was about a lady who had recently gotten married to a man. She was raped by another man just three days after her marriage. Traditionally, such case would not be brought up for consideration and punishment; for fear the woman herself will be stigmatized. However, my friend and I were brave enough to publicly reveal the story in our village assembly. The rapist himself also assembled and heard the story. He did not want us to talk about this issue. Since then, the people-especially the elders-viewed us as a new kind of woman, who were outside of the Karen tradition. We were a little afraid that there would be no-one to support us, especially the lady who was raped and her family. It is common that being raped leads to a stigma. Thus we were not sure if the lady and her family would cooperate with us, in the fight for her rights- her rights as a woman. However, we still went to her place and asked her mother to let her daughter witness the rapist. Her mother did not allow her to do so, but her husband did. He allowed his wife to identify the man and even encouraged her to speak in the assembly. As a result this case had been brought up and discussed among the elders, and we eventually won. In return, we did not ask the man to pay back anything. We only brought awareness and awoke the villagers to respect woman and her role within society. I learn from that experience that if woman herself is brave enough to look for her own rights, men are also ready to support.

**He allowed his wife to identify the man and even encouraged her to speak in the assembly.**



Norhaeri on International Women's Day, 2014. Photo credit - IWNT

In 1996 I committed to be the leader for my own village women's group. I, along with the committee members, started by training the women on family savings, teamwork building and group management. Our work was recognized and accepted in the community. At that time I worked

only in my community because I had a new born baby. Later on, when my child was four years old and many issues from outside called me to move out of my village. My first experience in the outside was with the Wang Watershed Network and The Assembly of the Poor meeting at the Central Hall of Chiang Mai, to call out for our lands and community forest rights on the national park. We gathered there quit a number of times. I had a chance to give a speech on the related issues of land and forest. At that time my Thai was not very good in speaking, so I gave my speech in Karen. While experiencing the outside, I did not neglect my duties in my village. I was also a village health volunteer and village committee member. My positions and responsibilities always come from the heart of a voluntary mind.

Later in 2000, I came for training on gender and human trafficking in Chiang Mai organized by the Indigenous Woman Network in Thailand (IWNT). I met Anchalee, one of the founders of IWNT. I came to learn and work with this network many times. There were many challenges that could stop me coming in to the city. The road was not well constructed, no public transport, and I was not confident to travel alone. Only later on, some male representatives from my community would help to make my travelling more convenient and possible.

Another time, with another experience, was the Dara-aung at Baan Pangdeang Village being illegally arrested. I learnt then justice does not spread evenly throughout the areas where

**The road was not well constructed, no public transport, and I was not confident to travel alone.**

human are. Thus our fight is an unending process. For the Pangdeang case, we spent many nights at the Central Hall of Chiang Mai where the officials situated. Our purpose was to call out for rights on possessing land and for release of the arrested family. During this time there were many injustice issues we became aware of and made us intensively continue our drive. I found that every path leading to good, right and justice is uneasy one. However, a change is waiting and it is possible.

Since 2002, I think I am only one of the only woman activists in my village and the villages nearby. I, along with the team, have constantly expanded woman issues to other people and now we have many women interested to work with us under IWNT's program. Recently as I took



Norhaeri Tungmuangthon. Photo credit - AIPP

my turn into the local politics as a representative of my village to work with Aor Bor Tor, a sub district administrative organization, I have even more things to cover, experience and learn by heart. Natural resources management is what I, and the head of Aor Bor Tor, concentrate on most. I observe that after my first step into the political sphere, other women can make their way into this field too. Being minorities in both the community and nationwide, it is not easy for us woman to play our roles in politics. It is a challenge for us!

Many researchers write about me. They focus me on environmental concerns, reproductive health issues, and my roles in the field of politics. And what I want to say, in a very short phrase about myself, is that I have grown from my own sufferings as well as others sufferings particularly on injustice. I am proud that as a representative of IWNT, I can present our voices of suffering in many forums - both internationally and nationally. However, I realize that in this society there are some people who support me and some are really do not. My steps on touching such sensitive issues will be going on and on as they are being passed on from generation to generation, until we have our rights!

