

**Women's Resistance and Struggles:**  
Asserting our Rights to Land,  
Resources and Livelihood

Strengthening the Women's Movement

2011

**Women's Resistance and Struggles:  
Asserting our Rights to Land, Resources and Livelihood  
Booklet 3** Strengthening the Women's Movement

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# Foreword

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The inspiration for this booklet and series on Women's Resistance and Struggles comes from the courage, resilience, and resolute commitment of women leaders from the peasant, agricultural workers, indigenous women, and fisherfolk movements in Asia. Their stories of struggle and their determination to continue even in the face of threats, harassment and violation of their human rights, are stories of sacrifice, heroism, and a belief in their struggle for women's and people's rights. These stories of women's resistance against tyranny, subjugation, exploitation, violence; alongside their successes motivate and encourage us in our own struggles. The 3-part booklet series on Women's Resistance and Struggles: Asserting our Rights to Land, Resources and Livelihood is a result of collaborative efforts from women's organisations and movements in Asia who have been working with various sectors of marginalised women: peasants, agricultural workers, indigenous women, fisherfolk, Dalits, and urban poor women. The booklets paint a picture of the various struggles and resistance of women, and the successes of organised women's groups in asserting and reclaiming their rights, as women and as a sector.

"Booklet 3: Strengthening the Women's Movement" is the third and last of our booklet series. This particular booklet is a documentation of the struggles, successes and strategies of four women's organisations and movements in three Asian countries, India, Sri Lanka and the Philippines. The cases illustrate the serious impact of the intensification of corporate aggression and neoliberal policies in Asia. The Philippines' land use conversions transforming agricultural lands to large-scale business plantations, industrial zones, and other tourist spots had displaced rural communities and rural women. India's privatisation from state to big corporations and foreign investors of communal properties such as ponds, cremation grounds and forests eroded the food security of the Dalit communities, especially of women. In Sri Lanka, sources of livelihood of fishing and farming communities were lost and their food security

threatened due to foreign investments, development projects, and adoption of unsustainable, and chemical-based agricultural production.

To confront and address the impact of the globalisation and corporatisation process, Asian rural women's groups have been empowering others to take action. These organised groups have been building strong movements of resistance against neoliberal forces and corporate aggression as well as for assertion of women's rights to equality, liberation and equitable resources. They have utilised a variety of innovative and continuous strategies including using legal means, influencing parliamentarians and using the political arena, media campaigns and documentation and exposing the violations of women's rights as well as developing alternatives from a feminist perspective. They have also achieved significant milestones in lobbying and campaigns at the local and international fora.

The ongoing struggles of the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum in India; the Women's Watch of the Human Development Organization and the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement of Sri Lanka; and GABRIELA in the Philippines provide insights on organising rural women and other sectoral groups to raise awareness and mobilise them to oppose neo-liberal globalisation. The recent protest actions in the US and Europe such as the "Occupy" movements have also shown the need to radically change the social and economic inequality and the power of large corporations and global financial system that exploits and benefits the few rich.

This last of the booklet series becomes a celebration of courage and commitment of women's groups and movements in asserting and fighting against all forms of exploitation and oppression. It is our hope that these stories of struggle, collective action and solidarity will further contribute to the strengthening of women's participation and leadership and inspire all women everywhere in their own struggles.

**Sarojeni V. Rengam, Executive Director**

# Introduction

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History tells us that women in agriculture have been strongly asserting their rights to productive and political resources; their rights to define and determine food and agricultural policies; their rights to healthy and safe food; and reclaiming their knowledge, skills and control over resources. For women in Asia, it has also meant the assertion of their rights as farmers, as workers, as consumers, as mothers and as women.

Women have joined hands to reclaim their rights, their knowledge and skills. There is a growing movement of women in agriculture involved in asserting their rights as farmers, as agricultural workers, as fisherfolk, as Dalits, as part of a collective of the indigenous community, working to spread and mainstream ecological agriculture and to mobilise against violence, against globalisation and corporate agriculture.

Women have become involved in different forms of struggle as they carry their fight in their farms, picket lines, street demonstrations, parliaments and urban centres. Women are holding up banners and are in the frontline – from protesting against the incursion of transnational corporations, right up to human rights struggles and the fight for freedom and justice in their own lands and workplaces.

Rural women have been resisting corporate-dominated mal-development and trade liberalisation. All over Asia, women peasants, farmers and workers are organising to drive out transnational corporations such as Syngenta and Monsanto. Rural women are demanding food sovereignty. Women farmers are out in the fields practising sustainable agriculture and livelihoods. Rural women are fighting to take control of their bodies and claim their reproductive rights. Rural women are challenging patriarchy within their families and communities. Rural women are challenging

national policies to incorporate the women's agenda and become represented in parliaments. Rural women have become leaders, resource persons, and speakers. Women have shown greater strength and courage in the face of increasing poverty, climate change, and looming food and financial crises.

Rural women have been challenged to consolidate the strengths in the resistance against corporate globalisation, highlighting their concerns to avoid being set aside and ignored, and sending out a message that women are resisting injustices, strengthening their movements and not afraid to let their voices be heard.

## **Women's resistance: Reclaiming rights**

The 3-part series of booklets on Women's Resistance and Struggles: Asserting our Rights to Land, Resources and Livelihood documents the struggles and successes of women in Asian communities in resisting corporate / neo-liberal / imperialist globalisation. These booklets share the various women's experiences in the communities and lessons in their struggle against globalisation.

The booklets cover 3 important issues on the struggles of women in agriculture across Asia: (1) the struggle of women agricultural workers; (2) rural women asserting control of land, livelihood and resources; and (3) women's groups opposing globalisation. Each of the booklets contain 4 to 6 caselets that document the various experiences of women's resistance from various countries in the region.

Booklet 1 compiles the experiences of women agricultural workers and their struggle for higher wages, combating health and occupational hazards (particularly on the use of pesticides), the right to form

associations, combating child labour, struggle against agrochemical and oil palm plantations, among others.

Booklet 2 documents the struggles and resistance of peasant, fisherfolk, indigenous women and Dalits in asserting their control of land, and other resources. The caselets convey the stories of women's organisations against land use conversions, mining companies, destruction of aquatic resources, and other similar struggles.

Booklet 3 covers the experiences of women's organisations and movements, which addresses the issues of globalisation and its impact on women, violence against women, patriarchy, and political representation, among others. The caselets present the various strategies and successful stories in organising, lobbying and campaigning for the rights of women.

This documentation of women's resistance in asserting and reclaiming their rights aims to contribute to the empowerment of women in agriculture, with their stories providing learning and effective strategising for women's groups to further strengthen their ranks and participate in the overall struggle of the people's movement in the region.



# Overview

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*By Judy M. Taguiwalo*

## **Testaments of struggle and gains of women in agriculture**

### **Strengthening the Women's Movement**

The year 2011 is the 100th year of the commemoration of International Women's Day. In 1911, a year after the declaration by the International Socialist Women of an International Working Women's Day, townhouse meetings, street rallies and other forms of protest and celebration marked the first International Women's Day in Europe. In 1977, two years after the UN declared 1975 as the International Year of Women, March 8 was adopted by the United Nation's General Assembly as International Women's Day.

One hundred years since the first International Women's Day, women continue to struggle against economic, political, social and gender marginalisation and oppression. Asian women, through their organisations have shown that victimisation is not a natural phenomenon that should be tolerated; and that women, especially poor rural and urban women, once awakened to the roots of their oppression and victimisation are willing to organise themselves and advance their rights, welfare and personhood. Through their organisations, Asian women repeatedly have shown that where there is oppression, there is resistance!

This third and last of the booklet series of PAN AP's "Women's Resistance and Struggles, Asserting Our Rights to Land, Resources and Livelihood" is a documentation of the struggles, victories and the strategies of four women's organisations in three Asian countries, India, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. The caselets are inspiring stories of the tenacity and persistence

of women's organisations in Asia in spite of tremendous obstacles due to impositions by multi-lateral institutions and the adoption by national governments of neo-liberal economic policies; the expansion of corporate control of agriculture and industry; and the complicity of states which utilise repression to quell opposition.

## **Neo-liberal globalisation intensifies women's burdens and sorrows**

Globalisation as a phenomenon is something Asian women live with on a daily basis. Far from being a matter of a borderless world due to advances in communications, information and other modern technology, globalisation means the imposition of policies and programmes based on the illusion that unregulated markets are the best path to development.

Neo-liberal globalisation aptly describes the economic frame of globalisation which emphasises the opening up of trade and investment not only in goods but also in services (including social services), the removal of government intervention in financial and trade, and the removal of state subsidies in such vital areas of a nation's life such as agriculture, education, health and other social services.

