Discussions

Speech by Silvia Tecun León, Lawyer and Indigenous Activist, Member of Movimiento de Mujeres indígenas Tz'uniña / Indigenous Women’s Movement Tz'uniña (Guatemala).

Silvia Tecun León at Innis Town Hall, University of Toronto (Photo courtesy of WHRI)

To speak about violence against indigenous women requires us to take a historical view. Violence against women in a patriarchal system manifests itself in a variety of ways – physical, sexual, psychological and economic. For us, indigenous women, we need to also look at historical processes like occupation, colonization and internal wars where violence becomes articulated with gender and ethnicity. The application of these particular modes of violence against indigenous populations led to the destruction of existing socio-political modes of social organization among these communities. The imposed economic, political and cultural model directly affected indigenous women because it was based on violence. Dr. Victoria Tubin, a Maya scholar, points to a clear example of this process in her work on the chronicles of Diego del Anda in the following quote:

It is a great dishonesty on the part of these women whose habit is to walk about in a natural state…it is ordered that no Indian woman should bathe herself in areas where men are present nor should
women dress in men’s attire, or men dress as women, even if it is done in jest or as part of some festivity.

In this quote, we see an example of how the bodies of indigenous women are inserted in colonial ideas of shame and sexual mores so that they no longer have freedom with regard to their bodies. They are forced into a colonial gender ideology that relies on the strict segregation of women and men’s roles.

The process of colonization violently ruptured traditional ways of life among indigenous populations. For indigenous women this meant losing the ways in which their lives had been socially, politically and economically organized and being thrust into a colonial order that marginalized and subordinated them through violence. A violence that was justified through both patriarchy and racism. Some of the mechanisms of domination used to subordinate indigenous peoples and indigenous women included religion, education and militarization. In terms of religion, the church imposed an ideal of womanhood as white, chaste and pure where a woman’s role was if single, to preserve her family’s honour or, if married, her husband’s honour. These colonial gender ideologies continue to be reproduced today, in terms of both attitudes and behaviours thus having a direct impact on violence against women. Education, as a system for the reproduction of dominant state ideologies was used to strip indigenous women of their identity and to propagate ideas of indigenous women’s inferiority through the use of patriarchal and racialized so-called ‘scientific’ knowledge. Processes of militarization were used to gain control over indigenous people’s lands and to attempt the domination of indigenous people’s bodies, minds and freedoms.

Racism is a mechanism of oppression used by those in power. This system was historically used on indigenous peoples to conquer their lands and to impose a foreign or external culture on them. This process of violent transculturation can be characterized as a kind of ethnocide. As Marta Elena Casais (2002) tells us in her book, The Metamorphosis of Racism, racism “is not a static phenomenon but rather it is constantly renewing and transforming itself – that is to say, racism’s metamorphosis and its chameleon-like capacity for mutation may be expressed in a variety of modes but its essence remains because its effects and levels of violence don’t change.” As Michel Foucault says, in modernity identifying or recognizing racism may be more complex because the way in which it manifests itself depends on historical, economic, political and ideological contexts that are linked to modes of economic production.

Given what has been discussed, violence against indigenous women can be categorized as systemic and continuing as a present day phenomenon that is experienced by indigenous women in both the private and public spheres. In the private sphere, the more common modes of violence we face
as women are found within the nuclear family where it is typically the husband or male partner who is for the most part responsible for the violence experienced by women. But the violence against us as indigenous women is not only experienced in the home but also in the spaces where we work, in spaces of education as well as other social sites where we are undervalued. As indigenous women in the public sphere, we face severe, dehumanizing and continuous forms of violence - institutional violence, violence of the state and political violence. Akin to colonial times and to times of war, a series of violations to both our individual and collective rights as indigenous women continue to occur. Presently, women’s lives are put at risk within the racist and neoliberal economic system that represent the ideological foundation for the model of extraction in place that is being used to exploit natural resources.

For indigenous women, the building of huge, large, mega mining and hydroelectric projects as well as of large cement factories have had serious and negative effects on their social, political, cultural and economic lives. When the building of megaprojects faces opposition from indigenous communities, communities who are directly and adversely impacted by these large projects as they usually live in the regions where these projects are being built, the government is able to use legal mechanisms such as declaring a state of siege or a state of emergency or, issuing orders of arrest against those leaders who oppose the projects. A clear example of this is the case of eight women from the small village of San Miguel Ixtahuacán, San Marcos Guatemala, where orders of arrest were issued against these women because they opposed the mine built in their community. The reasons for opposing the mine included the damage done to their houses, the loss of sources of water in the community, the skin diseases that affected adults and children as well as the rapes of women by employees of the mining company. When states of emergency are declared, sexual violence usually occurs. We have the examples of the sexual harassment suffered by Maya Kaqchiquel women during the 2008 state of emergency declared by the Guatemalan state; also, in the attempted rapes of women by members of the Guatemalan army during the government’s declared state of prevention in 2014 in San Juan Sacatepéquez; in the violent evictions that occurred in Polochic; and, in the state of emergency declared in Alta Verapaz y Peten, all of which produced severe impacts and consequences on indigenous women’s lives and their social worlds. These examples, although they refer specifically to Guatemala, can be said to have common elements to some of the effects and consequences experienced by indigenous women all over the world.