*Written by Norhaeri Tungmuangthon, translated by Rain (IWNT)*

**Name:** Mrs. Khanh Sovy  
**Ethnicity:** Kreung  
*Ratanakiri province, Cambodia*



Khanh Sovy. Photo credit - Ran Sopheak Pagna

My name is Khanh Sovy, 37; I'm Kreung ethnic live in O Chum commune, O Chum district, Ratanakiri province, kingdom of Cambodia. Today I'm a chief of commune and I am responsible for Women and Children issue.

In year 2000, after graduated, I was chosen to be a member of the commune council first round, responsible for Women and Children issues of O Chum commune. In that time I was the one who had to communicate with District Women Affair working group, to resolve any issues related to women and children. But in fact, I was too young to cover those issues. I had only little experience, but I was supported by some other organization to build my capacity. I have learnt a lot of skills such as Facilitation, News Writing, Interviewing etc. which have a made me more comfortable to work.

In 2007, after the subnational election, I became the 2<sup>nd</sup> Assistant to the chief of commune, but had the same responsibility. However, the



collaboration between Women and Child Affair working group of Women Affair Department and other government entities were much better than before. I have been strongly involved in Anti-trafficking activities and domestic violence resolution, as well as land conflict etc. At least 20 to 30 cases every year have been solved in this commune.


There were some methods I have used to solve these cases, such as sending an invitation letter to the perpetrator for resolution. I always give them some advises and also reflect with Cambodian Law. After then, I ask them to make a promising letter. In order to make sure that all perpetrators that have been advised are really changing their attitude, I have formed a monitoring team within the village to monitor those people. Every 3 months, I call them or visit them for friendly discussion and monitoring. Normally, those people who have got my advice are very happy and thankful to our working group that we have turned them into a new positive person.

2012 was the year that I have had my position as O Chum commune chief, as I do today. In this period my work has become bigger and bigger, and with more responsibilities-especially regarding to land issues.

There was the conflict among community regarding to transferring of land ownership and land registration. The root course of the problem is mortgages and loans. The staff of the local Bank and Micro Finance had approached to community directly, without any consultation with me and my team as a local authority. They accept property for mortgage and provide loans to the community. Once community is not able to return the interest or the loan on time, they then start to contact us for resolution. I think the best way to prevent these issues in indigenous community, is encouraging the community to register communal land. I want to see the bank and the micro finance growing, but I also want to see my community develop in a proper way.

Even if this new position is more difficult and more challenges, I strongly believes that I can help my people - especially those indigenous people - based on my self-reliance and experiences.

**I want to see the bank and the micro finance growing, but I also want to see my community develop in a proper way.**



Already, there are three indigenous communities who have begun to register communal land and one of them, in La-ern Kren village, have already got the certificate from Ministry of Interior. Moreover, two other communities are in the process of register.

At the national level, any of my suggestions during meetings, is always get consideration by the management team. On the other hand, within local level, any of my advices and decisions made are always accepted by the people especially my beloved indigenous people. This is the result of my commitment and ownership. Ongoing learning is the best foundation for us to build our confidence to make our decision.

I have depended on my capacity and value to continue my future. If people like and support me, then I'm happy to serve them but if they don't like I am also happy to walkout.

*Written by Ran Sopheak Pagna, Community Media Program Coordinator  
Building Community Voices (BCV)*

**Name:** Mrs Kha Srors  
**Ethnicity:** Kui  
*Stung Treng, Cambodia*



Kha Srors. Photo credit - ICSO

Mrs. Kha Srors who is from the Kuy indigenous peoples, is 50 years old. She is living in the remote area of Ton Song village, Siem Bok commune & district of Stung Treng province, in the northeast region of Cambodia.

