

DEFENSE OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION BY DOMINICAN WOMEN

When I think of Human Rights of women in the Asia-Pacific Region, the story of **Muktar Mai** from Pakistan comes to my mind. She represents the plight of women in some of our countries but at the same time stands out as an ideal for women who strive to defend their rights. Muktar Mai was gang raped as a punishment for an honor crime committed by her brother. Instead of killing herself as was the custom, with great courage she took her rapists to court. Now she runs the first school for girls in her own village. Along with all our Dominican Sisters in the Asia-Pacific Region, I put myself in her story. As women, on the one hand our rights are violated but on the other hand, we possess the courage, will power and endurance to fight for our cause. Our commitment to defend women's rights can be placed in between these two extremes. I can say that **awareness** about women's rights has been created among our sisters especially during these past 20 years or so. But awareness always does not lead to action.

What are the **concrete ways** in which our Dominican sisters are involved in the defense of Women's Rights? While some work on the **grass root level**, a few find their way to **put pressure on those who make decisions**. In the field of **education** our sisters try to inculcate values of human dignity and respect for each person. They create in their students, starting from the Primary classes on, awareness of human rights especially the rights of women and the need to defend them. In High schools and Colleges, they organize different activities: Debates, street plays, speeches, essay writing, short story competitions etc. on various issues of women like dowry deaths, Human trafficking and equality of right for education. In the area of **health care**, some sisters take courage to stand for the rights of the individuals whether in their ordinary every day activities or, in some important current issues. In some of our countries the principle, "first come, first served" is not always respected. It is the poor, the women, the low caste who have to wait for long hours to be attended to, while the rich, the high class, the educated are served right away. A sister who dares to take care of a poor woman first and lets the village landlord wait in line, will have to pay her price.

More and more of our sisters are now taking up their ministries in the **social area**. Teaching women to write their names, sign their signatures, count the money, organize micro credit units etc. have far reaching effects when it comes to defense of women's rights. Some of our sisters organize women to fight for their rights through street plays, public demonstrations, protest marches, lobbying etc. I remember, a few years back when some of our sisters working in a slum organized women to stand up to their husbands against wife-beating. Another group succeeded to get a woman candidate elected from their constituency.

In Vietnam, where under the Communist Government systematic violation of Democracy and Human Rights continue, and where Religious activities, Media etc. are controlled, **Human trafficking and Domestic violence** are the most disgracing problems for women. While Vietnam's

National Assembly has the highest proportion of women representatives compared to any other Asian country, and while it has laws prohibiting gender discrimination and trafficking, poor legal enforcement leaves many women disenfranchised and subject to domestic violence, trafficking, sex slavery, HIV/AIDS, and illiteracy. Our Vietnamese Dominican Sisters try to improve the situation of women in Vietnam by offering:

- 1: Caring and counseling (especially for sex workers, drug addicts, HIV patients, and Domestic violence victims)
- 2: Skills training.
- 3: Literacy and education (especially in Kindergartens and Primary Schools for the poor)
- 4: Source of income (assisting the poor women in seeking works and income)

We admire our sisters and their accomplishment, in spite of the police and local government who control every social activity of the church and religious communities.

Some of our sisters in Taiwan participate in an apostolate for Homeless women and work with a **national organization for women's concerns** called "Sprout". The Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of Remedies have started a **Mission Center for Filipino Migrants in Taiwan**. This center assists not only the Filipinos but people of other nationalities also. It networks with Taiwan and Philippines governments, other non-governmental organizations, the Dominican Family and other religious congregations.

In Australia our sisters are involved with the issues of indigenous Australians, asylum seekers, refugees, human trafficking, interfaith dialogue and development assistance. The Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and Solomon Islands have started **Las Casas Center for Justice Peace and the Care of Creation**. They also have set up Dominican Sisters NILS Program (No Interest Loan Scheme).

Last May I met a Mary knoll sister in Hebron, Israel. Her mission as **Peace Worker** was literally to put herself in between the Palestinians and the Jews when they fight. Can you imagine what it means to be constantly in such a conflicting situation? Luckily the Govt. gives visa only for three months. Otherwise who can survive such a conflicting situation for a longer period of time?

The **Declaration made by the Promoters of Asia-Pacific Dominican Family Justice, Peace and Care of Creation** in October 2006 reads:

"We affirm the loving care and efforts of those sisters and brothers whose ministries are currently addressing issues associated with Migrants, Refugees and Trafficking in the Asia-Pacific Region.

We condemn all forms of human rights violations, particularly human trafficking, and all forms of abuse and unequal treatment of women in the church and society. We especially condemn the abuse and commodification of women and girls for sexual and labor purposes.

We stand in solidarity with the victims of human rights and abuses, especially migrants and refugees and their families, and pledge our supports as they act to regain human dignity".

I am happy that we, the Dominican women are contributing our little share to the vast amount of work that awaits us in the Asia-Pacific region to defend our rights as women. As I explained, some of us work on the grass root level and some others in areas where they can influence policy makers and Government leaders. My own conviction is that if we continue to work on both levels supporting each other, we will create a better future for all women.

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