In the Philippines, neo-liberal programmes and policies have led to the collapse of domestic enterprises, loss of jobs, and higher unemployment rates in the cities. In the rural areas, land use conversion which transformed agricultural lands planted for food to agri-business plantations, industrial zones, golf courses and other tourist spots have displaced rural communities and rural women.

In Sri Lanka, the multiple burdens of women already heavy because of gender-based exploitation and violence are aggravated by the opening up of the country's economy to foreign investors and the adoption of

unsustainable, chemical-based agricultural production. Livelihood sources are lost and food security threatened. The havoc on Sri Lankan women and communities of neo-liberal policies is illustrated in the displacement of fishing communities in the East Coast due to the Oluvil Port Development Project.

In India, the privatisation of communal properties such as ponds, cremation grounds and forests has been accelerated with contracts given by the Indian state to giant companies. Such privatisation and other inducements to foreign investors and corporations have eroded the food security of the Indian people, especially the marginalised Dalits and women and the food sovereignty of the country.

## **Awareness-raising, organising and mobilising to oppose neo-liberal globalisation**

Far from passively accepting policies, programmes and projects aligned with neo-liberal globalisation, Asian women have firmly opposed them.

The exposition of the aims and elements of neo-liberal globalisation and its deleterious effects on women is the first and crucial step taken by women's organisations in generating women's opposition.

GABRIELA, the Philippine women's organisation, states:

*The triple-banner policies of globalisation – liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation – aimed to remove the remaining barriers in the economies of underdeveloped and developing countries for unhampered access of monopoly capitalists to the rich resources of these countries. Women from the poor sector of societies are among the hardest hit by this onslaught.*

Sri Lanka's Human Development Organization highlights the fact that:

*Under the open economic policy, the industrial sector of Sri Lanka has developed with the entry of foreign investors. This has brought about changes in the marketing facilities for plantation products. Women have been traditionally involved in plantation work. The mechanisation of plantation in harvesting, gradually replacing hand plucking, has led to a noticeable trend of replacing women's labour by men's labour in this aspect of plantation production.*

In India, the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum concretely reveals the impact on Dalit women of the opening of the economy to foreign investors, a major component of neo-liberal globalisation:

*The problem of land has worsened with the establishment of "Special Economic Zones" (SEZs) as an inducement to foreign companies. As of 2006, 134,000 hectares of land have been transformed into SEZs. The landlords whose lands have been converted into SEZs receive compensation from the government. The peasants, who have tilled the land, are dislocated and do not even have access to employment in the zones. Women, particularly Dalit women, have been further marginalised because of the land alienation. Those who are without organisations (and women comprise 80% of these) have no means to oppose their dislocation, the loss of livelihood and the resultant hunger and intensification of their poverty and powerlessness.*

The explanation of neo-liberal globalisation, its policies, programmes and projects and their impact on women and on communities are followed by awareness-raising, organising and collective actions.

India's Tamil Nadu Women's Forum (TNWF) "organised seminars, public meetings and submitted a memorandum on behalf of the unorganised

agricultural workers insisting that the government implement the recommendations of Kolappan Committee on Agricultural Labourers for an improvement in their living conditions. As a result of which, the government regularised the working hours and conditions for agricultural workers.”

*Samahan ng Maralitang Kababaihang Nagkakaisa (SAMAKANA)*, the Philippine organisation of urban poor women affiliated with GABRIELA, organised residents of a village facing demolition to give way to a Japanese-funded infrastructure project. The women “held dialogues with concerned authorities and when this failed, the women led in setting up a human barricade to thwart the demolition teams. When the demolition crew succeeded in tearing down their houses, the residents would set up make shift houses when the crew leaves at night. This pattern continued for days until they finally wore down their enemy. Although their homes were eventually demolished, the authorities were forced to provide them with a relocation site.”

In Sri Lanka, where the Oluvil Port Development Project would displace fishing communities and fisherfolks, the women of the Oluvil area commemorated International Women's Day in 2009 by organising a long march and a rally to demand their land and coastal areas.

## **Women's organisations grow and women leaders emerge in the midst of struggles for women's welfare, women's rights and social justice**

The experiences of GABRIELA in the Philippines, the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum in India, and the women of Sri Lanka in the caselets of this booklet prove once again that the growth of women's organisations and the emergence of grassroots women leaders are products of militant struggles to advance women's rights and welfare and women's quest for social justice especially in the midst of the havoc wreaked by globalisation.

GABRIELA remains the biggest militant women's organisation in the Philippines whose membership covers the whole country and whose grassroots composition of peasant women, women workers, urban poor women, indigenous women serves as the backbone for defending and promoting women's rights to their land, jobs and homes and for opposing foreign control of the economy. Its membership now includes chapters in the United States, Europe, Hong Kong and other countries where large numbers of Filipino women migrants are located.

In India, the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum has grown from a network of 50 groups when it was formed in 1991 to 375 groups throughout the state of Tamil Nadu. Dalit women leaders have emerged and are now capable of speaking in public meetings, in planning and organising mobilisations and programmes of the organisation.

Sri Lanka's Women's Watch, a women's human rights network in the central region of the country, was formed with the assistance of the Human Development Organization (HDO). Women plantation workers were the initial members of Women's Watch in 2004 but the membership has now expanded to include women displaced by the tsunami, grassroots women and students. These organisations "have been in the forefront in promoting alternative but viable agricultural production and systems to combat the spread of globalised farming methods." Grassroots Sri Lankan women have been involved in the public campaigns and caravans for the right to food and water as organisers and as participants.

The imperative to fight against their displacement because of the Oluvil Harbor Project led to the organising of the women in Oluvil. Organised, poor Sri Lankan women, conducted signature campaigns against the project, met with the Chief Minister of the province and held a rally to push for their demands.

## **Women's movements are linked to the people's movement**

Neo-liberal globalisation policies, programmes and projects impact negatively on the working classes and peoples of a country. Consequently, the opposition to market-driven economic policies and programmes that benefit mainly foreign investors and local elites involve the working classes and peoples, both women and men.

The caselets show that women's organisations, their demands and their struggles are very much integrated with the people's movement of their countries.

GABRIELA, while initiating women-specific campaigns, has always been a dynamic and reliable part of the various people's initiatives against globalisation in the Philippines. Along with other people's organisations, GABRIELA protested the oil deregulation law which gave license to foreign oil companies to increase gasoline prices without government intervention, the privatisation of water utility and the continuing state abandonment of education and health services through the annual reduction in the budget of public hospitals and public universities and colleges.

In India, the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum has consistently worked with farmers' organisations in campaigns such as a state-wide people's caravan for poison-free land and food, in opposing the commercial cultivation of genetically modified crops such as eggplants being propagated by foreign agribusinesses, and with other people's organisations in successfully demanding for the withdrawal of India's so-called Prevention of Terrorist Act (POTA) which was used to curtail the exercise by the people of their basic civil rights.

The efforts of Sri Lankan women for their rights to land, food and water and against displacement have been done in conjunction with other Sri Lankan people's organisations.

## **Local, regional and international alliances and networking are crucial to winning particular demands and struggles**

Various local groups outside of the people's movements in a particular country have provided needed support for the women's struggles. In India, the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum has been assisted by media outlets and persons in raising to the public concerns such as violation of women's human rights. Sympathetic government agencies such as the Adi-Dravida Welfare Department and the National Commission for Women have acknowledged the initiatives made by TNWF. In the Philippines, GABRIELA's "Purple Rose" campaign highlighting the trafficking of Filipino women was one of the beneficiaries in the local theater production of the internationally renowned feminist play "The Vagina Monologues". The campaign also received a tremendous boost by a video infomercial created by the international advertising company Ace Saatchi and Saatchi on the trafficking of women.

As neo-liberal globalisation policies, programmes and projects have international impact, women's demands and struggles are strengthened and amplified through regional and international alliances and networks. The regional platform provided by formations such as the Asian Rural Women's Coalition (ARWC), Pesticide Action Network Asia and the Pacific (PAN AP) and the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) has played a significant role in disseminating the opposition of women against anti-women and anti-people agricultural and other economic programmes in the region. The Coalition of Agricultural Workers International (CAWI) and the Committee on Asian Women (CAW) funded the research done by the Sri Lankan organisation HDO on the impact of globalisation on plantation women.