In 2000, she became a member of the village gender committee; and by 2004, she was also a member of community forest. She has limited use of Khmer language, even reading and writing, and this made her unconfident to speak to other people. She also lacked of facilitation

skills. Furthermore, she didn't understand the laws related to advocacy of indigenous peoples, develop plans of action, and advocacy skills, but she is the elder in the village and committed to helping her community to maintain language, identity, traditional, culture and custom.

In 2007, she had been selected as Indigenous Rights Active Members (IRAM) by local community, though there was no action at the grassroots level; and she barely received any training.

In 2009, with technical and financial support from the Indigenous Community Support Organization (ICSO), indigenous groups had been formed at Kampong Thom province on 12 March 2009. Through the selection process, 7 people had been selected as national representatives, and 70 people (including 20 women) to be representative of indigenous peoples in 15 provinces, in order to select a focal person in the target village, commune, district and province. Kha Srors had been trained on various topics from ICSO, such as law and rights related to advocacy of indigenous peoples, human rights documentation, facilitation skills, and develop plans of action.



Kha Srors providing training on HR documentation and advocacy to IP community leaders in February, 2013. Photo credit - ICSO

Moreover, she has been supported to attend meetings, with various organizations and networks, in various provinces in terms of advocacy on natural resource, identity of indigenous people through regional issues; and solved the problem happened at the community levels.

She has changed a lot, in terms of knowledge, confidence and her ability to facilitate, to promote, minute taking, report and conducting trainings in the community on laws and land rights advocacy of indigenous people in the target area which received support from local authority and the whole community. The community people have much trust in her.

Indeed, she has mobilized for a person, IRAM, Community Forest Committee, Prey Lang Network, Village Chief, Commune Chief, District Governor, Chief of Police Post, and people in her community (the three villages; Tonsoang, Siem Bok and Oolang) who make their living on non timber forest product and spirit forest. She has advocated on community land from Mr. Sam Ya, who is a soldier in Siem Bouk command post under Stung Treng headquarter, who has colluded to leveling the ground on community land, and cutting down trees for his property; 50 hectares that has affected 10 families in the three villages.

On 03 January 2013, Kha Srors went to stop 5 people (including 1 woman) who cut-down trees on 10 hectares of land and helped to educate them to stop cutting down community forest that they have maintained.



Mobilising IP communities to patrol the forest community in June, 2012.

Photo credit - ICSO

On 8 January 2013, she mobilized community representatives, local authorities, a police post and Prey Lang networks, to go down with female IRAM members, to post signs prohibiting the cutting down of trees. Since then, they have continued to patrol and take photos of any illegal cutting down of trees, including by Mr. Sam Yan's group, as well as lodging a complaint to the district governor for assistance.

**The people in Kha Srors community very much appreciated her performance and now trust her even more, for any work within the community**

Finally, the district governor solved this problem; Mr. Sam Ya was fired from his position, and ousted from the community.

The people in Kha Srors community very much appreciated her performance and now trust her even

more, for any work within the community. In conclusion, Ms. Kha Srors has sacrificed her time to help community to solve the problem and honest with the community.

*Written by Community Led-Development Program of Indigenous Community Support Organization (CLDP-ICSO)*

**Name:** Bua-Ban\*

**Ethnicity:** Kri

*Vilabouly District, Laos PDR*

Bua-Ban, about 40-year-old, is a Kri woman directly affected by the mining operations in a village in Vilabouly District. In the past, the village was located on the bank of river Koh, a wide fertile land suitable for farming and agriculture. A number of Kri and Ma-kong tribals used to live there together peacefully. Bua-Ban happily talks about the old days, before her village was relocated due to the mining project. “My village, where I used to live, was in the forest. I never saw a car, neither a crowd. There were no roads but only trees and rivers. We heard only birds and rats. We grew rice only once a year. To fish in the river or the ponds, men used fishing meshes, and women helped to collect the fishes. We went into the jungle to find vegetables and fruits to eat.”

