



Regional and International NGOs strongly condemn the gruesome killing of Indigenous Karbi Girl in Assam, Northeast India

30 April 2021

Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP), International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA), Network of Indigenous Women in Asia (NIWA) and Asia Indigenous Youth Platform (AIYP) strongly condemn the gruesome killing of an Indigenous girl, Sumila Ronghangpi, in Assam, Northeast India. It defies human conscience to have murdered the innocent Indigenous girl who was allegedly tortured, impregnated, and burnt alive to death. She was just 12 years old, employed as domestic help at an affluent, high caste family of mainstream society at Nagaon district in the state of Assam, Northeast India. She comes from West Karbi Anglong district, Kudam Ronghang village, and belongs to the extremely poor Karbi Indigenous community. On the fateful day of 22 April, Sumila Ronghangpi's charred body was discovered by a neighbor who alerted the police. Subsequently, prima facie case was registered, and the victim's employer father and son duo were arrested on the suspicion of murder, which they denied.

Circulated news claims that the post-mortem report did not confirm pregnancy theory and rape, which is contested by many organizations seeking justice for Sumila. The Nagaon Karbi Student's Union (NKSU) has claimed the evidence to prove how the alleged perpetrators procured medicine to terminate pregnancy. NKSU said the witness is ready to depose before the court. They even claimed to have learned from the neighbor of the culprits that this is not the first time, in earlier instances the culprits faced sexual exploitation charges against the maid. The matter was hushed up by influencing authority. The matter should be investigated properly considering these serious allegations to bring out the truth.

Regional and International NGOs strongly condemn this senseless act of violence against the Indigenous girl and demands that culprits be convicted according to their crime, which will also help deter future crimes like this. This horrific incident has thrown light to vulnerable situation of poor Indigenous Peoples, who are the targets of such orchestrated crime. As per the study report from Karbi Human Rights Watch (KHRW)¹, there are around 5000 Karbi young and underage girls working as domestic help in many adjoining districts of Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Council. As alleged by Karbi social and human rights organizations, many of the girls undergo similar abuse and cruelty. Most of the crimes are unreported and muzzled as the poor families and victims are intimidated, and unable to fight legal battles. They become mute spectators of a vicious cycle of exploitation and torture.

It is shared by the parents of the victim, that Sumila was sent off at the age of eight to work as domestic help in return for education, which is not accessible in her village and in the area. This clearly shows the Karbi Anglong Autonomous Territorial Council (KAATC) government has failed to develop

¹ Karbi Human Rights Watch (KHRW), a member organization of AIPP, has taken initial studies on the case and roughly estimated the number of Indigenous Karbi minor girls engaged in domestic maid to be 5000.



education infrastructures in the districts despite more than seven decades of its existence. Due to the lack of opportunities in the areas, young men and women have to look for better pastures elsewhere.

Knowing the situation well, the brokers work in tandem with local people to persuade the parents to send off children to work as domestic help and study with high expectations. Many children are not even allowed to go home and are compelled to serve their masters uninterruptedly. Some even forget their language, and thus unlearn their own cultures and traditions. They come at the age of six to eight years to work as domestic help. This is a pure case of child labour, a punishable Act under Article 24 of constitution of India. Despite laws in place, the perpetrators are exploiting the child labour market conditioned by poverty and ignorance without the fear of laws and authority.

It is only through exemplary punishment that the crime can be stopped, and precedent will be set to thwart the reoccurrence of such inhuman crime. Apart, the awareness raising and the upliftment of economic conditions along with infrastructure development in the Indigenous Peoples' areas will help resolve the problem. The government should address the issues leading to gender-based violence against the Indigenous women and girls and take actions accordingly.

We call upon the state and the council government to:

1. Take a recourse of investigation on all alleged cases and support the victims.
2. Investigate circumstances leading to this awful incident.
3. Award the stringent punishment for the crime through fast-track court.
4. Compensate the victim's family for the loss.
5. Ensure that child labor laws are implemented, and perpetrators are convicted.
6. Accept their accountability for such big no. of underaged Karbi girl's exploitation as maid and design preemptive measures immediately.
7. Develop mechanisms to enforce laws like POCSO Act². (Amended 2012).
8. Ensure access to quality education of the Indigenous/ Tribal children as per the law.

We reiterate our appeal to the authorities to take appropriate measures to stop recurrence of such incidents and take immediate action against the perpetrators and employers of children underaged.

In solidarity

1. Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP)
2. Asia Indigenous Youth Platform (AIYP)
3. Network of Indigenous Women in Asia (NIWA)
4. International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA)

#JusticeforSumilaRonghangpi

² The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 Amended