



'We are not

invisible'

The rights of indigenous people in the Philippines are enshrined in their constitution and backed by international law, yet they still face discrimination, human rights violations and dispossession which represses their basic rights. Filipino rights defender Judy Pasimio is addressing this injustice directly, from the women's perspective, since they are the ones who suffer the most.

By Mariejo S. Ramos

Locating the faces and voices of indigenous women has become an existential prompt for Filipino human rights defender Judy Pasimio. As the coordinator of LILAK—Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights—her long and fruitful journey in activism began with two questions: Where are the indigenous women? Which issues are important to them that are not being discussed?

In the case of indigenous women of the Dumagat-Remontado tribe in Southern Tagalog, resistance is anchored in their desire for peace and harmony with nature. Faced with the threat of a Chinese-funded multibillion-peso dam, they have one clear message, 'We should not be rendered invisible.'

Their government's 18.7 billion peso (317 million dollars) New Centennial Water Source-Kaliwa Dam Project is meant to be built in the Rizal and Quezon provinces to solve Manila's water shortage. It is one of the big-ticket items under the *Build Build Build* programme of former president Rodrigo Duterte.

The Dumagat-Remontado, who live within the Kaliwa River Basin, are opposed to it, because it encroaches on their ancestral domain and poses severe flood risks to around three hundred hectares of forested area. Aside from its significant threat to ecosystems and livelihoods, environmental degradation will result in food insecurity, poverty, displacement, loss of traditional knowledge, and violence.

'I am afraid of the threats thrown at us on social media while they have actual guns pointed at them at every corner'

Left: Judy Pasimio leads a protest against Terror Law in the Philippines

Three years ago on International Women's Day, the world witnessed Dumagat women standing at the centre of resistance. A leader offered soil and mama (betel nut) to express her kindred's opposition to the dam, while other women sang a song—as if in prayer—to not let their precious land drown in water. They were among the key partners of LILAK, a collective of feminists, activists, indigenous women, and advocates who act in solidarity, against threats to indigenous people's rights to land and environment.

It has been a long and constant quest for Pasimio tracing back to Sagada, a town in the Cordillera mountains in Northern Luzon. As a young environmental defender, she was among the few non-lawyers who were working with the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center (LRC), which was instrumental in crafting the landmark *Indigenous People's Rights Act* of 1997. 'In Sagada, there is a physical structure called a dap-ay, which doubles up as a political structure for the council of elders,' she recalls.

Being a woman, she was asked to sit outside the circle, while her male colleagues were allowed in. 'That triggered me and made me wonder where the women were. So, I started seeking them out each time I went on a community visit,' she says. This made her view the nuances of land rights and environmental struggles of indigenous people (IP) from the perspective of women.

She recalls a time LRC asked some IP women elders to relate their issues with mining and logging practices in their community. They raised gender-specific issues that often hide behind well-established narratives. For instance, when talking about deforestation, they went beyond land grabbing and spoke about gendered particularities.

'Most of them spiritualists, they proclaimed that they get their strength and wisdom from the forest. But now with the forests gone, where do they go?' Among the key issues raised, were access to basic social services and the lack of support for their health issues. Pasimio continues: 'For them, it is not just about not having free health service, but accessibility. Their geographical isolation, compared to the urban and rural poor, really underpins their political and economic isolation.'

Working with them and other environmental defenders in LILAK, particularly in Southern Tagalog and Mindanao, allowed her to witness various forms of gender-based violence against vulnerable women. According to a report by IUCN, on the link between the environment and GBV, 'it—gender-based violence—can be rooted in discriminatory norms and laws and shrouded in impunity,' being used 'as a means of control, subjugation and exploitation that further reinforces gender inequality.'

Many indigenous women who were primary caregivers in the family, but had little capacity to comply with state requirements, were deprived of access to government aid when the pandemic struck. Lockdowns also prevented them from seeking medical

attention which was located far from them.

For Pasimio, the pandemic also highlighted a contentious and discriminatory policy on women, the 'no home birthing' ordinances that exist in several local government units. They prohibit mothers from giving birth in their homes. 'Time and again, indigenous women have testified that there is a very small percentage—if any—of deaths due to their birthing practices. Another issue to consider is the distance and inaccessibility of birthing centres. The government has no "meet halfway" policy on this.'

At LILAK, she is helping open up spaces for sharing and solidarity, especially on gendered issues, among indigenous women and environmental defenders. When they looked at the situation of women in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), an area marred by armed conflict, they found displacement, violence, and discrimination rooted in religious and gender biases.