When the Sepon mining project arrived in the present area, it intensely affected several communities in Savannakhet, including all villages in Vilabouly. The mining operations caused village relocations and changes in land utilization. Communities either moved and resettled as a whole or merged together with other villages<sup>11</sup>. Some villages directly had to leave their original location; others were indirectly affected, but did not move as yet<sup>12</sup>. Some villagers return to continue farming in their original villages although the community has moved already<sup>13</sup>.

*In 2005, Bua-ban’s village was relocated because it was on the mine site concession granted by the government and moved near Road 28A15. When the mining operations started, environmental pollution was experienced in the village’s surroundings. Bua-Ban remembers: “I came in 2005. When the gold mine arrived, the whole village shifted to here, and has merged with people from other villages. It is unlike our old home.*

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\* Name changed

<sup>11</sup> Examples for villages that were combined with other villages: New Na-Lu village moved from Old Na-Lu village in 2007, and merged with other villages or resettlements nearby. Viang village amalgamated with Non Somboun village, and Pon Sa-At village with Nong Kadaeng village in 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Examples are Padong, Non Sa-At, Non Somboun, and Muang-luang

<sup>13</sup> For example, New Na-Lu village

*The house we live in is shared with many families, situated right next to the main road. The location is not bad at all, some 100 kilometers from Savannakhet. Here is where I came to know what people, cars, and roads are.”*

Bua-Ban relates how their living conditions deteriorated upon their relocation. “My previous house was near River Koh. We all saw that the river was polluted by the water that flowed from the mine. We decided to move closer to the road.” When asked about the compensation she received for the move, Bua-Ban explains that her family did not receive anything although financial compensation is provided in the government’s policies<sup>14</sup>. “None. Other villagers got 7 million Kip, but we got none because the authorities did not order us to move but we moved on our own, due to the pollution. For this voluntary relocation, they gave us nothing.” She further adds: “The mining company did not give any money. We dismantled the house and reconstructed it by ourselves. The company just helped in shifting the stuff from our previous location to where we are now.”

**no money means no food.**

Apart from the lack of compensation, finding food is another problem the relocates face. “Gathering wild vegetable has changed into growing food domestically and buying them from the market”, Bua-Ban states and adds that domestic production is also her duty. “Living here in a totally new place, no money means no food. We cannot go and collect wild vegetables or catch wild fish like before. Indeed this is much different. We must have a job in order to have money to have food and to be able to send our children to school” explains Bua-Ban. “Naturally growing vegetables do not exist here. I am afraid to eat these things around this relocation site. I am afraid of the dirtiness.”

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<sup>14</sup> Villagers were said to receive compensation from the government in 2 formats: 1) Land rental paid for the duration until the project is completed. The rent is variable, depending on land space and negotiation between the owner and tenants. 2) Total land purchase: The villagers are no longer have owners of the land, and the land will be in possession of the government. For the move, the mining project announced to assist in shifting woods, providing 20 zinc plates, and 5 kilogrammes of nails.



Today, Ban Vang-Yang encompasses 61 houses of 58 families, with 348 inhabitants (191 women)<sup>15</sup> altogether. Due to the merging of different communities within one resettlement site, the villagers also have to find ways to deal with different religious belief systems and practices, such as with the Tai who were shifted to the same area. “We Kri people believe in spirits and we have no temple. On the anniversary of a death, we gather and perform “La-Prue” (ancestor) rite . We still do the same, but also go to temple with the Phu Tai. If the Kri set up the La-Prue rite, the Phu Tai are invited as well, they are our neighbours.”

Since Bua-Ban moved to the new resettlement, she joined the weaving group, assisted by the corporation. Most of the products, both textiles and ready-made clothes, are sold in Vientiane and other provinces, but some are exported to Australia<sup>16</sup>. Today, she continues to face hardship in supporting her family. She has to survive the economic pressure which suddenly increased because she is now dependent on cash economy rather than being able to rely on subsistence activities: she has to pay for her children’s education, daily household expenditures, and the family’s food. One of the main limitations is that the women get paid for the labour, but not for the products, and thus, group members are bound as daily labourers. Their work totally depends on the company. If raw materials (cotton yarn) are not provided by the company, the women are not able to make any business.

