



Social barriers and abuses leave indigenous women unprotected from recurring violence

June 20, 2013 | Society and Culture | By Cynthia Via

UNITED NATIONS, MediaGlobal News—In recent weeks the United Nations revealed how decades of marginalization, cultural sexism, and lack of access to resources continues to prevent indigenous women from receiving adequate protection from violence.

Personal anecdotes and reports during the UN's 12th Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues indicate that indigenous women are still exposed to high rates of violence and discrimination.

However, in the past few years, nations such as Nicaragua, Mexico, Guatemala, and Kenya have seen an upturn in indigenous activism, with the help of social media and international conventions. Indigenous groups in these regions focus on preventing sexual exploitation, eradicating gender-based violence, increasing education, and promoting economic empowerment.

"One of the problems is inequality and discrimination of young women, because they are not recognized as being owners of rights," Candida Coxolca, a Indigenous Youth Coordinator from Guatemala-based non-profit INCIDEJOVEN, who represented her organization at a Permanent Forum side event, tells **MediaGlobal News**.

INCIDEJOVEN is currently demanding a political agenda on sexual and reproductive rights from the Guatemalan government to guaranteed access to education and health services for young women. "We try to raise awareness among parents and community leaders to understand a women's space," Coxolca says.

Silvia Perez, part of the Zapoteca indigenous group in Oaxaca, Mexico was one of many activists sharing stories on violence and neglect at the forum. A human rights activist since 1974 and founder of CIARENA, Perez described to the audience how gender-based violence has personally affected her.

Since 2011, CIARENA has received anonymous threats. On January 16, about 20 armed men surrounded Perez's house and threatened to shoot her. Despite their threats, neighbors intervened and Perez later received support from indigenous women's rights groups FIMI and Semillas.

"Many indigenous women defenders are suffering from persecution and threats of assassination," said Perez, noting that, recently, 20 women were killed in Oaxaca. "These are not isolated cases."

Another speaker, Jenes Lekimain, a Samburu tribeswoman from Kenya and program officer for Il'laramatak Community Concerns, tells **MediaGlobal News** that Samburu and Maasai women lack economic empowerment, since they are not allowed to own land or cattle. "Women depend on men for food and resources," she says.

Traditionally, Lekimain explains, boys are given priority for higher education and girls are often forced into marriage as young as 14 years old, where polygamy is common: "Men are supposed to provide, but because they are married to many women, you find yourself handicapped."

A 2013 UNICEF and UN Women report estimates 14.2 million girls under 18-years-old will be married each year worldwide, some 142 million girls in the next decade.

In Kenya, early marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) intertwine, as FGM represents the first transition to womanhood — most common among the Maasai — at 73 percent.

In 2011, Kenyan policymakers enacted the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act, which criminalizes the cultural tradition, and created an Anti-Female Genital Mutilation Board to implement the reform, but inadequate human and financial resources have delayed its effectiveness and efforts between national institutions.

The lack of resources and "culture of silence" has allowed FGM to continue, Lekimain said. "The caretakers [leaders] will do the cutting without knowledge or consent."

These practices of early marriage and FGM contribute to the negative effects on a girl's social welfare and physiological development. Furthermore the absence of education, despite Kenya's policy on free primary education, is linked to these prevalent customary laws of child marriage and FGM.

Among Samburu females aged 15 to 49 years, 12.2 percent are illiterate. "They don't know their rights, says Lekimain. "They don't know where to go if they are oppressed."

In Kenya, it's reported that 54 percent of women submitted to FGM have no education, compared with only 19 percent who have at least secondary education.

Indigenous women tell stories of violence and neglect at a side event of the 12th Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, hosted by MADRE, ECMIA, and FIMI.
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Kain explained how her group began to study the rates of violence against Miskito women after discovering the trafficking of indigenous girls near the Nicaragua-Honduras border and reporting it to authorities. Wangki Tangni researchers reviewed over 150 criminal reports and interviewed 14 victims involving Miskito women, and found evidence of incest, trafficking, femicide, and sexual violence.

Although the Nicaraguan Parliament enacted the Violence Against Women Act in 2011, outlawing the practice, the Miskito fall outside federal jurisdiction, making implementation difficult. But the group is working to adopt the law.

Wangki Tagni now engages in local dialogue, gathering women, men, elders, and indigenous authorities to sign acts of compromise to stop violence. The elders, who share traditional stories about a "woman's power," strengthened community support for the cause, explained Kain.

When implementation is stalled, youth movements often play a crucial role to advance it. In Guatemala, INCIDEJOVEN works to educate indigenous Kaqchikel youth from 17 to 30 on health, sexual, and political awareness. They "sensitize" parents and indigenous leaders about women's health and social rights to make changes at home and the wider community.

"There are some [government] strategies but they are not implemented," Coxolca tells **MediaGlobal News**. "What we do is try to start political advocacy as a way to advance implementation."

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