

Indigenous women overcome multiple obstacles

GENEVA – Despite the immense diversity of indigenous cultures, the challenges confronting indigenous peoples are often strikingly alike. Several issues come to the forefront across the continents:

- In addition to facing discrimination due to their ethnicity, members of indigenous communities often belong to linguistic minorities, causing hardship in education, employment and everyday life.
- Many lands once belonging to indigenous peoples have been encroached upon and settled by newcomers. With little legal protection, indigenous peoples can rarely recover the lands they traditionally occupied.
- Indigenous communities are often situated in remote, rural areas, where they lack infrastructure and access to larger markets.
- Indigenous communities have also played a historically important role in environmental protection. Traditional livelihoods in indigenous communities may depend upon plant and animal species and other parts of fragile ecosystems. Environmental damage therefore often most severely impacts their economies.
- Land reform and property laws have restricted many nomadic indigenous groups, often making their traditional occupations untenable.
- As they are often marginalized, even where they might constitute a national majority group, most indigenous and tribal peoples lack clout in national and even local government, and their interests and needs are often ignored by decision-makers.
- Years of discrimination have cast many indigenous people into poverty, thus further damaging their chances at empowerment and opportunities to improve their situation.

The intersection of ethnic and gender identities means that indigenous women often face multiple discrimination. Frequently excluded from decision-making at all levels, indigenous women number among the world's most disadvantaged people. Even in those indigenous societies where women were historically empowered, drastic changes in economic and political structures in recent decades have eroded women's traditional opportunities for financial independence. The hardship caused by the destruction of traditional industries has often fallen unduly on women, robbing them of social safety nets and opportunities for employment. Indigenous women often face disproportionately high mortality rates, low literacy rates and high levels of poverty.

Three women in Bangladesh

Indigenous and tribal peoples number only around 1 per cent of the total population in Bangladesh; the ethnic majority, Bengalis, constitute 98 per cent. In a country already hard hit by poverty, Bangladesh's indigenous peoples often find themselves among the poorest of the poor. They face discrimination in education, employment and civil rights. Decades of violence between indigenous-led insurgencies and government security forces in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region of Bangladesh aggravated social tensions and led to serious human and civil rights abuses against members of indigenous communities. The impact of these injustices persists today despite the signing of a peace accord nearly ten years ago.

Although women have played a major role in development efforts in the country, much of Bangladeshi society has yet to fully accept the idea of women working outside the home. Indigenous women often have little financial security; they are dependent on male family members. But what happens when that safety net vanishes?

Sujata Begum Khukumoni, a Muslim belonging to the Manipuri indigenous group in eastern Bangladesh, was only 9 years old when her father, a rice-seller, lost two trucks of rice in an accident, casting her family into debt. Seven years later, Khuku's younger brother was severely injured, leaving him severely scarred. As Khuku's father slipped into depression, she found herself shouldering the responsibility of providing for herself and her younger siblings.

Fifteen-year-old Khuku joined Urlai Mahila Samiti, a women's self-help group supported by the ILO project Women's Empowerment through Employment and Health (WEEH). After training in business, handicraft development and horticulture, she decided to take out small loans to finance tomato cultivation and weaving. Through these two activities, she has become the primary breadwinner in her family. At the age of 20 she now supports herself and her siblings and manages her family's savings and finances. She has plans to improve her businesses with further help from ILO-WEEH and her women's group.

Six years ago, Julie Martelson, a young indigenous Khasia woman living in the forests of eastern Bangladesh, watched her life suddenly fall apart: her husband, a paan leaf grower, died unexpectedly, leaving 26-year-old Julie a widowed mother of three. Like most Khasia in the area, Julie and her husband did not own their land but had to lease it from the government although their peoples have been using it for generations. As in many indigenous communities, most Khasia have no land titles; traditionally the land was considered to be the common property of the community, but often had no official recognition as such. Without land ownership, required as collateral against loans, most Khasia farmers – especially women – have almost no opportunities to gain credit.

Even before her husband's death, Julie had realized the potential for improving their livelihood with the help of loans. Joining a women's credit group in her community, she was able to borrow enough money to hire several workers to help her continue paan cultivation. Employing local labourers to work in the field, Julie concentrated on the post-harvesting processing and took charge of selling the leaves to distributors.

Julie has since remarried, and now works with her second husband in paan production. She still sells the leaves and, in accordance with the Khasias' matrilineal society, controls the family finances. Through training sponsored by the ILO project Women Empowerment through Decent Employment (WEDE), she has been able to increase her profits and expand the business through increased access to credit. Julie's hard work and astute business sense have paid off, and for her children, whom she can now afford to send to a good school, the future looks bright.

Sanoi Sinha is a 54-year-old Hindu woman and like Khuku, a member of the indigenous Manipuri people. For most of her life, Sanoi had enjoyed relative security from her father's and husband's incomes. But in 1994 her husband was diagnosed with leukaemia and the family quickly sunk into debt to pay for treatment. Despite their efforts, he died the following year, leaving Sanoi and her two unmarried daughters with nothing but a house and small garden.