The economic system directly impacts indigenous women because, it is thanks to indigenous women that our culture, our alternative economic practices and our indigenous cosmovisions have been maintained. These practices have typically included the protection of natural resources
because our territories, our lands are made up of some of earth’s remaining unexplored regions. At present, in a similar fashion to the time when nations were first being built, violence against indigenous women operates through diverse power relations that are arrived at via the intersection of systems of racism, sexism and economic that some academics refer to as colonialism. In its Social Panorama of Latin America 2006 report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC: 2007), it estimated that the indigenous population of Latin America represented over 40 million people which continue to be affected by forms of structural discrimination that include social marginalization, exclusion and poverty.

Throughout our history, indigenous women have been carrying the burden of domination that has been forced on our beings, our bodies and on the kinds of roles we can play in society. Colonial violence has tried to convert us into sexual objects and place us into systems of forced labour that deny us our autonomy as well as making us men’s private property. As a consequence, as indigenous women, we have little access to justice, health, education, public services and even less access to spaces where decision-making takes place.

The struggle for the recognition and respect of the individual and collective rights of indigenous women is of extreme importance – it is a struggle to regain the honor and respect, the dignity, that was taken away from our lives. The United Nations has played an important role with international conventions in defense of human rights and women’s rights. We turn specifically to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and examine how indigenous women’s rights have been included. We point out that the majority of UN international conventions do not include stipulations or articles that deal specifically with the particular forms of discrimination faced by indigenous women who have been not only subjugated because of their gender but also because of racism which denies indigenous peoples their individual and collective rights. CEDAW’s objective is to help in the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women worldwide, but we need to recognize that in the world’s nations we find indigenous populations numbering in the millions and, that indigenous women make up more than half of these populations.

We therefore consider that the CEDAW committee would take a significant step if it were to take into account how gender oppression and racism intersect to create systemic and structural problems that have condemned indigenous women to live in subhuman conditions worldwide. Participating States should be urged to recognize and take steps to change the political, economic, legal and social systems that have historically and systemically discriminated, excluded and subordinated indigenous women and men to the point of even wanting to erase our people’s childhoods and our historical memory.
Due to the factors discussed already, in 2009 the Movimiento de Mujeres Indígenas Tz’uniunija’ /Indigenous Women’s Movement Tz’ununija’ led the work on the creation of an alternative report for the CEDAW committee. This report would focus on the CEDAW committee’s recommendations 34 and 35, recommendations that had been presented to the Guatemalan state and government in 2003 and in 2007. The aim was to produce a report that would clearly focus on the specific situation and conditions faced by indigenous women. Throughout the country regional meetings were held to analyze the CEDAW convention and to collectively discuss, create and approve this report. Some of the principal points covered in the report include recommendations dealing with violence, access to justice, the development of policies that deal with discrimination, political participation, labour issues, health, the economy, and the specific situation of women in rural areas. The document that came out of this initial process and that contained indigenous women’s perspectives is entitled, “Facts and Analysis for the Development of a General Proposal to the CEDAW Committee to Guarantee Indigenous Women’s Rights.” With this document a process of consultation, discussion and dissemination started whose objectives were to: form alliances with individual and organizations with shared perspectives and goals; to develop closer ties with women’s organizations throughout the Latin American region; to have a transnational meeting of indigenous women from Central America and Mexico; to discuss human rights issues and CEDAW in order to come up with recommendations to improve the document.

Out of this effort, another document was developed as a joint national and international effort led by Guatemalan indigenous women’s organizations like the Movimiento de Mujeres Indígenas Tz’ununija’, Tik Na’oj, Asociación Maya Ux B’e, Sinergia No’j, Equipo de estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial ECAP and by Just Associates (JASS) as well as by participating groups from Colombia, Panama, Canada, Nepal and Mexico. The goal of the document is to argue before the CEDAW Committee in July of this year to issue a specific General Recommendation on indigenous women, based on the proposals contained in the document, that address the specific demands for the collective and individual rights of indigenous women.

We will be asking, with this document, the CEDAW Committee to make recommendations to all ratifying States to play a serious role in making the required transformations and taking the urgent actions needed to promote the institutionalization of social, cultural and, economic measures that support the full participation of indigenous women. These measures should be based on the recognition of indigenous ethno-cultural and gender perspectives as a means to eliminate the structural barriers that have impeded or delayed the social, cultural, economic and scientific development of indigenous women. We will also be requesting that recommendations be made to eliminate those practices that rely on racialized stereotypes and the folklorization of indigenous lives found in everyday spaces like schools, hospitals, markets,
shopping centres, churches and other State institutions. The objective is to recognize indigenous peoples as socio-political subjects whose specific demands need to be addressed and in so doing, leaving behind notions of nations and societies as homogeneous and monocultural.

As part of this effort at transnational collaboration, we are providing you with copies of the document asking for your support. We ask all who are here, as indigenous people or as allies, to add your support to the struggle of indigenous women worldwide; we ask you to add your name and voice to this great challenge so that we can begin to create better opportunities for indigenous women all over the world. It would be a significant feat in this struggle, and a historic gain for our daughters, if the CEDAW Committee were able to issue a general recommendation that specifically deals with the particular situation and conditions faced by indigenous women. You can support this collaborative effort by signing, sharing and disseminating the document throughout your networks.

I would also like to thank the Women’s Human Rights Education Institute, Alda and Angela, for making possible this event as well as all the joint collaborations that have come about because of these activities with other women and their organizations.

Thank you very much,

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Muchas Gracias

Works Cited:

*(English translation by Lorena M. Gajardo).

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see also - https://www.facebook.com/CEDAWGenRecIndigenous