



RURAL WOMEN'S DECLARATION RIGHTS, EMPOWERMENT AND LIBERATION 6-8 March 2008 Arakkonam, Tamil Nadu, India

STEERING COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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- Irene Fernandez, TENAGANITA, Malaysia
- P Logeswary, Human Development Organisation (HDO), Sri Lanka
- Emmi de Jesus and Emily Cahilog, GABRIELA National Alliance of Women's Organisation, Philippines
- Sita Poudel, All Nepal Women's Alliance (ANWA), Nepal
- Nimalka Fernando, International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR)
- Lucia Jayaseelan, Committee for Asian Women (CAW)
- Lynnsay Francis, Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD)
- Saira Shameem and Michelle Rogers, Asian-Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women (ARROW)
- Sarojeni Rengam, Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP)
- Irene Fernandez and Nova Nelson, Coordination of Action Research on HIV/AIDS and Mobility (CARAM - ๕๙1๕)

We, 716 women from 21 countries representing peasants, agricultural workers, indigenous women, Dalit women, nomads, fisherfolk, informal and formal workers, migrants and supportive activists met for the First Asian Rural Women's Conference in Arakkonam, Tamil Nadu, India from 6th March to 8th March to call for the *Rights, Empowerment and Liberation* of rural women.

Rural women in Asia continue to face exploitation, oppression, multiple forms of discrimination and violence in all forms from the impact of neo-liberal globalisation, fundamentalisms and militarisation.

The process of neo-liberal globalisation is abusing Mother Nature, destroying the symbiotic relationship between nature and human beings; and has disempowered rural women and exacerbated human and labour rights violation and economic injustices. This process driven by G8 countries, perpetuated by the WTO, bilateral and regional trade agreements, sustained by International Financial Institutions such as World Bank, IMF and ADB benefits the landlords, elites and TNCs.

This present imperialist-dominated economic and political processes promote corporate control over all aspects of food and fibre production and have created monopoly control over land, seas and marine resources, water, livelihoods, seeds and genetic biodiversity. Corporate farming and contract farming, intensive industrial aquaculture, expansion of agro-fuel projects, setting up of Special Economic Zones (SEZ), and massive land conversion are displacing thousands of women peasants, agricultural workers and fisherfolk; worsening the loss of livelihoods and productive resources; increasingly poisoning the environment; accelerating poverty and disintegrating the rural economy. Rural women are disproportionately and negatively affected, suffering increased gender based violence, hunger and malnutrition, forced evictions and trafficking.

Industries like mining, logging, energy projects, bio-fuel production and agro-industries are taking away the ancestral lands of indigenous women and their communities. Commercialisation and monopoly control are destroying the traditional knowledge and practices that have kept indigenous women self-sufficient. Displaced from their economic base, indigenous women are forced to migrate and lose the protection provided by their communities and alienate them from their culture and value systems. It is in this way that imperialist globalisation is causing ethnocide among indigenous women, their children and their communities.

Life and livelihood of the small-scale fisherfolk have been destroyed by liberalised policies of globalisation processes, privatization of the sea and marine resources and the push for exports have increased the use of modern fishing techniques including trawler fishing and push nets, thus decreasing fish production. At the same time mega-projects, SEZs, tourism and intensive industrial aquaculture are decreasing the access of women fisherfolk to the sea and marine resources. Women fisherfolk and fish workers are most affected and have to work longer hours for lower incomes and the quality of food and health is affected.

Globalisation processes have caused the greatest destruction of formal and regular work worldwide. The strategy of flexibilisation of labour has pushed more women workers into informal work where they are not covered by labour laws and are therefore subject to greater exploitation and abuse. In many Asian countries, women constitute majority of the informal economy.

The IFI/Micro Finance Institution-led micro credit as a form of women's self-employment and Self Help Groups (SHG) is a myth and misnomer. In reality, this disempowers women and leads to a vicious cycle of debt and poverty.

Rural women forced to cross borders due to state repression and in search of livelihood have had to bear huge social costs, are subjected to increased violence, abuse, exploitation, discrimination and criminalisation, and denied their rights as women and as migrant workers and when they return home, face alienation. The remittances of migrant women workers have sustained the bankrupt economies of Asian countries.

Rising religious fundamentalisms with the support of imperialist forces and the collusion of state and non-state actors, have made rural women more invisible, further restricted women's decision making and mobility, legitimated violence on rural women, revived religious sanctioned prostitution, perpetuated discrimination and denied women's inherent right to control their lives, their sexuality and resources.

Fundamentalisms and globalisation processes are interacting with caste discrimination in further denying Dalit women the right to land, political and equal status and the very right to life. Thus Dalit women daily face increased untouchability, sexual exploitation and the violent atrocities and harassment by the dominant caste. Dalit women face loss of livelihoods, displacement and migration and trafficking due to the onslaught of new economic policies and the destructive globalisation processes.

