Indigenous Women and Militarization of their Territories

Among the multiple challenges that indigenous peoples must overcome if they are to survive are the protection of their cultural identity and the preservation of their close relationship with the land. Both of these are jeopardized when indigenous territories come under military attack, whether by state forces, paramilitaries or guerrillas. The militarization of indigenous territories tears at the social fabric of the community at large, divides families and has particularly devastating effects on women. The consequences of militarization are disturbingly similar for indigenous peoples, some of whose numbers have been so reduced that they are at risk of disappearing altogether.

Women as targets

Rape and Sexual Violence

Armed groups regularly employ strategies that target women, notably sexual violence. It is not uncommon for women to be raped in view of the community or in front of their families. When women survive these types of attacks, they may be further victimized by domestic violence or their husbands may divorce them in accordance with cultural norms. There may be social stigma, particularly if the rape results in a pregnancy. Members of armed groups often coerce young women into becoming their "girlfriends" in order to obtain information about the community or to involve them in the conflict by having them act as messengers or even recruiting them into their forces. Communities with ongoing contact with armed groups almost inevitably have increased problems with drugs, voluntary or forced prostitution, alcoholism, domestic violence and other problems that have long-lasting effects in the community.

Occupation of Territories

One of the main tactics used by military forces in conflict situations is to destroy the social fabric and model of collectivity that exists in indigenous communities. One of the ways is to assassinate or forcibly disappear traditional authorities. In some communities, no one is willing to

Martha Cecilia Domicó, Emberá from Colombia, daughter of the disappeared leader Kimy Pernía Domicó.

METROPOLIS

assume the responsibility of leadership for fear of becoming a target. When there is no one to provide guidance to the community, the population is more vulnerable and easier to manipulate. Conventional roles for members of the community often change as men are killed or disappear, leaving behind widows who must find a way to provide for their families.

In such circumstances, it becomes increasingly difficult for women to organize, whether it be to form an agricultural cooperative, participate in a training session or carry out traditional group activities, since going to a meeting may put them at risk. It also becomes more difficult to implement health, education or other types of projects in these
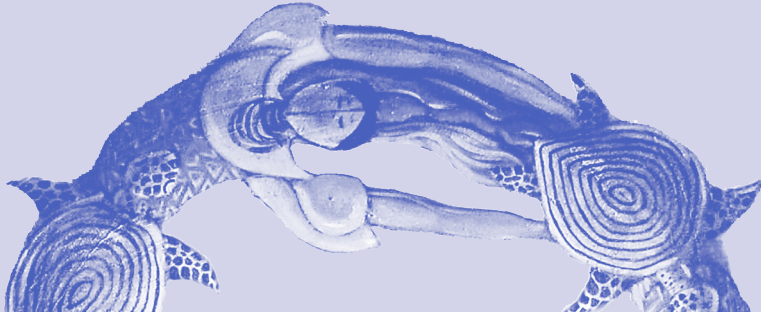
> ## "We can no longer eat our traditional foods. We can't go fishing in the river at night."

Interviewee, Mesa Mujer y Conflicto Armado,
Informe sobre Violencia Sociopolítica contra Mujeres,
Jóvenes y Niñas en Colombia, Bogotá, Feb. 2003.
(www.ilsa.org.co/biblioteca/13.pdf)

communities, even when they are community-led. They are often unwilling to receive funds to implement these kinds of projects because it would place the community in danger. This means that many communities are not benefitting from the programs and projects that are available to them.

Armed groups often control access routes to and from indigenous territories and restrict the movement of members of the community. This intimidates people and upsets activities that normally guarantee food security, such as tending to crops, hunting, fishing or gathering plants for traditional medicines.

Women are often forced to cook and produce food for armed groups, provide them with shelter and act as porters, which consequently places them at risk of being singled out by opposition forces as collaborators.

In most cases, this is a radical departure from the traditional custom of hospitality for visitors to the community. Armed groups may enter communities during the day, when men may be away from the community doing agricultural work, forcing women, who may not be experienced interlocutors to assume the role of negotiators in situations of extreme tension. Sometimes the community chooses to send women to talk with armed groups, hoping that the response by armed groups will be more favourable.

Displacement

When military activities intensify, it is common for entire communities to flee. Internal displacement of indigenous communities is a particular challenge and the situation in countries like Colombia has been signaled by UN agencies as critical, creating a humanitarian emergency. Entire communities are without food, shelter and protection, and have had to abandon not only their homes, their crops and their belongings but also places of spiritual significance. Because of the historical and spiritual importance of communities and traditional lands, displacement can have devastating effects for indigenous peoples.