## **Onward with women's resistance**

The Asian Rural Women's Coalition (ARWC) conference, 100 years of Women's Resistance: Rights, Empowerment, Liberation held in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India on March 29-30, 2011 underscored the continuing attacks on women's lives, welfare and rights by neo-liberal globalisation. The reports of participants from eight (8) Asian countries were stories of intensification of land grabbing by foreign and local corporations; of the continued destruction of traditional and sustainable farming systems through aggressive campaigns of multinational agribusinesses supported by local governments. Deepening poverty had led to increased migration and corresponding vulnerabilities suffered by women and the emergence of new forms of violence against women such as cyber prostitution and violence against women in relocation camps for victims of disaster. Scarcity of water for household use, for agriculture and for school children use has become a major problem due to the privatisation of water.

But these stories of sufferings and deprivation were offset by stories of victories in women's struggles and resistance. In Pakistan, in the Philippines, in Bangladesh, in Malaysia, in India, women have won back farmlands, prevented land ejection of communities and the transformation of agricultural lands into private estates and, have won increased participation in various political arenas.

The women of Asia also noted the intensification of people's resistance world-wide manifested in the series of people's uprisings in West Asia, in the massive protests in the United States and Europe against the state abandonment of social services such as education and health and in women's visible presence in these collective actions.

The concluding paragraph of the GABRIELA caselet (but using Asian instead of Filipino women) provides a fitting conclusion to this last and third booklet of PAN AP on “Women’s Resistance and Struggles, Asserting Our Rights To Land, Resources and Livelihood: Strengthening the Women’s Movement”:

*The fight of Asian women against globalisation has been ongoing for more than a decade and will not cease. Some battles will be won, some will be lost. But the women’s struggle against globalisation and its policies will continue and it will even be more vibrant and more militant because it is the Asian women’s contribution towards the eventual emancipation of women and of peoples against the pernicious and unequal world that monopoly capitalism has wrought.*

# The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum (TNWF)

**Striving for women's liberation through upholding women's rights and advancing people's issues**

## Introduction

As per the Human Development Report (2009) of the UNDP, India belongs to the category of 'medium' human development.<sup>1</sup> The life expectancy at birth is around 63 years, the adult literacy rate is 66% and the GDP per capita is 2,753 PPP. India's position in the Human Development Index of UNDP is 134 which is much lower than Brazil (75) and the Philippines (105), but higher than Pakistan (141), Nepal (144) and many Sub-Saharan countries.<sup>2</sup>

Statistics from the Indian government<sup>3</sup> show that poverty levels declined from 55 per cent in 1973-74 to 36 per cent in 1993-94 and 26 percent in 1999-2000. Though the poverty ratio declined, the number of poor remained constant at around 320 million for two decades (1973 - 1993) because of the increase in population. The latest estimates for 1999 - 2000 indicate a large reduction in the number of poor, at about 260 million out of a total population of 997 million. But most of the poor are Dalits, *Adivasis*<sup>4</sup> and women who belong to the most deprived groups in the Indian society.

<sup>1</sup> [http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_IND.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_IND.html), accessed May 12, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/>, accessed May 12, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Government of India, Economic Survey 2001 - 2002, New Delhi, 2002, page 237 - 241.

<sup>4</sup> Tribals are also referred to as Adivasis and Scheduled Tribes; Dalits is a more militant name for untouchables or harijans.

## Globalisation, food sovereignty and the people

Neo-liberal globalisation, particularly through the agreements imposed by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), has slowly eroded food sovereignty of the people. Important natural resources such as land and water are no longer in the hands of the people. Communal properties such as ponds, cremation grounds, and forests have been privatised with giant companies exercising control over them. The WTO agreements are lopsided and are against the interests of farmers of the Third World. The major share of high quality food materials produced by developing countries are exported leaving the local population with limited access to quality but reasonably-priced agricultural products. While government subsidies to local farmers in developing countries such as India are constantly eroding, governments of developed countries continue to provide subsidies to their farmers. Through so-called food aid, developed countries are dumping food in Third World countries and filling up the markets with genetically modified (GMO) produce.



Village meeting for Rangapuram Road struggle

Farmers borrow money to dig bore-wells up to 1,100 feet so that they can irrigate their farmlands. They borrow money in order to buy seeds, pesticides and fertilisers, all owned by foreign companies. The income earned from the sale of the harvest is never sufficient to neither recover the costs of production nor support the farmers and their families until the next harvest. Many of these indebted farmers are not considered as living below the poverty line. Those who are listed can buy rice and other basic necessities at subsidised rates from the so-called “fair-price shops”. However, the commodities, especially rice, sold in fair price shops, are unfit for human consumption. News of farmers committing suicide in India is not anymore surprising.

## **Rural Women's Situation**

India has a population of approximately one billion people, of which 49 per cent are women. The Hindu caste system structures Indian society in a complex hierarchy that can be socially oppressive for the majority of women. Women from the lower castes and tribal groups face multiple oppressions on account of gender, caste and class.

The majority of the rural women in India belong to small peasant and landless agricultural labourer households, and/or from communities of lower castes and tribal groups. Poverty and hunger due to landlessness characterise the lives of these poor rural household. Women of these households bear the brunt of reproductive work in the home while engaging in laborious underpaid work outside. For women of these households, gender-based violence is a common phenomenon. They are vulnerable to gender violence in the forms of wife battery, sexual abuse and incest, female infanticide and even murder.

In India, Dalits and other tribal communities suffer from institutionalised oppression. These communities belong to the poorest communities of the country because of the lack of ownership and access to resources and the pervasive and entrenched discrimination against them.

## Land Rights and Dalit Women

The struggle for the land rights of Dalits and women began centuries ago when India was still under British colonial rule and remains the key struggle of the Dalits.

The problem of land has worsened with the establishment of “Special Economic Zones” (SEZs) as an inducement to foreign companies. As of 2006, 134,000 hectares of land have been transformed into SEZs. The landlords whose lands have been converted into SEZs receive compensation from the government. The peasants, who have tilled the land, are dislocated and do not even have access to employment in the zones. Women, particularly Dalit women, have been further marginalised because of the land alienation. Those who are without organisations (and women comprise 80 per cent of these) have no means to oppose their dislocation, the loss of livelihood and the resultant hunger and intensification of their poverty and powerlessness.

The average rural Dalit woman clocks longer field hours in the farm each year than either her male counterpart or the bullock she works alongside with. She is not protected by labour laws and makes less than the minimum wage because she is a casual labourer.

As agri-business takes over farming, casual workers are forced to migrate to urban areas. Many Dalit women are left behind and bear



Maharajapuram land struggle – village meeting

the responsibility of providing for their families. Those who move to the cities often end up in export processing zones where they are subjected to pregnancy tests in order to obtain jobs and then to stand while working on a 12-hour shift inside barbed wire enclosed factories.

Long-standing Hindu tradition compels many Dalit families to dedicate their daughters to goddesses as *Mathamas*. In practice, this means that the girl cannot marry and must make her living as a temple dancer, selling herself to higher-caste male visitors to the temple. Meanwhile, globalisation policies which have converted farms into export processing zones and which have destroyed traditional agriculture and rural work have pushed many more Dalit women and children into prostitution as their only means of survival.

Dalit and Tribal women are prostituted, raped, beaten and used as cheap labour. Mass violence and mass rapes against the women of these communities are part of the complex matrix of the continued imposition of patriarchal and misogynist Hindu ideologies as well as control of land on certain communities. In some tribal communities, there are less constraints to women's sexuality. Mainstream India often sees this as unacceptable behaviour that needs to be curtailed and regulated.

The Dalit women have a long history of starvation, oppression and gender violence inflicted by upper castes. Dalit women concerns are the attainment of their families' basic necessities such as food, wages, electricity, education and work. They are in distress under the burden of triple oppression because of caste, class and gender. Dalit identity politics articulates caste identity sharply but resists articulating the gender dimension of caste itself. Women are raped as part of caste subjugation. Dalit girls are forced to have sex with the village landlord and have been forced to become prostitutes for upper-caste patrons and village priests. In rural areas, 'women are induced into prostitution

(*Devadasi/Mathamma* system), which [is] forced on them under the name of religion'. The prevalence of rape in villages contributes to the greater incidence of child marriage. Early marriage between the ages of ten and sixteen years persists in large part because of Dalit girls' vulnerability to sexual assault by upper-caste men; once a girl is raped, she becomes unmarriageable.<sup>5</sup>

## The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum

The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum (TNWF) is a state-level formation advocating women's rights and gender justice. It works against all forms of discrimination not only gender-based discrimination, but also caste-based discrimination, and discrimination against Dalit women.

The TNWF, in advocating for the protection and promotion of women's rights, links up with a wide network of women's, human rights, tribal, Dalit groups, fisher communities, individuals, environmental justice groups and peoples' movements.

With a network of 50 groups when it started in 1991, the TNWF now has more than 375 groups throughout the state of Tamil Nadu. It has a planning committee which consists of 26 members which include trainers, legal advisors and special speakers from all over the state. The planning committee lays down the activities for all the districts and its members lead in the implementation of the plans.