A study published this year by Plan International and the Women's Refugee Commission found that displaced girls from the conflict-affected areas of BARMM are 'more vulnerable to child marriage, which can severely affect their physical, mental, and psycho-social health, as well as make them prone to stigma, isolation, school dropouts, and extreme poverty.' Pasimio notes that displaced groups were forced to settle in makeshift evacuation areas because no municipality would accept them.

'[Accepting them] would somehow legitimise the violence in the community, and when [local officials] legitimise it, they need to make a stand. But they're afraid of doing that. Access to justice has been very difficult, especially for indigenous women, so they are left on their own.' Gender-based violence also exists within the community. In some indigenous groups, the issue of rape was being settled by having the perpetrator marry the victim.

Young women in other IP groups can also be victims of incest, 'and it's the tribal leaders who are hunting the women protecting the survivors,' she says. But her work with LILAK has sparked a ray of hope. 'Now I can speak for the Teduray, who are pushing for



School children walk with posters protesting the construction of the Kaliwa Dam



A dam in the Philippines

a more just and favourable response to victims and survivors of GBV. Thanks to the activism of their women leaders, they can open indigenous justice system mechanisms for gender-based violence within their community.'

Violence against Filipino environmental defenders, including indigenous people, has also been tied to their economic conditions. When Duterte lifted the nine-year moratorium on new mining permits in the country, the government promised to employ members of the indigenous communities. 'When we looked at the jobs and looked for women, there were very few of them who were in the mining work!'

Their jobs were extensions of their domesticated roles—laundry, cooking and entertaining the miners, most of them men. 'There's no space for development, while the contractual nature of their job and the places they work renders them more vulnerable to violence,' she adds. For her, what makes the Philippines one of the worst countries for environmentalists is the state-sponsored social injustices and violence against environmental rights defenders, especially women.

She laments how the Duterte administration had institutionalised 'red-tagging,' the malicious blacklisting of individuals and

organisations critical of their actions. In the latest report by the NGO Global Witness, the Philippines remain the deadliest country in Asia for land and environmental defenders, with 270 of them killed in the last decade.

Of this, over forty percent—114—were indigenous people campaigning to protect their land and environment, with nearly eighty percent of attacks taking place on the island of Mindanao. 'The challenges I experience are nothing compared to what our women partners encounter. I am afraid of the threats thrown at us on social media while they have actual guns pointed at them at every corner daily. This became more pronounced under the Duterte administration.'

Like many women's rights defenders, she was labelled a communist and a drug lord. They even posted a photo of her with her daughter on a Facebook page of supporters of the ex-president's daughter, now vice president Sara Duterte. 'That kind of threat is enough to give you several sleepless nights. The government has actively tried to silence us through red-tagging, labelling us terrorists and rebels, and the killings of activists and community leaders.'

'Sadly, impunity for these acts of violence is being institutionalised through the anti-terrorist law,' she asserts. With her colleagues, they challenged the administration by filing a petition

to the Commission on Human Rights against the sexist and misogynist campaign statements and actions of the then-president. 'He was firing tirades against women activists and women's rights advocates, mostly online, but you got the feeling that it could easily result in physical threats.'

GBV, according to IUCN, 'can also be employed as a means to maintain power imbalances between men and women, and their rights and roles in accessing, using, and managing natural resources by violently reinforcing socio-cultural expectations and norms, and exacerbating gender inequality.' Under the Philippines' law on indigenous people, free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) is a specific right that pertains to indigenous people's self-determination and participation in decision-making on any activity that affects them.

It is protected by international human rights law. In the case of the Kaliwa Dam, the military employed a 'divide and rule' strategy. 'Before the pandemic struck, the communities were united. Almost six clusters said no and per the rule of the FPIC—under the IPRA—'that's a resounding no,' she says. However, the pandemic prompted governments to impose lockdowns, so civic organisations and other support groups could not meet with the indigenous people. State groups and the military took advantage of this to intimidate them to reverse their decision on the project.

Some of them had been red-tagged by the country's anti-insurgency task force and forced to surrender to authorities for five thousand pesos. 'They faced hunger and could not enter the forests, not only because of the lockdown, but the military had set up camps in the vicinity, creating fear,' she adds. With state-sponsored red-tagging that threatens the lives of women and rights defenders, where do they go for safety?

