Violence against Indigenous Women: a global challenge

Indigenous Women around the world face disproportional levels of violence and harassment due to past and present colonialisation of their territories, and because they are Indigenous and women. They are often subjected to harassment, violence and even killings by representatives of the State, armed opposition and criminal groups. And even in their own communities they are not always safe and are exposed to domestic violence and attacks on their physical integrity and autonomy. But Indigenous women shall not only be portrayed as victims. They are active change agents and important leaders in the struggle for the rights of their peoples.

By Signe Leth – July 1st 2022

Indigenous Peoples all over the world face systemic discrimination rooted in persistent racism as well as past and present colonialism. Indigenous Peoples forced to live in countries created and ruled by the descendants of settler colonialists from overseas, or in countries created after the colonizers had left and are now ruled by the elites of the dominant society and thus, they experience discrimination, dispossession and disempowerment. Many Indigenous communities have been forcefully relocated, lands have been taken away, forests have been destroyed, mountains have been mined and valleys have been dammed and flooded.

Indigenous children have been taken away to boarding schools, living and dying under terrible and destructive circumstances in the name of assimilation, or are forced into schools where none of their languages are spoken and none of their ancestral knowledge and values are taught and practiced. And they are forced to live under governments that are not their own, in which they can hardly participate and on which they have no influence. Being colonized and suppressed obviously results in a series of negative consequences including racism and systemic discrimination that also leads to much violence against Indigenous women.

Violence against Indigenous women and girls

When the wider society views Indigenous Peoples as second-class citizens, the likelihood of violence with impunity happening against them increases. The countless murdered and missing Indigenous women in Canada or the innumerable unreported and unrecorded rape cases against Indigenous
women by settlers, military, police, workers from outside, or tourists all around the world are brutal examples of this. Indeed, **Indigenous women and girls are significantly more likely to be victims of different forms of sexual violence and more likely to experience rape than non-indigenous women and girls.** This includes a higher exposure to various forms of sexual violence, trafficking and domestic violence.

Perhaps unsurprisingly violence against Indigenous women and girls also occurs routinely in contexts such as armed conflicts and militarization of their territories, during the implementation of development, investment and extractive projects, and while exercising the defence of their human rights. In some cases, this form of violence is politically motivated. For the most vulnerable women and youth, namely unmarried mothers, child-brides, orphans, widows, LGBTQ+ and women living with disabilities, the cycle of poverty disproportionately marginalizes them and is perpetuated from generation to generation, placing them at the bottom of society, where violence with impunity is even more pervasive.

Indigenous women face discrimination and violence in the exercise of their economic, social and cultural rights. **Indigenous girls are at higher risk of sexual violence on their way to and from school, or when they move away from their communities to study or work,** as a result of the remoteness of many Indigenous communities and the long distances they need to travel to attend school or work. School itself is also not a safe place for Indigenous girls. In the past few years media in Canada, Guatemala, Bangladesh and other countries published a number of horrific reports of Indigenous school students sexually abused by their teachers.

When Indigenous Peoples migrate as a result of eviction from their territories, there is also a higher risk of violence and poverty. In her report on the situation of Indigenous Women in the Americas the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Vicky Tauli-Corpuz reported instances where Indigenous women accessing health services related to pregnancy, childbirth or postpartum period have been sterilized without their consent or forced to use contraceptives. In fact, obstetric violence against Indigenous women is a widespread practice in many countries around the world, with common reports of practices such as forcing Indigenous women to give birth in a supine position rather than their preferred vertical position, banning traditional midwifery and
criminalising traditional practices, or ridiculing Indigenous women for their traditional clothing or their belief in the effects of traditional medicine; among others.

**Victims of sexual violence**

Because Indigenous lands are often coveted by diverse actors for the natural resources they contain or for their development potential, Indigenous communities—and Indigenous women in particular—often end up “caught in the crossfire of conflict situations and subjected to militarized violence”. In several countries, such as Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Kenya, the Philippines, Thailand and Timor-Leste, the militarization of and conflict over Indigenous land has led to instances of gang-rape, sexual enslavement and killing of Indigenous women and girls. The militarization of their lands also makes them particularly vulnerable to forced labour and trafficking.

Indigenous women and girls worldwide who leave their families and communities fleeing difficult socio-economic conditions or armed conflicts are thus highly vulnerable to trafficking, including severe economic and sexual exploitation and sexual violence. In Nepal for instance, Indigenous women and girls amount to almost 80% of the total of trafficked persons, although the proportion of Indigenous Peoples in Nepal is officially only 37%.

Development activities on Indigenous lands have also generated increased risks of sexual violence for Indigenous women and girls globally. Development projects and the presence of temporary workers camps or armed security personnel in remote areas have led to “an increase in involuntary prostitution of Indigenous girls, forced/unwanted pregnancies, STDs and sexual violence”.

The rapid expansion of tourism in some areas has also led to increased “sexual harassment, insecurity and sufferings for the Indigenous women and girls”. Moreover, Indigenous women and girls have an exacerbated risk of health problems associated with environmental contamination when development projects are implemented in their territories.