Sanoi had joined a women's credit and self-help group several years before her husband's death, and with the help of NGO- and ILO-sponsored training was able to start a weaving business, using the skills she had gained from years of weaving as a pastime. She took out several loans to buy equipment and supplies, and began making a variety of traditional and non-traditional products. With her proceeds and further loans, she was able to build a workshop for her looms. Today, her loans are nearly paid off, and she soon hopes to take out more money to finance the purchase of a new loom and the hiring of an additional weaver. Although she must still work hard to support herself and her daughters, she has high hopes for the future.

Turning the tables

Khuku, Julie and Sanoi were able to find strength in their roles as indigenous women. All three come from societies where relations between women and men were traditionally more flexible than in mainstream Bangladeshi society today. Khuku remarked to the ILO that being Manipuri was what freed her to find work outside the home, since Bengali Muslim families often restrict girls in this regard. Julie finds that being Khasia, one of the only two matrilineal societies in Bangladesh, gave her greater control over finances.

"It is the women in Khasia society who control the funds," she explains.

Khuku, Julie and Sanoi also used their knowledge of traditional indigenous industries as a starting point for their businesses. Khuku began to learn traditional Manipuri weaving when she was only 5 years old. Sanoi's weaving business draws on the same knowledge, passed down through generations of Manipuri women. In cultivating paan leaves, Julie also tapped the knowledge of her community, using the traditional livelihood as a basis for a successful and expanding business.

Like these women, thousands of indigenous women throughout Bangladesh and around the world are taking fate into their own hands and working to overcome poverty and discrimination. Traditional knowledge and values, coupled with economic support from governments, NGOs and agencies such as the ILO, provide indigenous women with unique opportunities to better themselves, their families and their communities.

These stories, and many others like them, provide hope in the face of the often-dismal situations of indigenous peoples. In Bangladesh the ILO-WEED project, in conjunction with its partner NGOs, has joined forces with women in indigenous communities in the fight against poverty and injustice. The project has provided training for indigenous women and men in business management, productive skills, and women's and labour rights. The organizations have also helped provide microinsurance to families and have lent

support in the establishment of microcredit groups, enabling women and men to combine their new knowledge and longstanding traditions in the form of new enterprises.

The project in Bangladesh is just one of numerous projects carried out by the ILO and partner NGOs in recent years. In Central America, a recent ILO project has used education and training to help indigenous women start their own eco-tourism businesses. Another ILO project has aided urban indigenous women in the Philippines in the development of weaving businesses. Cameroonian indigenous women have received support from the ILO in order to start horticulture businesses, market handicrafts, and open stores. The ILO in India has helped support the formation of cooperatives for savings, loans and entrepreneurship among indigenous women. And that's just to name a few examples (see sidebar).

The increasing focus on indigenous women recognizes that, in addition to being the most disadvantaged, women are also key to improving their communities as a whole. Women are often the centre of indigenous families. Their empowerment is essential for the well-being of their families, and in turn, their communities. Indigenous women are often the custodians of a wealth of traditional knowledge. Also, women across cultures take primary responsibility for raising children; they are children's first and most important teachers. Knowledge given to women is likely to pass on to future generations, multiplying opportunities for their children and grandchildren.

The ILO and indigenous peoples

The ILO has long been at the forefront in addressing the needs and rights of indigenous peoples. The organization's history of involvement dates back to the 1920s, when it began advocating against the exploitation of "native workers". By the 1950s the ILO had begun to explicitly address the concerns of indigenous workers, adopting the Indigenous and Tribal Populations Convention (No.107) in 1957, the first international treaty of its kind.

Over the following three decades, indigenous people around the world began to organize to make their voices heard on an international level. During the 1970s, the United Nations and partner organizations began to re-examine their approaches to indigenous concerns, finding themselves the subjects of increasing criticism for treating the eventual destruction of indigenous cultures as inevitable. In response, the ILO adopted a new Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No.169) in 1989. This Convention sets as goals both the creation of opportunities for decent work among indigenous peoples and the protection of their unique cultures.

The ILO's work for indigenous peoples is two-fold. The Project to Promote ILO Policy on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (PRO 169) works at the policy level to integrate the principles set forth in Convention 169 into government practices, to increase dialogue between indigenous peoples and national governments, and to raise awareness and understanding of the Convention. In this regard, it also undertakes capacity building initiatives for all concerned actors at national, regional and international levels. In 2006, PRO 169 was particularly active in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Kenya, Morocco, Nepal, Pakistan, Peru, the Philippines and the Russian Federation. PRO 169 also cooperates with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to research legislation in Africa protecting indigenous and tribal peoples. The ILO-INDISCO programme complements the work of PRO 169 by undertaking initiatives on economic development and decent work that is appropriate for the particular cultures, aspirations and specificities of indigenous peoples. In 2006, INDISCO undertook activities in Cambodia, Kenya and the Philippines.

In recent years, women in indigenous communities have received increasing attention from the ILO and throughout the international community. In 1999, ILO Director-General Juan Somavia announced the Policy on Gender Equality and Mainstreaming, giving an increased voice to women in all ILO programmes, including its work on behalf of indigenous peoples.