Bua-Ban epitomizes the situation of the Kri women relocatees which is particularly difficult due to their dependency on the company for their wages, as well as their lack of education and/or marketable skills. “I don’t know how to earn money. I don’t know how to work in this kind of society. I can weave and stitch, thanks to aid from the company. I sell my textile. I may earn 30000 Kip (3.5 dollars) a day, or perhaps not even a single kip.” When asked her about her daily expenses, she answers with smiles: “I buy vegetables, fish, and drinking water. These things can no longer be obtained naturally. Now I have 9 children, and I have to get all

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<sup>15</sup> Also 36 permanent miners (11 women), and 9 temporary miners (4 women) are living in the village.

<sup>16</sup> In 2010, the project transferred the business to a local family to continue. The workers were still hired, but the training at the silkworm-raising building was not discontinued.

of them educated<sup>17</sup>. Education is costly.” She further explains why the education of her children is of utmost importance: *“One without knowledge, like me, faces difficulties everywhere. I cannot do other things but weave. The knowledgeable can lead to better lives. Uneducated teenagers in our village cannot get money either. They clean toilets and mow for the company. One day when they are not hired, they do nothing else due to lack of knowledge.”*

With regards to the responsibilities of a woman towards her family, she explains that her duty as a mother and wife will never change, no matter how the environment changes. “I must seek food for my husband and our children. Water is a need. Money is required for their education.” Worries overwhelm Bua-Ban. “When we have cows or buffaloes, we sell them out and have cash. We spend a lot on our children. I do not know how and where to get more money.” Referring to her husband, she adds: “He is simply raising cows and buffaloes. My husband is not working for anyone. He has no knowledge, just like me. So he cannot work anywhere, even in the mine.”

**Sometimes they ask me whether I miss my old life, I say ‘yes, but I cannot change it.’**

Bua-Ban and other villagers are struggling, trying to adapt themselves and survive amidst challenging living conditions. Some people have more difficulties to adapt to this new lifestyle than others: “Some people are in harder situations, those who say they can do nothing and they have nothing to eat. They cannot hunt wild fish or pick wild vegetables like before. Now they can only raise cows and buffaloes. Many have been talking about their old lifestyles. Sometimes they ask me whether I miss my old life, I say ‘yes, but I cannot change it.’ Asked whether men or women find it harder to live in this new area, Bua-Ban answered without hesitation, “equal. Neither of them knows what to do.”

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<sup>17</sup> Two of her daughters are studying at the ethnic school. One is studying at a medical university. Another is in the national university. The ethnic school which is introduced by the policy of free education offers educational opportunities until university level for all ethnic members.

There are numerous direct negative impacts of the mining operations on the environment - such as water pollution and forests degradation, causing death of countless animals and endangering biodiversity in the area. Before the arrival of the mine, Vilabouly was a wide and fertile rural district with a plenty of natural resources. Most villagers used to consume forest products, such as bamboo or wild fruits, and to collect herbal medicine. Everybody could freely access natural resources without any restriction. When the mining project took over the land, forests, and thus, the villagers' main food sources were inevitably destroyed. With the arrival of the open pit mine, the forests and fields have been scraped off the face of the earth.

As mentioned women heavily depend on the forest for food and other resources on which families were able to subsist on. Now that the forests are gone, women have lost access to critical food sources.

***Now that the forests are gone, women have lost access to critical food sources.***

If before they were able to sell extra natural products from the forests earn extra cash for the family, this revenue does not exist any longer. However, Bua-Ban describes that lack of this wild food is not as troublesome as the lack of water. "My family has to buy water and dig our own well. Water in the river could not be used. It was filthy and nobody dares use it." Water pollution is a big problem in Bua-ban's village and many other adjacent communities. River Koh, the villager's main supply artery, is now so heavily contaminated with waste water from the mining factory that everyone fears using it.

