

## Papuan women victims of discrimination and abuse Carmel Budiardjo reports a tale of oppression

**Mama Yosefa Amolang Goldman**  
environmental prize winner



For the past forty years, Indonesia has relied heavily on revenues from West Papua, the richest of its provinces, to keep its economy afloat, while the Papuan people have enjoyed little benefit from these riches. Few journalists have been allowed to visit the huge territory which is out of bounds to foreign NGOs. Hence, little is known about the conditions of Papuan women

A recent book\* has helped to fill this gap. It draws attention to the discrimination they suffer within their traditional communities, the burdens they bear as a result of the occupation of West Papua by Indonesia and the presence of mining corporations which make huge profits from West Papua's copper, gold, timber and other natural resources.

According to tradition, Papuan women are very much second-class citizens. They must abide by marital deals made by their father or other male relative. Already at an early age, a girl is expected to marry. Some marriages are even arranged when the child is conceived; from birth, she becomes the 'property' of her suitor.

While tribal wars were common before the arrival of Christian missionaries, these become more infrequent after contact with the outside world. Although this made Papua more peaceful, the arrival of Indonesian troops in 1963 led to egregious violations and the

forced displacement of Papuan communities to make way for foreign mining projects. The import of foreign labour has left Papuan men with little to do, while the burdens of rearing the children, handling household chores and foraging for food have borne down heavily on the women.

*According to Afina Tabuni, a housewife in Puncak Jaya, when they run out of food, it is the woman who must go and find more food. This is why women have to work in the fields, planting tubers to provide for the children, the husband and members of the husband's family.*

*With a baby strapped to her body, the woman prepares food for the husband while he is still asleep. When he gets up, he demands to be fed immediately, then off he goes to hunt in the forest. A woman's working day is much longer than her husband's. She works twenty hours a day looking after the family which gives her no time at all to do anything else outside the household.*

In many parts, patriarchy is widespread; women are treated as subordinates and suffer serious discrimination. While women must work hard running the household, public affairs are a matter for the men.

When the missionaries set up schools, women were able to enjoy the fruits of the education system, learning new skills to combine with their

household duties.

However, this was confined mainly to coastal towns, leading to a discrepancy between women in the towns and coastal areas and those in the remote interior who were bypassed by these developments.

In 1963, West Papua was handed over to Indonesia in a deal struck between the Dutch colonialists and Indonesia, brokered by Washington. The day following the transfer of power, a huge bonfire in Jayapura consumed symbols of Papuan life, school textbooks and Papuan flags. Some 10,000 Papuans were forced to witness this ceremonial burning of Papuan culture.

### The impact of foreign investment

The largest foreign investor in West Papua is the US multinational, Freeport-McMoran, granted a concession to exploit West Papua's copper and gold. 133 square kilometres of land have been polluted by the mine, damaging the quality of drinking water, fish and other foodstuffs. Traditional lands have been fenced off to keep the local people out, meaning that women have to walk greater distances to reach their gardens.

While women cope with daily chores, the men who are not employed by Freeport, spend most of the day lazing around or perhaps going hunting. As a consequence they have become prone to alcoholism. Moreover, the influx of sex workers and brothels to serve the mainly foreign workforce has led to the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS.

The other major foreign investor is British Petroleum which is about to start exploiting West Papua's huge gas reserves.

### Health Conditions

At the time of the fraudulent Act of Free Choice in 1969 which sealed West Papua's fate as a part of Indonesia, the population of West Papua was around 700,000, and grew to only 2.3 million in 2003 in-

cluding tens of thousands of Indonesian migrants. The slow rate of growth is primarily the result of meagre facilities for reproductive health as compared with other parts of Indonesia. Little attention has been paid to establishing local health clinics.

There are few midwives, nurses or doctors, most of whom live in the towns. The death rate among women giving birth is particularly high among women in the interior where health professionals are few and far between.

