

10/05 (3)

Ms. Tamang will make
revisions to her statement
and deliver it to DoCip on
11/5/04 (Tues.)¹



United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 3rd Session

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Item 3: Special Theme: Indigenous Women *High Level Panel & Dialogue*

Presentation of Stella Tamang, Chair, South Asia Indigenous Women Forum

First of all I would like to offer respect to all our ancestors and would like to seek for their blessings. I would like to offer respect and greetings to the indigenous peoples of Haudenosaunee, the peoples of this land. We express our appreciation and gratitude for allowing us to use this space where we are holding this meeting. We the indigenous peoples are blessed with the wealth of resources, knowledge and wisdom and skills which have been handed over to us by our ancestors and we are also bestowed with the responsibility to protect and defend them. At this moment, I would like to remember all those indigenous brothers and sisters who have sacrificed their life for the cause of the indigenous peoples. I would also like to remember all those indigenous individuals whose constant struggle to defend the rights of indigenous peoples have enabled us to be here in this UN process but they are not present here to day. I would specially like to acknowledge the contribution of indigenous mothers and sisters of all over the world for their constant struggle in defending our rights and for the cause of indigenous peoples. Our presence here today is a testimony of how far we have travelled and how much struggle we have made. UN Permanent on indigenous issues is not a gift given to us, it is the symbol of our struggle, our strength and success.

Mr, Chairman, honourable members of Permanent Forum, respectable members of the panel, distinguished Government's representatives, representatives of various UN Agencies and dear indigenous brothers and sisters, I bring greetings from the indigenous peoples of Nepal. Along with the greetings, I bring messages of hopes, expectation, fears, concerns, wisdom and confidence of the indigenous peoples from different parts of the world. I will share that during my presentation. Honourable members of the high panel, I have my highest respect for you all for what you are doing and for what you have done. It is an honour to be sitting next to you.

Thank you! I would also like to thank the Secretariat of the Permanent Forum for giving me this opportunity.

I am Stella Tamang. Tamang is one of the indigenous peoples of Nepal. Tamang is a matriarchal society. Tamang women retain their family name after the marriage too. Tamang peoples are mountain peoples. We live on high mountain. I come from a family of two brothers and three sisters and married to Parshuram Tamang who is the second of the seven brothers and no sisters. I have two daughters and one son only in spite of my mother and mother-in-law's blessing to have many children.

In Tamang community, to perform any rituals, two auspicious instruments are very important, the Bell and the Bajra. Bell represents the female principle and the Bajra which symbolises thunderbolt, represents the male principle. Every ritual begins by striking the bell with Bajra and the sound is produced symbolising coexistence of female and male equanimity. This value is so important and carries such a strong message that we are reminded by every ritual. The Bell and the Bajra are still in use and one can find various kinds of the Bell and the Bajra, very expensive one, very beautiful, very strong one, but unfortunately the very true meaning of the use of these auspicious instruments are disappearing.

For us, the sky is the father and the earth is the mother. The sun is the mother and the moon is the maternal uncle. The mountain is male and river is female. As the sun never tries to be the moon and the moon never tries to be the sun, and they complement each other, so is the men and the women. My mother uses to explain me how important it is to learn from the quality and action of the sun. She would draw my attention to the punctuality of the sun, she would explain how the sun does it duties without any discrimination, shines on the roof of the poor and of the rich palaces, gives warmth to the rich as well as poor, to the young and the old, to everyone, she said so should be the mothers and the women.

It is estimated that there are 300 to 500 million indigenous people in more than 70 countries around the world. They represent over 5000 languages and cultures which is about over 80 percent of the world cultures and languages on all five continents. The indigenous women are the main protectors, preservers and are transmitters of languages, cultures and identity. Indigenous women therefore are respected in our communities.

Most of the indigenous societies are based on egalitarian gender patterns. Men and women complement each other. Women have respectable position in the families and societies. Our patterns of duties and responsibilities have been always complementary. At this point I would also like to be reminded that there are many discriminations done towards indigenous women in the name of tradition and culture. On the other hand, the traditional balanced gender relations have undergone dramatic changes as a consequence of incorporation into the dominant society. Unfortunately, now the gender imbalance between men and women are getting wider in the indigenous societies leading indigenous women facing with triple discrimination. Indigenous women are subjected to discrimination and violent not only on the basis of gender but they suffer social and economic discrimination based on race, class and culture as well due to denial of their rights, their right to land, loss of natural resources, changes in decision-making structures at all the levels and due to vulnerable political status within nation-state.