> ## "The loss of land is the crux of our identity, and is at the root of our dispossession and marginalization."

A representative of Indigenous Peoples
of Africa Coordinating Committee at
Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues 2003. HR/4601.
(www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2002/hr4601.doc.htm)

People may displace temporarily to a nearby community, they may attempt to re-establish their community in another location, or migrate to cities. When large groups of people move into neighbouring communities, the host community may not be able to meet the needs of the newcomers and their own food security may be jeopardized. Existing infrastructure such as health centres and schools (in communities where they exist) may not be able to handle the numbers.

When violence crosses international borders into countries where there is not an official armed conflict, the national response may not address the problems. Assassinations, intimidations, human rights violations and military activities may go practically unnoticed and unpunished, attracting more armed groups to the area. As well, the militarization of aid endangers the ability of women to feed and address the needs of their family and community.

An indirect consequence of internal displacement is a reduction of social services available for people who stay in their communities. For example, Emberá communities in Darien, Panama, are finding that people are leaving their communities because of the violence that is spilling over the border from Colombia. When the number of children in the community does not meet the minimum to maintain a teacher, schools are closed. If children are to continue going to school, the family must move to another community, leaving behind their homes and crops. In some cases, families do not move, and consequently children stop going to school.

> "We live very cautiously,
> we practically don't talk
> to anyone, we refuse to offer
> food to people because
> we don't know
> what might happen to us.
> We don't know which side
> they are on, if they are police,
> army, paramilitaries or guerrillas."

Interviewee, Mesa Mujer y Conflicto Armado, Informe sobre Violencia Sociopolítica contra Mujeres, Jóvenes y Niñas en Colombia, Bogotá, Feb. 2003. (www.ilsa.org.co/biblioteca/13.pdf)

Recommendations from the International Conference on Conflict Resolution, Peace-building, Sustainable Development and Indigenous Peoples, organized by the Tebtebba Foundation (Indigenous Peoples' International Centre For Policy Research and Education) in December 2000, reflect the need for the recognition and enhancement of the roles of indigenous women in peace-building and conflict resolution.

Recommendations include:

▲ The need to create awareness among indigenous peoples and the public at large on the important role played by indigenous women in conflict resolution and peace-building, and the need to document their efforts in different parts of the world.

▲ The promotion of effective participation of women at all levels and stages of peacemaking processes.

▲ The encouragement and support (including training, technical and financial assistance) for women to build capacity and to seek decision-making positions, and the need to build mechanisms that will enable women to have access to such positions whether in the traditional or modern governance systems.

▲ The forging of networks and linkages with other women's organizations and networks at all levels in their respective region and internationally.

▲ The urgent need for international agencies, NGOs, indigenous peoples and the donor community to include gender in their analysis of conflict and peace-building processes and in the assessments done on the economic, social, political and cultural situation pre- and post-conflict.

When people migrate to urban centres, they often lose contact with other community members and begin to lose their traditional practices. Women often migrate alone with their children and must find a way of making a living in an environment that is foreign to them and without their traditional support system. Where social services are available to internally displaced populations, they are rarely culturally appropriate and indigenous women in particular, who may be unilingual, may not be able to access them.

TO FIND OUT MORE...

Metodología de Investigación con enfoque de género y sensible a las mujeres indígenas.

Agnès Callamard (traducción y adaptación Pilar Rueda). Derechos y Democracia, 2002. (Available only in Spanish)

Investigating Women's Rights Violations in Armed Conflicts.

Agnès Callamard (in collaboration with Barbara Bedont, Ariane Brunet, Dyan Mazurana, and Madeleine Rees). Publication of Amnesty International and Rights & Democracy, 2001.

Documenting Human Rights Violations by State Agents.

Agnès Callamard. Publication of Amnesty International and Rights & Democracy, 1999.

A Methodology for Gender-Sensitive Research.

Agnès Callamard. Publication of Amnesty International and Rights & Democracy, 1999.

The Continental Network of Indigenous Women of the Americas has recently formed a Working Commission on the subject of violence in order to address some of these and other issues related to violence and indigenous women. The commission is made up of members Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Nicaragua.

For more information: http://enlace.nativeweb.org.

Questions for Debate

- **Can you identify barriers**
  - **to the effective protection of indigenous women in situations of armed conflict?**
  - **to the participation of indigenous women in conflict resolution initiatives?**

  How can these barriers be overcome?

- **What changes have you observed in women's roles in situations of armed conflict?**

- **Who would you turn to for help in the event of armed conflict?**

- **How can other indigenous women's organizations support you in your struggle?**