*"Birds drank it and they died. I saw dead birds." The village representatives informed responsible parties of the mine, but they were only told that they should not worry. "Many cows and buffaloes have died because of the polluted water. We told our representative to talk to the company. The mine said it was not due to the water. Those cows and buffaloes died naturally. But many died suddenly. Some entered the mining site and fell down dead."*

The villagers suffer from water shortage. "For water, the company dug 7 wells, but that was not sufficient. In summer, all the water dried out. We still had to buy water. Normally 4 buckets are for 2 days, each bucket

costs 4000 Kip. When the drought comes, we need to buy water. We need more money.” Bua-Ban adds that *“there is only one water filtration point installed by the company. But that’s not enough, one point for multiple villages. I buy water myself. It is better and cleaner.”*

*“Some families do not have enough money. They choose to drink the well water.” Bua-Ban explains why she does not drink the well water. “I do not know if it is contaminated or not. But I am afraid it is. All villagers think the same. Those who can buy water never drink it. It is only for those who cannot buy.”*

Natural water sources for consumption and other uses had been destroyed by the mining operations. A study of environmental effects on the Koh River confirms that the main river is contaminated with chemicals from the mining industry on a very dangerous level, and that it cannot be used as it was before.<sup>18</sup> Vilabouly’s villagers traditionally used the river in numerous ways and its contamination is severely affecting the peoples’ lives. Although no organisation has systematically studied environmental effects yet, a private international development organisation warned about the chemical contamination of River Kok<sup>19</sup>. According to the report, the mine is not subject to any restrictions or requirements regarding the discharging of cyanide wastes and heavy metals (like mercury and cadmium which are used in gold and copper ore processing) into the river where biodiversity is considerably high. Bua-Ban explains that no-one came to test the water’s hygiene in the wells or the river: *“I have seen nobody”*, and *“our representative told the company to come and check. They have not.”*

*Written by Haruethai Buakhiao, as told by Bua-Ban*

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<sup>18</sup> Damdouane Khouangvichit, 2010: Socio-Economic Transformation and Gender Relations in Laos PDR, [umu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:318827/FULLTEXT01](http://umu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:318827/FULLTEXT01)

<sup>19</sup> Friends of the Earth. Sepon gold mine, Laos. [www.foei.org/en/resources/publications/oil-mining-and-gas/2000-2007/sepon.pdf/at\\_download/file](http://www.foei.org/en/resources/publications/oil-mining-and-gas/2000-2007/sepon.pdf/at_download/file)

**Name:** Daw Bawk Jar  
**Ethnicity:** Kachin  
*Myitkyina, Kachin State, Myanmar*



Bawk Jar presenting and translating for a farmer who doesn't speak Burmese language to media at a press conference in Rangoon. Photo credit - KDNG

I also want to cry. Long time ago, my village was attacked, and men were killed by the military. They buried all the dead bodies in just one big grave. Women were raped and sexually abused, putting a stick into their

vagina and sitting then up and down. There was a lot of harassment. They brought them to other places to rape them. My grandfather was killed by this group. These cases are still happening in my area. My family experienced the situation and this makes me very sad and motivates me to become politically active.

After I graduated from the university, I went back to my place to ensure my community's children's education. I was working in community development projects, such as primary schools and income generation.

The Yuzana company came to my village in the western part of Kachin State. It confiscated 20,000 acres land for the mono plantation in Hugawng Valley (which is well known as a tiger reservation), established in 2001 by the Burmese regime and the US-based Wildlife Conservation Society. This affected about 7000 people living in the village, mainly Kachin, Burmese, Shan and Naga people. The company has a very powerful military background. They are just grabbing people's lands. Confiscating entire villages. All of the legal or administrative departments are biased. Most of them disappear within one day. When the company comes in the village, the community is against them, but they always lose. They ban their village.