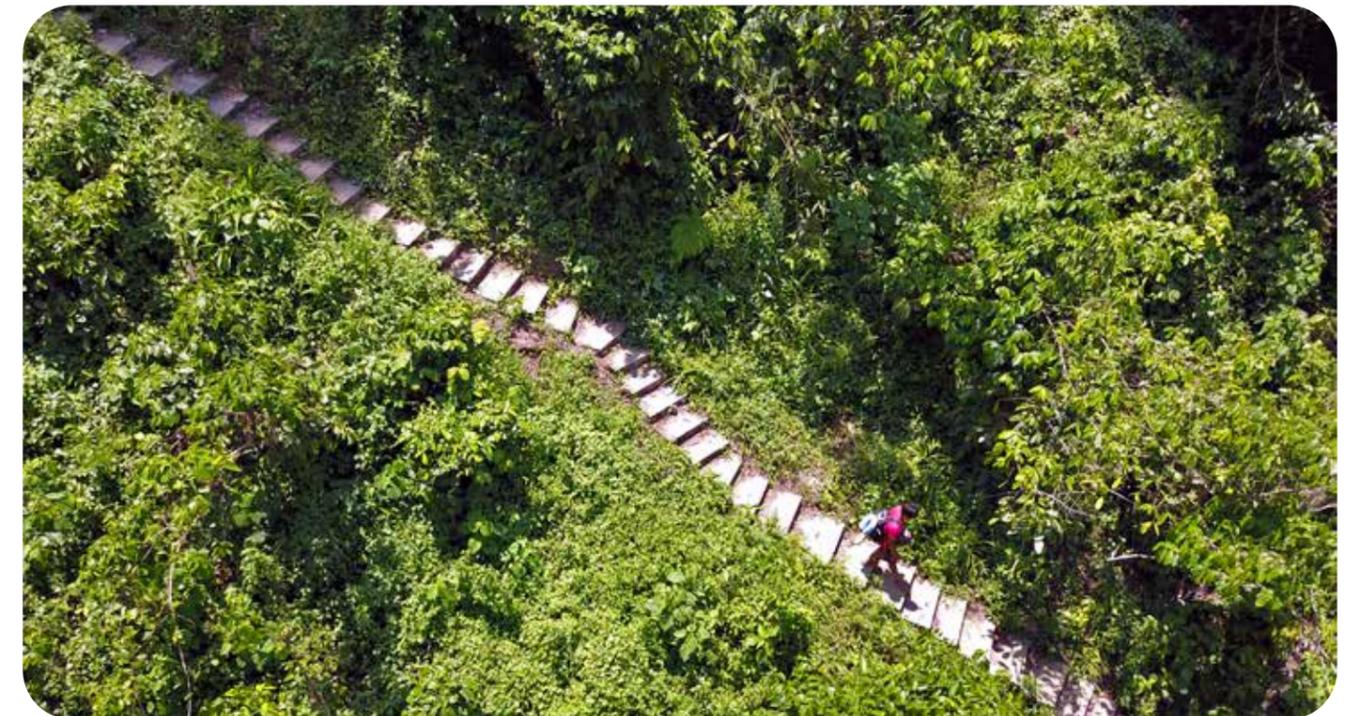
The Commission on Human Rights were the first responder and helped them amplify cases of violence and harassment. Except for a few local judges who can still stand up to red-tagging, there was 'no other recourse' for rights defenders. Together with her colleagues, they reached out to international legal mechanisms,

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including the United Nations Human Rights Council.

LILAK continues to share a strong partnership with women leaders and advocates who form a robust and diverse network of rights defenders. They initiated the *ReSisters Dialogues*, a regional workshop where women community leaders and activists from South Asia join together. 'It is important we collectively reflect on how to analyse our situations at the community level, and connect these to the regional and international level,' she explains. It strengthens them to know that they are not alone in this.

Even though more Filipino women leaders are finding their voices, amplifying their causes and asserting their rights, Pasimio fears that most women's voices are being drowned out by a lack of representation. 'The search is not yet over,' she affirms. 'We always look beyond the data, and scan for the women's faces.'



IUCN NL is part of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the largest and oldest union for nature conservation in the world. It works with civil society organisations in multiple countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and it advocates for gender equality: women's rights are fundamental rights. In addition, women—in all their diversity—play a central role in nature conservation. However, they continually face discrimination and remain marginalised when it comes to decision-making processes around their forests, waters, and lands. Moreover, women and other marginalised groups often face gender-based violence linked to the environment.

IUCN NL applies a gender transformative approach, addressing the root causes of gender inequality. It supports women's networks and feminist organisations like LILAK, among others, in its campaign work and by linking them to international mechanisms to ensure a podium on which their voices are amplified