The TNWF's main focus is on the rights of rural women. It facilitates collective articulation and action at the local, district, state and country levels. It initiates campaigns and concerted actions against all forms of violence

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.dalitchristians.com/html/condition.htm](http://www.dalitchristians.com/html/condition.htm).

against women and in sensitising the public at large on highly exploitative patriarchal social structure. It provides gender support services as and when necessary. It assists grassroots women's organisations at achieving self-reliance through various means.



Cleaning the land through NREGA scheme

The TNWF initiated in 1997 the struggle of 50 per cent women's representation in various levels of government. The Forum has sustained this struggle through protest actions, demonstrations, public meetings, rallies, advocacy programmes, lobbying and campaigns.

It has trained a team of women speakers who boldly address public meetings in support of upholding the rights of women. It has also developed twelve (12) women evaluators. Through trainings on planning, monitoring and evaluation (PME), the women have learned the concepts and skills related to results-oriented evaluation and have successfully evaluated programmes of other organisations.

Various organisations, media and the public recognise the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum. Media persons have referred women victims of human rights violations to the TNWF for guidance and assistance. This is due to the media being aware of the legal support extended by TNWF to women victims. The good rapport with the media and other forums helps TNWF highlight the issues at a wider level.



"No Pesticide Use Day" was commemorated by the TNWF on the 3rd December 2009, by way of a public protest action at Kancheepuram.

The Tamil Nadu Government Adi-Dravida Welfare Department has acknowledged the work of TNWF by involving the organisation in a research on the welfare of Dalits. The specific recommendations forwarded by TNWF

were considered by the government for implementation. The government's National Commission for Women has included in its annual publications accounts on public hearings organised by TNWF. Amendments to existing laws for women forwarded by the TNWF have also been initiated.

The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum works mainly with women but it also works closely with other Dalit groups involved in human rights, farmer groups, fisherfolks, scheduled tribes and with individual advocates. A meaningful linkage exists between TNWF with the grassroots people, NGO, political parties, trade unions and activists. Through these linkages, the TNWF has successfully intervened in policy implementation and in bringing policy changes and new policies.

TNWF organised seminars, public meetings and



submitted a memorandum on behalf of the unorganised agricultural workers insisting that the government implement the recommendations of Kolappan Committee on Agricultural Labourers for an improvement in their living conditions. As a result of which the government regularised the working hours and conditions for agriculture workers.

The TNWF conducted a micro-sample survey of the Public Distribution System (PDS) shops throughout the state. The study exposed various forms of irregularities, which were brought to the notice of the government. On the bases of the results of the study, the government instituted reforms to tighten monitoring of the operation of the PDS by the district collectors.

The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum has also continuously opposed religious fundamentalism and attacks on minorities through public meetings and awareness programmes. Solidarity programmes were organised in support of minorities who were brutally attacked in Gujarat, one of the states of India where communal fights between Hindus and Muslims took place. The campaign to end communal violence reached the international level and gained support from many groups.

## **Opposing globalisation in strong solidarity with farmers and workers organisations**

The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum has not hesitated to engage with international agri-business corporations. It launched a signature campaign at the state level, against the giant company Monsanto for promoting genetically engineered seeds.

TNWF led a state-wide people's caravan for land and food without poison; a campaign against the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides to convince thousands of farmers to adopt safe and sustainable organic



Success of the struggle the dalit women got their land with ownership farming.

A study done by TNWF on flower cultivators brought out the hazardous impact of pesticides use and health on women due to the shift to cut-flower production for export encouraged by the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture.

The Central Government announced in January 2010, the introduction of commercial cultivation of *Bt Brinjal* (genetically modified eggplant). TNWF conducted protest meetings, sensitisation workshops, distributed pamphlets, passed a resolution with the *Panchayat* Presidents and sent copies of these resolutions to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. With the strong opposition coming from the women and together with other farmers' organisations, the commercial cultivation of *Bt Brinjal* has been put on hold by the Central Government.

The TNWF organised a demonstration to pressure the government to withdraw the Prevention of Terrorist Act (POTA) which was passed in 2002. Under POTA, an accused cannot be released on bail unless the Special Court constituted under the Act gives the Public Prosecutor an opportunity to be heard. If the Public Prosecutor opposes the application for grant of bail, the court cannot release the accused unless it is satisfied that

there are grounds to believe that the person concerned is not guilty of such offence. The court can release the accused only after the completion of one year from the date of detention. The law was repealed after continuous demonstrations.



After the success of road struggle Dalit children are using the pathway to go to school

TNWF has also opposed the Government Order's on Panchami land which allowed the selling of land previously allotted to members of "Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes". Over the years, the Dalits were forced to sell the land through "coercion and threat." Though such land transactions were illegal, non-Dalits continued to enjoy the ownership.

The Tamil Nadu State Agriculture Council Bill (2009) was passed by the state assembly without public discussion. This Act makes 'agricultural service' an exclusive area only to those registered with the Council. This Act converts the knowledge of agriculture to an exclusive property of those with degrees in agriculture (and a few other degrees that the government deems fit). Organic farmers and traditional farming practitioners were excluded by this act. TNWF, together with various farmer unions and people's movements, initiated a campaign for the withdrawal of the law.

TNWF supported the Madras Rubber Factory (MRF) in Arakkonam, and workers of the United Labour Federation. The union in the rubber factory

has, as members, majority of the workers and it fought for union recognition and the reinstatement of dismissed workers. The struggle was successful.

## **Conclusion**

In 2011, the Tamil Nadu Women's Forum will enter its third decade as a women's organisation. It has accomplished a lot in its avowed goal of protecting and promoting women's human rights and has done so in the complicated and difficult context of globalisation and the reality of caste and class oppression in India.

Its accomplishments are due to the organisation's comprehensive analysis of the roots of the oppression of women, especially Dalit women, and the dedication of its leaders and members. With its strategies of organising and the mobilisation of women against oppressive policies and practices and its strong network with other movements and organisations in the state, in the country and internationally, TNWF continues to advance women's liberation from class, caste and patriarchal structures and oppression. The Tamil Nadu Women's Forum through its actions are bringing women from other movements into the circle of women struggling to create a society which is just and equal.

# Human Development Organization (HDO)

## Supporting Sri Lankan Women's Opposition to Globalisation

### Introduction

Fifty-three per cent of Sri Lanka's workforce are women. Under the neo liberal policies which open Sri Lanka's economy to foreign investors, the exploitation of Sri Lanka's women has intensified.

In general, Sri Lankan women are better off compared to other South Asian women in the areas of literacy, life expectancy and child mortality. Sri Lankan women's literacy rate is 83 per cent<sup>1</sup> compared to the 33 per cent average literacy rate of women in South Asia as a whole. Life expectancy of women in Sri Lanka is 73 years<sup>2</sup> compared to the 60 years average in other countries of South Asia. Child mortality is a quarter lower than India's. Sri Lanka earns annually US \$ 3.8 billion, through workers who work in the foreign countries as migrant workers. A large majority of these migrant workers are women. However, Sri Lankan women are at a disadvantage compared to Sri Lankan men. Unemployment among educated women is two times higher than among educated men. Twenty per cent of employees holding high position and who are mostly men earn over 50 per cent of the country's family income. In contrast, 20 per cent of those at the lower echelons of employment composed mostly of women account for only 5 per cent of the family income<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Department of Census and statistics

<sup>2</sup> Department of Census and statistics

<sup>3</sup> Right to Education Book, Human Development Organization



In the past 15 years, urban communities have witnessed the establishment of factories which predominantly hire male workers. In the rural areas, thousands have been displaced because of various land use conversion of what used to be agriculture lands. The protracted ethnic conflict has killed thousands of men and has widowed thousands of women, increasing tremendously women's economic and emotional burdens.

## Neo- liberal Globalisation and Sri Lanka Women

Neo-liberal globalisation has aggravated the suffering of Sri Lankan women due to gender-based exploitation and violence. Women workers in plantations start their day at 4:00 am to perform household chores and then work the whole day in the fields before coming back to the house for another round of housekeeping and child rearing.

Under the open economic policy, the industrial sector of Sri Lanka has developed with the entry of foreign investors. This has brought about changes in the marketing facilities for plantation products. Women have been traditionally involved in plantation work. The mechanisation of

plantation in harvesting, gradually replacing hand plucking, has led to a noticeable trend of replacing women's labour by men's labour in this aspect of plantation production.