Indigenous women throughout the world are among the most marginalized groups due to combined factors of colonization, the spread of western-style capitalism, and top-down and paternalistic approaches to development. Indigenous women are faced with more serious problems as many governments are caught up in the globalization race. The international rules made at the WTO and the continuing efforts of the World Bank and the IMF to impose their neoliberal economic, political and social policies remain as the root causes of many of our problems. The privatization of our waters, forests, ancestral lands, other social services like health and education, are making life doubly difficult for us. On the other hand, the continuing attempts of governments to claim that our lands are public lands and they have the sole prerogative to decide how to use these, remains as a big problem. It is not only with the land and resources, now our genes are also under hunting. There is initiative to harvest our genes which was led by the Human Genome Diversity Project, but now it is taken by the world's most powerful pharmaceutical and biotechnology corporations.

Indigenous women are the custodian of the planet. Our cosmovision is closely related with the nature. By virtue of our closely dependent relationships to their environment, we claim that we have guardianship of the earth - our terrestrial mother, the giver of all life. Indigenous women, through our cultural and traditional management and use of natural resources which they have accumulated and posses transmitted to them through generation, play a vital role in the sustainable use of the natural environment. The

declaration of protected areas imposing threat to the survival of indigenous peoples, specially the indigenous women since her daily life is connected with nature. Indigenous women have not been sufficiently engaged in the identification and management of protected areas, which have often violated our rights, restricted our access to livelihood and cultural resources and impoverished our peoples.

Most indigenous women are subsistence agricultural producers. The program of government to let them shift into high value cash crop production and to integrate them into the global market economy has not resulted into more wealth but problem leading to lost the lands, as they run into huge debts from the usurers. It also led to rich agro-business corporations virtually ending up controlling the production and marketing processes. The coming of GURT, Genetically Used Restricted Technology, is a trap to ditch the indigenous peoples into the ditch of poverty.

Armed conflicts is continuously occurring in many parts of the world and have escalated over the last decade. All these armed conflicts are having disproportionate impact on indigenous women and girls because of their status and sex since a large number of armed conflicts are taking place in indigenous areas. They are targeted of specific forms of violence and abuse. Parties to conflicts often rape women with impunity, sometimes using systematic rape as a tactic of war and terrorism compounded by emerging forms of violence leaving life-long social, economic, and psychologically traumatic consequences. Indigenous women do not see themselves as the mere victims of armed conflicts. They are the survivors of a struggle against militarization, and for peace-building.

The Beijing Platform for Action, the Cairo Declaration and Programme for Action of Population and Development, and the Millennium Development Goals stress the importance of investment in women health. But the health condition of many indigenous women in many parts of the world are deteriorating due to inadequate and limited access to health services, lack of outreach clinics in remote areas, deteriorating quality of air, water and land. Alarming number of indigenous women specially in Asia are being trafficked and sold into prostitution leading to the rapid spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and other STD into indigenous communities, destroying our social fabric. The Government policies to promote modern medicines have lead to an erosion or loss of practices and culturally appropriate health rules and codes of behaviours which have been instrumental in ensuring

gender-sensitive approaches to health. The denial and restriction of indigenous women's access to traditional medicines and practices is adversely affecting the health and well-being of Indigenous women. The worse situation the indigenous women healers are facing today in most of the countries in the world, especially in South Asia is being blamed and accused of practising witchcraft and there are many cases of indigenous women being stoned and killed.

Indigenous women continue to be one of the most marginalised groups in many countries in the world suffering severe forms of human rights abuses. Though human rights instruments protecting the rights of indigenous women have been put in place by the international community (CEDAW and ILO Convention 169) the lack of effective implementation of existing human rights on the part of governments is worsening the human rights situation of women.