**From the persecution of women leaders to domestic violence**

Additionally, Indigenous women leaders and human rights organizations working for the defence of Indigenous women’s rights are frequently targets of intimidation, threats and attacks on their life. They face criminalization on the basis of false allegations, are subjected to unfounded criminal proceedings, as well as to imprisonment in order to demoralize them, paralyze their human rights
defence work and delegitimize their causes. In 2021 Debates Indígenas wrote about the cases of Rachel Mariano and Betty Belén, Indigenous women and human rights advocates from the Philippines who were arrested on trumped-up charges. The combination of this pattern of violence against human rights defenders and the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by Indigenous women creates conditions that facilitate and perpetuate violence against Indigenous women.

Indigenous women and girls across all regions are significantly more likely to be victims of domestic violence than non-indigenous women, both from non-indigenous and Indigenous partners. Due to racial discrimination, colonial history and in some cases the motives behind the marriage (i.e. non-indigenous men marry Indigenous women to get access to land) means that mixed marriages between Indigenous women and non-indigenous men are more likely to be tainted by violence.

All around the world Indigenous people are suffering from colonial trauma and current systemic discrimination leading to, for example, an increase in mental health issues, alcoholism, etc. seriously affecting Indigenous women and children. Some Indigenous communities of South Africa have the highest rate of Foetal Alcoholic Syndrom on the planet, a legacy of the dop system, a system of paying farm workers part of their salary in alcohol.

Another example of the effects of this trauma is the harrowing statistics IACHR has come up with to show the prevalence of domestic violence suffered by Indigenous women throughout the Americas. Or the data from Cameroon that shows that, 55% of Indigenous Mbororo women reported facing violence before the age of 15. We do not have data from all regions and countries, so these are just indicative examples. Domestic violence may be felt more acutely by Indigenous women and girls owing to the lack of access to support services and justice, as well as their specific cultural and economic circumstances.

When violence against women comes from their own communities

Indigenous women and girls’ rights to physical integrity are also violated by their own communities through different traditional, harmful practices. For example, across Sub-Saharan Africa, and in countries in South and Southeast Asia early and forced marriages remain a major concern for Indigenous girls. Early marriage is closely related to removal from school, higher probability of domestic violence, complications in pregnancy and childbirth, and psychological trauma. Female
Gentile Mutilation (FGM) is also a common practice among Indigenous communities in many countries in Africa, causing serious harm and violence towards the affected girls and women.

A prevalent practice called “beading” in the Samburu region in Kenya, allows men of the “warrior” age group to have sanctioned sexual relations with girls as young as nine years old in exchange for special beads and other goods, and constitutes a serious violation of Indigenous girls’ rights. In India, Indigenous women face brutal human rights violations when their communities brand them as witches. As a result, these women are shunned from their communities at best, and at times are stoned, tortured and killed.

It is also important to recognize that several Indigenous customary practices are also favourable of Indigenous women and bolster their position in their communities. The matrilineal Khasi of India and Bangladesh is an example of this. Or the Kreung in Cambodia, whose customary practice includes the newly wed couples to live in the community of the bride, then later move to the groom’s community and finally jointly decide where they wish to live, providing some protection for the young women. Traditionally, Kreung women would be the ones administering the family income.

Leaders of the struggle for Indigenous rights

Although Indigenous women and girls face enormous challenges, violence and discrimination, they should not only be portrayed as victims or a vulnerable group. Indigenous women are active change agents and important leaders in the movement and struggle for the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous women worldwide have built a movement and insisted on being given space to raise their issues within the broader Indigenous Peoples’ movement, as well as within the broader women’s rights movement.

They have resiliently and consistently been pushing their messages in various spaces at all levels – from the family and grassroot level to the global arena – because they have specific priorities they need everyone to pay attention to and address. Indigenous women have also, in some places, established their own parallel social and political structures if not enough space was provided within the established structures (both state and Indigenous structures).

IWGIA published an analysis of all the recommendations made by the UN related to Indigenous women since 2011 – focusing specifically on recommendations for Bangladesh, Nepal, India,
Myanmar, Kenya, Tanzania, Colombia, Peru and global. The study shows that between 2011 and 2021, 271 recommendations specifically related to Indigenous women were made – yet if we look at the level of implementation, there is an enormous gap. In general, effective implementation of recommendations to end the intersectional challenges faced by Indigenous Women have been far too slow to materialize.

Addressing the situation of Indigenous Women demands holistic approaches. Instrumental to breaking the cycle of discrimination and exclusion - political will by States is needed, moreover, financial allocation, awareness raising campaigns toward the general public, and the effective and inclusive participation of Indigenous Women in decision-making at all levels of governance, laws, legislation, and projects from the process of formation to their implementation, must be substantially prioritized. The Indigenous women’s movement undoubtedly will continue to put pressure on duty bearers to fulfil their responsibilities towards Indigenous women, and IWGIA will be here in solidarity and support.

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