The widespread use of pesticides and weedicides in the plantation has increased the vulnerability of women working in the plantations to health problems. In the rubber plantation, the women



apply fungicide to rubber trees and sprinkle urea and other weedicides with their bare hands leading to skin and respiratory ailments<sup>4</sup>.

Pesticide use in food production has affected consumers both in the rural and urban communities. Farmlands and ground water have also been polluted because of the widespread use of chemicals in agriculture.

## **The Human Development Organization (HDO) supports women opposing globalisation**

The effects of neo-liberal globalisation policies in the form of militarisation, privatisation and economic restructuring heavily weigh on women. The Sri Lankan government by embracing neo-liberal globalisation has to allocate more funds for "militarisation" while thousands of Sri Lankans have been displaced because of the closure of factories, the privatisation

<sup>4</sup> Report of an incident of a child from a farming family who died from chewing the paper cover of a weedicide container and the use of weedicide by young people who committed suicide have been reported in the media. The report was taken from a Public Hearing Program sponsored by IMADR held at Sri Lanka Foundation Institute in Colombo and by fact-finding reports of HDO.



of plantations and other enterprises; the promotion of non-traditional export crops in place of traditional export crops; cutbacks in agricultural subsidies and the reduction in health and welfare expenditures. As a result, Sri Lanka's working class women's vulnerability to violence and multiple burdens have increased tremendously.

HDO, which was established in 1992 with the vision of a just, equitable and peaceful society through sustainable

development, has a women's programme. The programme was created to protect and promote the rights of the women and to work for gender equality.

The HDO has launched several campaigns, demonstrations and awareness raising programmes on the multiple adverse consequences of neo-liberal globalisation. Peace and right to food and water are issues close to women. Peace is an essential element in the current context of Sri Lankan politics. Civilians faced economic and physical hardships because of the civil war. HDO emphasising the need for peace conducted a national consultation on minority rights and initiated peace actions in 2005 attended by civil organisations and educators from all over the island.

In 2004, HDO organised the right to food campaign and a caravan in Sri Lanka in collaboration with PAN AP. It also conducted a public campaign for food and water security in cooperation with many civil society

organisations. Women were involved as organisers and participants in these campaigns.

Aside from initiating campaigns, HDO has undertaken research on the impact of globalisation and liberalisation on plantation women in collaboration with the Coalition of Agricultural Workers International (CAWI) and the Committee on Asian Women (CAW) and has published the results of this research.

The Human Development Organization (HDO) also initiated the formation of a women's human rights network in the central region of Sri Lanka, the "Women's Watch" to ensure the protection of women's human rights. Formed in 2004, Women's Watch has worked with women plantation workers and after the December 26, 2004 tsunami hit Sri Lanka, expanded its work with women displaced by the tsunami.

Women's Watch draws its membership mainly from grassroots women and students. Its decision making process is participatory, embracing women from grassroots level.

Women's Watch is aware that in a patriarchal society, women's liberation and development are a mirage unless the women themselves are organised at all levels and are committed to act against discrimination and injustices whether these occur in the workplace or at home. In pursuance of this objective, Women's Watch cooperates with organisations with identical objectives. Woman's Watch works with other women groups in fighting for basic amenities in their village and support a process of conflict resolution for national peace.

HDO and Sri Lanka's women's organisations have been in the forefront in promoting alternative but viable agricultural production and systems to combat the spread of globalised farming methods. They actively work for

the propagation and re-adoption of traditional methods of agriculture by the use of traditional seeds and traditional non-chemical methods of pest control and use of organic fertilisers.

HDO has supported people's organisations in working for the realisation of the right to land, housing and safe drinking water, concerns very close to the heart of women.

# Wither the Displaced Fisher Communities in the East Coast?:

## Development Displacement at Oluvil Harbour Site at Ampara district

World Forum of Fisher Peoples, WFFP

### History

The construction of the Oluvil Port Development Project was inaugurated for the second time with the initiative of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, in 2006. The Port construction was carried out under the guidance of then Minister of Port, Aviation, Irrigation & Water Management. The Project, which had been limited only to discussions for a long period of time, has thus commenced. It offered priority to the Oluvil Port development via “Negenahira Nawodaya” (Awakening of Eastern Province) that launched the expedited development of the Eastern region of the country. The Sri Lanka Ports Authority and the Denmark contractors signed the Memorandum of Understanding for the construction of the Oluvil Port Project on March 13, 2008. The Denmark Construction Company named MT Hojgaard is responsible for the construction while the Denmark Government provides financial assistance for the Oluvil Port Project. The Project, estimated to be worth 46.1 Million is not yet complete and still under construction; yet the communities are unaware of the acquisition of land in Palamunai and Sinna Palamunai under the Oluvil Harbour Development project.

The moment this project started for the first time in 2000, many lost their only source of income which is fisheries and beach seine operations. In Oluvil, there were 12 teams to haul the catch by beach seine fishery. In

Palamunai there were 7 teams to haul the catch from them. One team consisted of 100 fishermen. Accordingly, around 1,900 lost their jobs. Among the 1,900, only 835 have received compensation and among the 835, the majority are friends and relatives of the haul owners who in most cases do not have links with the fishing industry. Many genuine fishermen who were directly affected have yet to receive any form of compensation. The reason behind this is that the fishing industry, unlike other sectors, does not maintain official records but is owned in its entirety by the private sector. Its entire business, responsibilities and profits belong to the entrepreneur.

The government's solution to the problems of the fishing community was to allow them to move to a specified but limited area for fishing if they wanted to continue fishing. However, to haul the large number of fish, there has to be a beach, which is conducive for such activity. Areas with coral reefs are not conducive for this. The area taken over by the harbour is the best area to haul the fish in.

## **How the Harbour Project affects the lives of the People in the Oluvil area:**

At the very beginning, the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) and the District Fisheries Soidarity Movement (DIFSO) team met a group of women to learn about the situation they faced:

*“After the tsunami, the police opened fire and 8 houses were burnt; Mr. Rauff Hakeem (Leader of Muslim Congress, the Justice Minister in the present Parliament) said he would build houses, he never did. Mr. A.L.M. Athaulla (The Local Government minister of the present government) donated some sewing machines. Both of them said that they will give our lands back to us or will provide a relocation area. In the end, the Ports Authority said that these lands are owned by someone and that he has been paid compensation for the land.”*

*“We first heard about the Oluvil harbour in 1994 but we only got to know that our village Palamunai will also be affected by it in 2004.”*

M B Lanfa Been's story is quite heart breaking. She is the eldest of the seven daughters of Cader Saiwoo Mahimun Umma and Biskin Bawa. She attended the Arasithar Muslim Mixed School in Palamunai until grade 5 and then dropped out of school to look after the rest of her siblings. Muslim women in rural areas usually do not pursue higher education. In 1987, she got married and today is a mother of 3 daughters aged 13, 16 and 17 and 2 sons aged 14 and 4 years.

*“As I was the eldest in the family, I suffered a lot. Until today, I suffer because of the problems involving my children. I went abroad after getting married, worked as a labourer and I still continue to do these things to earn a living. All 5 of my children are studying”, she moaned.*

*In the Muslim community, the bride's party should arrange a dowry, which usually consists of land and houses. Her father also cleared the land and planted around 60 coconut trees. The government has even given deeds on a lease basis.*

Her father had transferred the land including all relevant documents in her name. By the time the government acquired it, there was a hut along with many other crops. She moved to the hut in 1990 and this is where her third child was born. If she had not move to the hut to live with her husband and two kids, she may have lost her land, taken away by the government. Also, her husband is a smallscale fisherman at the village and does not earn sufficient income to cover their day to day affairs.

*“My husband didn't earn much from fishing but due to harbour construction, we lost that income too. I too cannot go to Middle East as I have no guarantee of protection for my daughters.”*

*“I am not the only woman affected by the harbour construction.”*

In Sinna Palamunai, 9 plots of land acquired by the government have licenses/deeds. Lands that have been acquired on a lease deed as government land, are in fact NOT government land, according to what the Assistant Government Agent stated in 1996. Hence, this land is private and its owner decided to give it to the Ports Authority.

*“Most of our neighbours are in the same situation as me and have lost their life, livelihoods and source of income. I heard some people have received some money as compensation. But, how can we put a value on our native place? And how can we put a value on our livelihoods, and source of income loss? How can we survive with little compensation and where can we stay?”*

*“No...never. We will not give up our customary rights. That is why we decided to take a stand and fight for our land, our livelihoods, our rights. DIFSO and the neighbouring Addalachenai women's groups helped us to get organised.”*

The normal life of the people is now in danger, due to the Oluvil harbour construction work. Fishing is the main livelihood for them. Their livelihood is very much affected as the harbour work is ongoing. They have lost their inherited land rights and are unable to raise their voice against the harbour construction work by the government. These people have not only lost their lands, but also the coastal and aquatic resources. They are trying to fight for it through the District Fisheries Solidarity (DIFSO) but everything has been in vain so far. People are scared with the situation of the country, the human rights violations, abductions, threats, harassments and white van culture suppressing any people's uprising through para-military actions.