It is getting widely recognized that in order for the world to be able to advance in the quest for development, peace and social justice, women are the most important force. The women effective participation is very crucial for the success of any programme. This is the reason that the indigenous women are carving out political spaces and creating and using International instruments. We cannot remain victims of the wrong decisions. We are seeking ways to be able to change these decisions wherever they are made.

Because of this, now there is growing number of indigenous women organisations at the international levels, national levels and local levels. Indigenous women's participation at the various UN processes in standard setting though very few are increasing. We have therefore some gains at the international arena and we have many gains at the national and local levels. But these gains have increased challenges too.

We have achieved significant gains because we did not separate from the broad indigenous peoples' movement and for some the national movements for sovereignty and democracy. We are clear that gaining our rights as indigenous women cannot be separated from gaining our rights as indigenous peoples. We are committed to be an integral part of the indigenous peoples' movement and we will continue to be the key players in this at whichever level this is found. We will at the same time engage in organising separate indigenous women's organisations. We have added responsibility of ensuring gender balance and sensitivity in our indigenous peoples' movements and in

our own tribes or communities.

Indigenous women are not homogeneous and represent diverse background and situation with different needs and concerns but they share many concerns in the areas of poverty, human rights, economic and social development with other women throughout the world, also offer a distinct and important perspective on these issues.

Indigenous women have been participating various UN standard setting process and have been very presenting their positions and programmes. So far, relatively little attention has been paid to the possibilities offered by them.

Our concerns:

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, CEDAW,

Despite its scope and its name this convention is failing to address the forms of discrimination experienced by indigenous women. Our primary concern is recognition of the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination, including our rights to our territories and natural resources, which are 'inextricably linked to our survival, development, identity and self-determination'. The body charged with monitoring the Convention has shown little interest in and awareness of the specific concerns of indigenous women. Between 1994 and 2000, indigenous women were mentioned in only 11 of the 97 country reports that were reviewed by the Committee. Unfortunately, the Committee is not the only UN body that has largely ignored the human rights of the indigenous women.

The invisibility of Indigenous women within the United Nations Human Rights Systems

A review of the annual reports of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) for example, shows that from its inception in 1983 until 2000, indigenous women were only mentioned in 1991, at its 9th session. The representatives demanded attention particularly critical situation of indigenous women, stating that they have less access to education, are economically exploited, oppressed and marginalised. Since then, although indigenous representatives have made references to human rights violations committed against indigenous women, such as limited or no access to health services, high incidence of illiteracy because of inadequate education, forced sterilizations and rape by military forces, there has been little focussed discussion within the WGIP on human rights problems experienced by

indigenous women.

UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, who was appointed in 2001, is explicitly mandated to pay special attention to discrimination against indigenous women and take into account a gender perspective. It is sad that in his first thematic report (January 2003) which focussed on the impact of large-scale or major development projects on the human rights and fundamental freedom of indigenous peoples, the Special Rapporteur only referred to indigenous women once.

Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

This creation of Permanent Forum is the only highest body in UN. During its second session in 2003, the Permanent Forum focused on the special theme of indigenous children and youth. It recommended, among others, that United Nations bodies address issues related to the trafficking and sexual exploitation of indigenous girls, and urged states to create rehabilitation programs'. With regards to indigenous women, the Permanent Forum recommended that the Special Rapporteur on violence against women pay special attention to the impact of violence against indigenous women, 'including war-related violence and domestic violence'.

Though the recommendations are made, it is now important that Permanent Forum monitor and do the assessment as follow up. Permanent Forum should now develop mechanism for follow up the recommendations. Otherwise, it will become the factory to produce recommendations only.

It has been observed during the last two sessions of the Permanent Forum the presence and participation of Governments and UN bodies but the presence and participation has been not encouraging so that the interaction could be more effective.

Conclusion:

In the last two decades we have witnessed that more and more number of Governments and UN bodies and various international communities are showing interest and are opening the door for the indigenous peoples. We are happy to see various UN agencies and organisations developing policies and programmes but it is just a drop in the ocean. It is the seed, if planed well and taken care of will definitely bear fruits. At last I would like to say that men cannot do everything, women also are needed. If women are left behind, we will never reach the goal.