Villagers in Kachin State living by the side of the road with their remaining possessions after their house was destroyed by Yuzana. Photo credit - KDNG

The living conditions get worse. The trees are all cut, so it is difficult to find fire wood. Shortages are happening; people are getting sick of malaria and diarrhoea. People have to stay just beside their house, they have no job, no food, and people are dying. Without income, people cannot repair their houses; they do not have enough for living. This other picture of a small hut is the primary school in the village. The land was confiscated, and villagers were expected to work for them.



Primary school in Myitkyina, Kachin State. Photo credit - KDNG

The villagers sued the company since 2007. Several times, they sued the company, so the company is not successful yet. The young people cannot attend school because parents cannot afford it. Many young people abuse drugs. There is trafficking and sex work among women. The roads used by the company are in very bad condition because of mud. We also appealed to the ILO, but there was a lot of intimidation. The situation is getting worse; some villagers don't want to move to their relocation camps. The army announced that they will shoot those who do not want to move.

Local authorities are grabbing property, money, even donation money in the church. Two women and a man were arrested. What we did was to bring the case to the state court. The judge decided unfairly. Even during the process, there were many intimidations. Some elder people cannot speak Burmese very well. The court did not get any interpreter. During the court case, the judge was sleepy then he declared the following compensation: 1 acre for 1 tree. The community refused the compensation scheme and appealed to the national-level court.

There is no mechanism to punish the judge. The legal process does not work. The people are planning to demonstrate. Last year, it was announced that every individual can demonstrate, but this is not true. The police station refused the permit to demonstrate. We threatened to demonstrate at the police station. We explained that we are against the company, not the government. The police stated that the reason why the demonstration was forbidden is because the roads will be too full and blocked.

**The living conditions get worse. The trees are all cut, so it is difficult to find fire wood. Shortages are happening; people are getting sick of malaria and diarrhoea.**

We still demonstrated and the owner (U Htay Myint, an MP from Tanintharyi division) of the company invited us to negotiate with them to the Naypyidaw as he was attending the parliament. The owner said that they did not confiscate the land, but the government gave it to them as all land and natural resources are owned by the government. When we met the owner, we told him that we will get back the land from the company and will continue with the legal process. The company promised to give back the land and support a school in the village.

Some villagers have been appointed the substitute land, but actually these lands already have original owners. So the company has made a problem or conflict among the villagers again.

Bawk Jar was arrested in 18, July 2013 for her activities. She was released in 24 January 2014 . She released as she did not commit any crime. She led affected farmers in demonstrating in Yangoon again. They demonstrated in front of Yuzana Company in 30 May 2014 and the second time in 9 June 2014. They got media attention again and appeal letter to land commission group to investigate to Hugawng Valley, Kachin State. The Land Commission group went in September but the report is not out yet. She is still struggling with famers together to get back their land.

*As told by Daw Bawk Jar, with help by Seng Mai (KDNG)*



## AIPP Publication Feedback Form

Dear Friends,

As we endeavor to publish more useful and relevant materials relating to indigenous peoples, we would greatly appreciate if you could spend some of your valuable time to provide your constructive comments and suggestions on this publication. Your comments and suggestions will help us to improve our publications and enhance our outreach to wider audiences.

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## **AIPP at a glance**

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

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

### **Our Vision**

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

### **Our Mission**

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

### **Our Programmes**

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

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

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

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

Rewriting HerStory reflects the strength of the indigenous women’s movement for empowerment, leadership and justice and is a result of the dedication of our partners and friends from indigenous communities in the Philippines, Northeast India, Mainland India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Bangladesh, Cambodia and Nepal. Here, 14 women have bravely shared their stories to empower and promote the solidarity of indigenous women, not only in Asia, but worldwide.

This collection of personal essays has been made possible by the generous funding from Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) to Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), in collaboration with the Indigenous Voices in Asia Network (IVAN).

## *“Our Voices, Our Rights”*