These are the various problems that the people face:

- Land acquisition by the ports authority.
- Problem of fishermen of beach seine fishing (Beach Seines) - no compensation for them.

- Problem of small-scale fishermen, canoe fishing and fish vendors – lack of fishing area, displacement from work.
- Women losing their lands, which put them into difficulties.

*“This will affect hundreds of families in 3 fishing communities”, young women activists Ms.M.H. Meerasahebu and Ms. I.M. Meerasahebu, representatives of the small-scale fishers and members of Oluvil Al Shaba Fisheries Society, attached to DIFSO, said. “The entire fishing career is affected and day to day survival is in question. We go fishing within one kilometre distance from the shore. Due to the port construction, the area is prohibited to entrance. Oluvil port is being constructed in the low level area where more fish are normally found. Each boat is losing Rs.5000/- per day. Around 50 small fish vendors who buy and sell daily from the small fishermen are also affected”.*

The Beach Seine fish workers are the worst hit among the community. Each Beach seine earns around Rs.150, 000/- a day, with each fish worker earning Rs. 650 per day. Now, they have lost that income. They do not have any other source of income too. Worse, 3 beach seine fishermen and most of the fish workers were not compensated. With available information, it is clear that out of the six compensated beach seines, another 124 persons were left out. The affected fisher folks complained about their grievances at various levels but none got a favourable response. “We started the agitations and demanded from various government agencies for justice. We reported to the District Secretary, Divisional Secretary; we had sit-ins in front of the Port construction site, where police beat and arrested us. Women escaped. But, no results were achieved with all these efforts.”

In March 2009, commemorating the International Women's Day, the women at the Oluvil area, with the support from the southern people had organised a long march and a rally at Addalachenai demanding back their land and coastal areas. Women handed over a petition to the eastern

province Chief Minister, Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan with 12,000 signatures which were collected from the people in the area as well as the people from the South. However, there was no change despite this initiated activity.

Women had political interventions during the eastern provincial council elections in May 2008. Politicians cheated them at the time of elections on several occasions. But they have continued their long struggle since 2000 until today. This includes organised work against the harbour project together with DIFSO, Palliwasal (Mosque Society) and Oluvil harbour affected women's organisation; getting support from the political parties, including Attalachena Pradesheeya Sabha, Muslim Congress etc.

There was no positive response to the letters they wrote on this issue. Details of their correspondence and their involvement against the project are:

1. A letter was sent on 01 December 2000 to the former Minister of Fisheries, Mahinda Rajapakse. A letter was again sent to the same Minister of Fisheries in 29 December 2000.
2. A letter was sent in 2005 to President Chandrika Kumaranathunga Bandaranayake.
3. A letter was sent to the Ampara District Government Agent, District Fisheries Extension Officer on 11 November 2006.
4. Letters were sent on 17 November 2006 to President Mahinda Rajapakse, Opposition Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe, and Minister A. M. Aththualla.
5. A letter was sent on 16 January 2008 to the Fisheries Minister Felix Perera.
6. Letter was again sent on 06 May 2008 to President Mahinda Rajapakse, Opposition Leader Ranil Wickramasinghe, Minister A. M. Aththualla, Colombo Ports Authority, Oluvil Ports Authority, Additional Government Agent Ampara and Fisheries Extension Officer Ampara.

7. A letter to the Chief Minister Sivanesathurai Chandrakanthan (Date not known)
8. A petition was handed over to Chief Minister S. Chandrakanthan on 09<sup>th</sup> March 2009.

Nobody replied to these letters except for the Ports and Aviation Minister dated 19 December 2007 and on 06 May 2008 to take necessary action.

## **Involvement of DIFSO with the Affected Communities due to Oluvil Harbour Construction:**

As an organisation that works with the coastal communities, DIFSO is struggling to organise the women in the area against the harbour project. The women's organisation together with DIFSO wants to get at least a reasonable compensation for the fisher families of small-scale boat operators, beach seine owners and fish workers, the women who lost their land and their livelihoods, fish vendors etc.

The main demands of the women's group and DIFSO are as follows:

- Compensation for the people who lost their land and their livelihood due to the Oluvil harbour project;
- A reasonable resettlement programme for the women and also the other people who lost their land and jobs;
- Equality for all the displaced communities and the consideration of their grievances based on social justice;
- No eviction from the lands that people live on without consultation and consent of the potential victims.

As the fisher women's organisation and DIFSO continue work on land issues, they have come to realise the necessity to have a serious and in-depth advocacy and a campaign to change the land laws, which are only in favour of the ruling class and the bureaucrats in the country. In this particular context, the women's organisation and DIFSO's main demands are:

- To change the land rules and regulations in favour of the people,
- To include the right to life as a fundamental right into the constitution.

## **How has the women's group responded to neoliberal globalisation?**

The women's movement has been formed to face the challenges of displacement due to so-called development of the commercial fishery harbour. The only livelihoods of those families were fishing and fish vending for the women. Small producers and small business communities are wiped out from their livelihoods and even from their own land. Today, they do not have any means to earn an income hence it has become a serious threat to their lives. The women got together and united with people who resisted against the land grabbing and gathered support from various sectors such as religious groups based at Mosque, a regional council level.

At a certain stage, the women's group approached the District Fisheries Organization, which is a NAFSO partner organisation at Ampara district. They assisted in strengthening the women's group as well as the displaced beach seine operators and brought the case up to the provincial council level. The DIFSO and Praja Abilasha Land network assisted the women and conducted a signature campaign that was submitted to the Chief Minister of the eastern province. As a result of the organising work of DIFSO, the women were able to bring the Chief Minister for the Women's Day rally at Addalachenai, in which Oluvil harbour became the main focus of the women's demand for their survival. The women leaders met the Chief Minister of the eastern province who then agreed to support the displaced women as well as the beach seine operators to continue their livelihoods. But unfortunately, the Sri Lankan Govt is continuing the

harbour project, displacing the people. But, it is a fact that there is not enough strong women's movement to face the challenges of the present neo-liberal economic context. However, this is not to limit the women's movement in Sri Lanka. The whole society is in a numb situation due to the post war context in the country. The whole system is militarised and controlled by the weapon and constitutional dictatorship of the Presidential system. People are losing their trust in the judiciary day by day. They are reluctant to come forward and raise their voice against the violations of their rights due to fear. There was only one recent incident in which the Negombo lagoon communities fought against the government Sea Plane Project, which is to promote tourism at Negombo lagoon. They were defeated by the strong interventions of fisherfolks at the Negombo area. There is very limited space for the Oluvil harbour-affected women's organisation to work hand in hand for such struggles against neo-liberal economic policies in the country.

## **What are the current challenges?**

There are many challenges and difficulties we are facing today. The biggest challenge is that the numbing situation of the affected people due to neo-liberal economic policies adopted by the government. People are reluctant to come forward and voice out their concerns. Many of the people in the area hope that the commercial harbour will bring glory to the people. They do not depend on the natural resources. They do not understand the devastation of the environment, destruction of livelihoods, land grabbing in the area and security threats to the poor.

Women are reluctant to come forward because they are afraid of the people behind the contract. The religious groups and the other people who are engaged in the campaign are also reluctant to come forward due to oppression, harassments and of life threats.

At the same time, the government's media propaganda over the harbour construction has created a lot of hope among the general public so there is no support from them. Also, women and the organisers do not have an alternative media to counter the mainstream media propaganda, hence there is poor support from the people. The government of Sri Lanka is cleverly taking all the steps to show mega constructions as development for the country, future of the poor and solution to the economic difficulties faced by the people. None of the projects come from the budget of the government, making the country deeper in debt to the Asian Development Bank (ADB) along with other agencies. The poor believe the government propaganda. We need a very strong education and awareness campaign that is somewhat difficult to conduct at the present oppressive atmosphere of military rule in the country as well as the para-military groups operating in the East and North of the country.

## **What are the strategies in confronting these challenges?**

The main strategy is to educate the communities. Raising awareness at the local as well as national level is going to be one of the biggest struggles against land grabbing. We conducted a People's Tribunal to garner attention at national and even international levels. But the main issue was to bring the affected communities to the People's Tribunal and to sustain the links we built with the affected people. We are working to unite all the development displaced communities together to fight, whether it is rural, coastal or urban areas in the country. This will help to bring the landless people as well as the people affected by land grabbing in the country to unite and bring them together to build a coalition. We are working through the Land Forum, which is a CSO initiative, to bring the displaced communities together to fight for their rights. DIFSO/NAFSO is working for the unification of such groups among the rural and coastal areas.