The U.S.-led global "War on Terror" being used to push globalisation policies, the economic interest of U.S and other big capitalist countries is providing Asian government with the rationale to increase militarisation and state terrorism and is fanning ethnic conflicts in Asia. This has led to killings, detention and harassment of more rural women. In the guise of security, repressive governments like that of Burma, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Philippines are carrying out extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances of women, men and children. Ethnic conflicts and civil wars are causing forced displacement of thousands of people; and caste riots are resulting in massive violence against Dalit women. Women in conflict areas are raped as a tool of war, killed, and forced to "service" the armed forces and in extreme circumstances become victims of genocide.

Within the context of War on Terror the top nuclear powers continue nuclear explosions testing. Radiation is the most horrible yet invisible weapon of war. It can kill the environment and lead to the annihilation of mankind. It affects primarily women of fertile age and their children. It causes cancer particularly of the uterus, breast and blood. Women from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, India and Pakistan are suffering and dying from exposure to radiation.

The privatisation of public hospitals, a dictate of globalisation, has worsened the negligence of governments of social services and increased inaccessibility of rural women to accurate and appropriate health information and comprehensive and affordable health services. More rural women suffer from pregnancy and childbirth-related deaths and disabilities, unsafe abortion, HIV/AIDS, reproductive cancers, physical and sexual violence and from limited access to nutritious food and safe drinking water. They are forced to endure dangerous labor conditions all of which leave them ill, injured and malnourished. Pesticide exposure increases vulnerability of women to infertility, reproductive cancers and miscarriage.

Thus, we, the participants to the First Asian Rural Women's Conference is sending a call for rural women to defy injustices and raise our voices against all forms of discrimination and violence on women. We, the rural women and supportive activists resolve to continue to challenge and resist neo-liberal globalisation, imperialist and fundamentalist forces and militarisation.

We call for genuine agrarian reform and rural women's ownership and access to land and productive resources which include access to credit and training; we demand for food sovereignty, to healthy and local foods and healthy agriculture and to reclaim rural women's knowledge and skills.

We demand direct access and control of coastal and marine resources with meaningful participation and decision-making of fisherfolk in all policies related to our livelihoods and marine resources.

We demand for the end of development aggression in indigenous peoples' ancestral lands, state and corporate plunder of our resources and demand for the right to self-determination.

We demand a ban on hazardous agro-chemicals and technologies including pesticides, inorganic fertilisers and genetic engineering in food and agriculture, in favor of ecological and biodiversity-based agriculture.

We condemn the land alienation, state oppression and violations of human rights of Dalit Women; and we say that Dalit women's rights are human rights. We demand for the end of caste system and untouchability practices. We collectively demand the state to protect our right to land, right to expression, right to decision making, right to political spaces and right to life with dignity for Dalit women and that the state is held accountable if these rights are not upheld.

We demand an end to trade liberalisation and privatisation and for livelihood security and decent work for all women. We, the Asian Women workers movement, demand fair living wages, safe and decent working conditions, job security, and the right to freedom of association.

We absolutely repudiate the emphasis of all Asian governments to push micro credit as a tool of development and empowerment of rural women. We demand that governments provide a system to enable rural women access to credit on their own terms.

We demand an end to forced migration kept in place by the agenda of corporations and governments. For migrant workers, we demand protection of all rights including the right to stay or move and work with dignity.

We condemn the revival of fundamentalist and communal forces that are unleashing violence on society, particularly women and children. We demand that all states/governments ensure the representation at all policy levels of peoples of different religions, diverse ethnic groups and the most marginalised sections, particularly women, so that women's rights are protected.

War of aggression has no place in our society and we demand an end to all state-led and state-supported wars; and we demand justice for all human rights defenders and affected communities. We call for the removal of all US bases in Asia, the prioritisation of budget allocations for food production, education and health, social services and empowerment of women over military budgets. We demand the repeal of repressive laws such as the security and anti-terrorism legislation and an end to all extra-judicial killings and enforced disappearances.

Participation of women in the democratic movements and in the political process is necessary to push for pro-people and democratic societies in Asia. We should learn from the successful experiences of Asian countries, express our solidarity with the democratic movements all over Asia and ensure the participation of women in the peace process.

Rural women demand the right to control their bodies, to assert their sexual and reproductive health rights, and choose on issues of contraception, marriage, pregnancy and child birth. We also call for the end of exploitative sex selection and other reproductive technologies.

Now is the time for rural women to come together, create a visible force, consolidate gains and strengthen the global women's movement. To strengthen the rural women's movement, we, participants of the first Asian Rural Women's Conference, are forming ourselves into an **Asian Rural Women's Coalition** for rural women's rights, empowerment and liberation. Our voices will be heard.

Long Live Rural Women's Solidarity!!!