Moreover, because of the strength of traditional beliefs; the fate of a woman in childbirth is in the hands of the spirits. When a woman falls ill, she is expected to confess to past mistakes towards her husband or other members of the family. If her health continues to deteriorate, the family's pig is sacrificed while nothing is done to check the cause of the illness or check the health of the new-born baby.

According to a UNICEF doctor, the number of mothers and new-born babies who died per 100,000 of live births was 1,025 in Papua as compared to the national average of 350.

The reasons for this high death rate are poverty, a belief in spirits and difficulties caused by having to travel long distances for medical assistance. There is a lack of blood for transfusions and facilities to cope with disorders such as heavy bleeding.

Given that people living in the interior are heavily reliant on gathering food in the forests, pregnant women, regardless of their condition, will sometimes walk long distances to forage for food in the forest and it is at times like these that many women die.

While local clinics for mothers and children are reasonably plentiful in other parts of Indonesia, they are far less prevalent in Papua. In 2005, there were 2,948 local clinics in Papua of which 929 were not

### Liberation

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functioning. Although the number of clinics has since increased to 3,690 in 2006, 1,497 were not functioning.

There are only twelve government hospitals and six private hospitals in Papua, but this is far from adequate, considering the size of the territory. 'More than 90% of *kam-pungs* in Papua have no basic health facilities whatsoever. No doctors, midwives or clinics,' writes Petrus Tekege.

Conditions in the Central Highlands of West Papua are particularly bad. Some districts either have only one doctor or no doctor at all, according to the Provincial Health Service. Because of the re-

moteness, many doctors sent to work there leave before their term ends.

According to the Provincial Health Service, there are 1,500 midwives in Papua, of whom 70% are in the towns. HIV/AIDS became a very serious matter in 2000, when Papua had the largest number of HIV/AIDS sufferers after Jakarta. Three years later, there were 1,454 cases, 244 of whom died. The number of AIDS sufferers is certain to be higher than the official figures.

*The spread of the disease is in part due to the poor health standards while the government has done little to educate people about the risks they face. Nor have they restricted the massage bars and brothels that have sprung up in many places. Drinking alcohol to excess has become widespread among the younger generation and the middle classes, leading to unprotected sex.*

Far too little money is devoted to combating HIV/AIDS. According to the chair-

man of the Papua AIDS Commission, the disease is increasing rapidly in Papua. In October 2008, 319 new cases were reported, bringing the total for Papua to 4,114 reported cases.

'The spread of the HIV/AIDS virus is occurring faster than the efforts being made to curb it. The virus is spreading quickly as there is no vaccine and unsafe sexual intercourse is still taking place.'

### A culture of violence against women

A culture of violence has engulfed the people of West Papua since Indonesia took over the territory in the mid 1960s with the women bearing the brunt of the violence.

According to Papuan tradition, sexual relations are confined to a married couple. This has been seriously eroded with the arrival of outsiders, in particular Indonesians to take charge of the administration, including members of the security forces.

With migrants taking charge of administrative affairs, there has been an influx of Indone-

sian personnel into the interior. Male officials frequently employ local women for household duties many of whom are raped by their employer. 'In this way, the Indonesian government has defiled Papuan cultural values,' writes the author.

An investigation in 1998 showed that during military operations, a number of women who had been left behind when their menfolk fled were raped by soldiers. Many later gave birth, in some cases two or three times.

When troops moved against a group of flag-raisers in Biak, in July 1998, 'many women, included under-aged girls, were raped, even including women who were already pregnant'.

Conditions in West Papua under Indonesian occupation have perpetuated the tradition of women's subordination to men.

*\*Perempuan Women by Petrus Tekege, Jakarta 2007 Carmel Budiardjo writes on behalf of TAPOL. May 2009*



**Have we learned nothing from our follies in Iraq?**

**Do we need to repeat them in Afghanistan?**

**Or Iran?**

**Keith Norman**

**General Secretary**

**Alan Donnelly**

**President**

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