The same campaign brings the issues of changing the land laws and regulations as an organised body. We demand for genuine land and aquatic reform in the country which is based on the change of constitution on people-centred land policy. We want to have land as a fundamental right of the people which the government cannot utilise, and grab them from the people as they wish. Also, we are working hard to establish a land commission with the full participation of all the stake holders on land struggle.

Education, promotion of land and aquatic reform through legal reform, formation of new structures to cater to the needs of landless people, building up landless people's coalition are the strategies that are crucial to face the challenges.

## **Conclusion:**

In the post-tsunami and post-war situation, land grabbing is becoming a very serious issue in Sri Lanka. After the tsunami, there were post-tsunami development processes which led to the displacement of the poor and marginalised coastal communities in the country. Two years after the war ended, we saw land grabbing becoming a serious issue all over the country. In post war Sri Lanka, tourism is the main aim for becoming the "Wonders in Asia." All the lands are free for market and investments. The government wants to bring more investments to promote tourism, strengthen market forces, which need more mega-scale projects, super highways, commercial harbours, international airports and sea plane projects which attracts tourists to the country. Oluvil harbour is among them. The government is indifferent to the people's customary rights. People who are living day to day life with their earnings from the natural resources, coasts, seas, lagoons and agricultural lands will be wiped out from the system. However, majority are supporting all these efforts as

the development of the country. Day by day, we are losing our lands and losing our small way of living.

Our challenge is to bring the people together to resist and change this kind of exploitation with the support of government mechanisms. So, we are working with various groups including affected communities, religious groups, political parties and CBOs, NGOs, scholars and professionals to fight together against this corporate globalisation.

The women's organisation affected by Oluvil harbour construction is still continuing their struggle amidst all these difficulties in the eastern province. They do not want to give up the struggle. DIFSO, the local community-based organisation is continuing their support to the community while organising and mobilising them to fight for their land and sea rights. People are learning day by day that this is a political struggle and that they need to further widen their network by deepening the links with the land coalition. Our challenge is to motivate the women's organisation and the people in the area to become more dynamic and vibrant until they reclaim their rights to land, sea, coast and their livelihoods.

# GABRIELA's Continuing Struggle Against Globalisation:

## Organising, Awakening and Mobilising Against Displacement, Commodification and Modern-Day Slavery of Women

*“Unless poor and oppressed women of the world unite to struggle against imperialist globalisation, our fate will remain as that of being displaced, commodified and modern-day slaves.”<sup>1</sup>*

**Liza Largoza-Maza**  
GABRIELA Philippines

Presently, the world is reeling from the global financial crisis following the crash of major financial institutions in the United States of America. The effects of the financial crisis are immediately felt by the financial institutions in the United States but its grim effect is expected to arrive at the doorstep of the working class all over the world. Many critics of globalisation were not surprised by this development. From the onset, globalisation was doomed to fail as it is the last ditch effort of monopoly capitalism to salvage its ever worsening crisis of overproduction. The triple banner policies of globalisation – liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation – aimed to remove the remaining barriers in the economies of underdeveloped and developing countries for unhampered access of

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<sup>1</sup> Largoza-Maza, Liza (1996). Proceedings of the Workshop on Women and Globalisation. Globalisation: Displacement, Commodification and Modern-Day Slavery of Women (p.12). Quezon City, Philippines. GABRIELA National Alliance of Women

monopoly capitalists to the rich resources of these countries. Women from the poor sector of societies are among the hardest hit by this onslaught.

GABRIELA National Alliance of Women in the Philippines has always been a staunch opponent of globalisation especially for its disastrous effects on the lives of women. The battle of Filipino women against globalisation started long before “globalisation” became a by-word.

## **GABRIELA @ 25**

GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership, and Action) was formed in 1984, in the midst of the growing Filipino people's struggle against the dictatorship of then President Ferdinand E. Marcos. The primary catalyst for organised struggle of Filipinos, at that time, was the Marcos dictatorship's blatant and massive violation of human rights. At the core of the dictatorship's political repression is the need to quell the people's unrest over the worsening economic crisis because it was the Marcos dictatorship that laid the economic foundation of what later will become the nucleus of the globalisation policies.

Through the years, through four other regimes, GABRIELA thrived, grew and strengthened owing to its strong base of women from the marginalised sectors of peasant, workers, urban poor, youth and indigenous peoples. GABRIELA now boasts of having more than 200 member organisations, institutions, desks and programmes spread all over the Philippines. Internationally, GABRIELA has Solidarity Networks in the United States, Canada, Germany, Australia, Japan, Belgium and the Netherlands. GABRIELA recently formed its first overseas chapter in the United States.

As GABRIELA celebrated its second decade in 2004, it also paved the way for the formation of Gabriela Women's Party which won one seat in the Congressional elections in 2004 and two seats in its second term in 2007.

In 2009, GABRIELA celebrated its 25 years of struggles and triumphs in its advocacy for the issues of Filipino women – landlessness, militarisation, the foreign debt crisis and the International Monetary Fund-World Bank (IMF-WB) impositions, General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade-World Trade Organization (GATT-WTO), anti-people development projects, the denial of women's health rights, violence against women and children, prostitution, trafficking in women and forced migration; among others.



GABRIELA believes that the freedom women seek will be brought about by the resolution of the problems of foreign domination, landlessness and political repression and in the changing of patriarchal value systems and structures of Philippine society.

## **Women's Battles Against Globalisation**

Even before the term “globalisation” was coined, GABRIELA had opposed neo-liberal policies that adversely affect women. The 1992 commemoration of March 8 International Women's Day of GABRIELA focused on the negative impact of the IMF-WB conditionalities contained in the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP). Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women is among the first to campaign against the GATT, even before it became GATT-WTO. Amihan called for a conference on the impact on Asian women of SAP and GATT; the conference resulted in the formation of the Asian Peasant Women's Network (APWN). As a sectoral organisation and together with other people's organisations, GABRIELA protested the passage and implementation of the Downstream

Oil Deregulation Law in 1995, the privatisation of water utility and health services and the commercialisation of education.

It was in 1996 when the protest against globalisation heightened in the Philippines when the government of then President Fidel V. Ramos hosted the Fourth Asia Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) Leaders Summit. Heads of states of countries in the Asia Pacific and then US President Bill Clinton came to the Philippines to signify their unity in brandishing the globalisation blueprint in each country and within the region.

National democratic people's organisations led by the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (New Patriotic Alliance) or BAYAN, launched the People's Campaign Against Imperialist Globalisation (PCAIG). In this campaign, women workers, peasants, urban poor, students, professionals and religious and indigenous women militantly and vibrantly took part in a series of protest actions against imperialist globalisation.

A counter-conference to the APEC Summit was held on November 21 to 23 attended by 123 foreign delegates from 30 countries and 53 local delegates. During the conference, GABRIELA sponsored a workshop and it was here where the militant women's group first used the apt terms to describe globalisation's effects on women worldwide: *displacement, commodification and modern-day slavery*.

## **Urban Poor Women**

In the name of globalisation, the Philippine government further opened up the country to various so-called development projects of foreign corporations; projects that only resulted in the displacement of women from their homes and livelihood. But women fought back.



Samahan ng Maralitang Kababaihang Nagkakaisa (Association of United Poor Women) or SAMAKANA, a federation of urban poor women, organised the residents in Barangay Longos, Malabon in Metro Manila. In 1997, the residents here faced the threat of demolition to give way to a Japanese-funded infrastructure project. They held dialogues with concerned authorities and when this failed, the women led in setting up a human barricade to thwart the demolition teams. When the demolition crew succeeded in tearing down their houses, the residents would set up make shift houses when the crew left at night. This pattern continued for days until they finally wore down their enemy. Although their homes were eventually demolished, the authorities were forced to provide them with a relocation site.

Such persistence was also displayed by the food vendors within the complex of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP).<sup>2</sup> In preparation for the entry of foreign food concessionaires in keeping with retail trade liberalisation, CCP management ordered the eviction of vendors who are mostly women.

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<sup>2</sup> CCP is the premier center of culture and arts in the Philippines. It is located in Pasay City encompassing 60 hectares of land and site of several performance venues and exhibit halls.

The vendors resisted. The combined armed force of the city police and private security were no match to the determined vendors whose only arms were pots and pans, ladles, spoons and other cooking utensils.

In 2002, when the electricity rate steeply increased, brought about by the deregulation of oil and the privatisation of basic utilities, GABRIELA led protest actions at the community level. GABRIELA joined the multi-sectoral campaign against power hike. Households were encouraged to turn off electric power for a few minutes as a sign of protest. This form of protest was striking in an urban poor community of dilapidated tenement housing organised by GABRIELA. The Manila-wide campaign was such a success that the government was pressured to postpone the planned power rate increase.

## **Women Workers**

The supposed “global competitiveness” under the neo-liberal policies have resulted in the collapse of businesses unable to withstand the competition from multinational and transnational corporations. In its wake, thousands upon thousands of workers lost their jobs.

The growing number of jobless Filipinos seeking employment further depresses the already low wages of workers. For women, who are considered as secondary or reserve labour by the prevalent feudal-patriarchal view, this only meant the further constriction of an already narrowing employment opportunities. Such desperation makes it easier to implement and make acceptable the neo-liberal policy of labour flexibilisation. But women workers were not to be cowed.

In 1998, the Mabuhay Electronics Corporation Employees’ Union (MECEU), a union of Samsung Industries mostly composed of women and under the Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (Women Workers



Movement) or KMK, won their collective bargaining agreement demands through united militant actions. Among their gains include an increase in wage and allowances and, the affirmation of the ban on labour-only contracting.

The following year, ShoeMart<sup>3</sup> (SM) workers crowned their employer - Henry Sy, Sr. – “Contractualisation King” for SM’s notoriety in hiring contractuales. SM employed about 20,000 workers in its 14 branches nationwide<sup>4</sup> in 1999. Eighty per cent of these workers are contractual, majority are women working as “sales-ladies”. Contractualisation was among the issues raised by the workers of SM when they went on strike on November 13. The workers strike brought to public attention the

<sup>3</sup> ShoeMart (SM) is the largest chain of malls and department stores in the Philippines. Its owner, Henry Sy, Sr., was recently named the richest man in the country by the Forbes Magazine.

<sup>4</sup> To date, SM has at least 31 Malls and Department Stores all over the Philippines.

widespread labour contractualisation in the country. Through the coverage of mass media of the SM workers' fight, the issue of contractualisation came to fore. The Philippine Congress was compelled to call for an inquiry on the matter and even the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) intervened on the labour dispute.

Two years later, the SM worker's union, together with GABRIELA and KMK, organised a national conference on women workers and contractualisation attended by women labour leaders all over the country which gave birth to the *Koalisyon Laban sa Kontraktwalisasyon* (Coalition Against Contractualisation).

## Peasant Women

The globalisation policy of land-use conversion worsens the historical problem of landlessness in the Philippines. Agricultural lands were being converted to industrial zones, golf courses, tourist spots and cattle ranches further displacing rural women.

Amihan National Federation of Women directly faced this hurdle with the struggle of its local chapter in San Francisco, Quezon<sup>5</sup>. Calling for the immediate distribution of the *haciendas*<sup>6</sup>, the local Amihan chapter faced the hurdle of the Tumbaga Ranch, located within San Francisco, Quezon and owned by an American rancher. Under the pressure of Amihan, the Department of Agrarian Reform participated in a fact-finding mission and found that the ranch covering more than 2,000 hectares has only 250 heads of cattle.

To protect the interest of landlords, the area was highly militarised. Military camps were set-up within school premises. Women peasants complained

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<sup>5</sup> Quezon is a province within the Southern Tagalog region in Luzon.

<sup>6</sup> Hacienda is the system of large land holding that originated with the land grant system used by Spanish conquistadores.

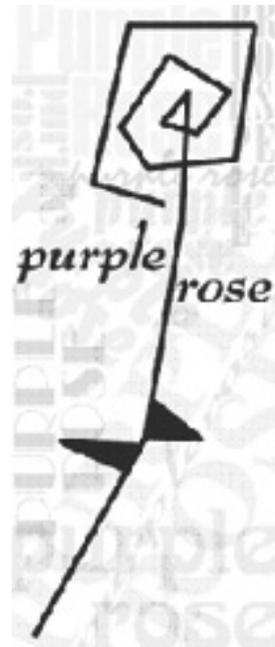
of constant sexual harassment from the military. Worse, three members of the Mabuhay Farmers Association were summarily-executed and the military were the primary suspect. But this did not deter the peasants from continuing their struggle. As the widow of one of the slain peasant said, "Who will take up the fight, if we don't? It is better to die fighting than to die without putting up a fight."

In 2004, Amihan reported that its members in Sta. Ana, Pampanga occupied 29 hectares of the Lacsama Estate. The women peasants then turned the land into productive and continuing source of food and livelihood for their families.

From taking up the local struggles of its members and chapter, Amihan also addressed the international community in its advocacy for rural women's rights and against globalisation. In 2004, Amihan together with the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) and Asian Peasant Women Network (APWN) sponsored a regional conference to declare war against imperialist globalisation. In the said conference, attended by women representing 12 countries in the Asian region, the peasant women agreed to "reject and fight massive attacks of imperialist globalisation on the world's agriculture."

### **The Purple Rose Campaign Against Sex Trafficking**

The displacement of women from their homes and livelihood and the narrowing employment opportunity in the country has forced Filipinas to work abroad mostly as domestic helpers



and entertainers. The Philippine government's labour-export policy has encouraged the trafficking of women. Globalisation has pushed women to become modern-day slaves and women's bodies commodified through prostitution and sex trafficking.

One of the most notable campaigns of GABRIELA is the Purple Rose<sup>7</sup> Campaign, an international campaign against trafficking of Filipino women and children. It has earned recognition and success not only in the Philippines but also gained international support.

Among the components of the Purple Rose Campaign is the Pledge Card, which individuals sign committing himself/herself to opposing the trafficking of women and children, the popularisation of the Purple Rose icon and the formation of The Committee of One-Hundred, a group of respected women and men in each country that takes up the Purple Rose Campaign, that ensures that the issue of the trafficking of women, particularly Filipinas, remain in the public eye.

The Purple Rose Campaign gained such massive support that it became the beneficiary of the first local production of *The Vagina Monologues*<sup>8</sup>. An advertisement in support of the campaign entitled "Package"<sup>9</sup>, created by renowned advertising company made by Ace Saatchi & Saatchi was cited in several local and international advertising awards. GABRIELA leaders

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<sup>7</sup> The Purple Rose is used as a symbol of sex trafficking because roses, by their very nature, were never purple. Purple roses were bred and made exotic for the pleasure and profit of others in the same manner that women and children victims of trafficking are objectified for pleasure and source of profits.

<sup>8</sup> *The Vagina Monologues* is an episodic play written by Eve Ensler first played at the HERE Arts Center in 1996. The production has been staged internationally, and a television version featuring Ensler was produced by cable TV channel HBO. In the Philippines, *The Vagina Monologues* is produced by the New Voice Company (NVC) headed by international theater actor Monique Wilson, the international spokesperson of The Purple Rose Campaign.

<sup>9</sup> The short infovideo, "Gabriela anti women trafficking TVC 'has been uploaded on Youtube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqCvN90ytUA>

spoke in regional and international conferences against globalisation's hand in the worsening crime of sex trafficking.

But more importantly, the Purple Rose Campaign brought to the international level, the truth about sex trafficking: globalisation policies heightened the poverty situation of women and led to further commodification of women through sex trafficking.

## **The Continuing Battle Against Globalisation**

The battle of Filipino women against neo-liberal policies took many forms and was waged at various levels – from barricades and simultaneously turning off lights in communities, from ribbon-wearing to work stoppage in workplaces, actively taking part and speaking out in regional and international conferences to launching international campaigns, reclaiming lands in the rural areas onto militantly marching in the streets and meeting head-on anti-riot police in order to oppose globalisation.

The important lesson of the struggle against globalisation – of any struggle for that matter - is that it must be deeply rooted in the struggle of the toiling masses against exploitation and oppression. The analysis that globalisation would only wreak havoc in the lives of poor peoples and of marginalised women all over the world stemmed from taking the stand point of the masses and realising the main antagonistic role of imperialism in women's oppression. The need to fight globalisation sprung from the continuing struggle of oppressed people for genuine liberation and democracy.

As it was in the beginning - when GABRIELA declared that globalisation spawns the displacement, commodification and modern-day slavery of women - so it is at present especially now that globalisation has clearly failed to achieve its empty promise of prosperity as highlighted by the worldwide economic crisis that started in 2008 and continues to this day.

The fight of Filipino women against globalisation has been on-going for more than a decade and will not cease. Some battles will be won, some will be lost. But the women's struggle against globalisation and its policies will continue and it will be even more vibrant and more militant because it is the Filipino women's contribution towards the eventual emancipation of women and of peoples against the pernicious and unequal world that monopoly capitalism has wrought.



