AFAD Celebrates the 2020 International Women’s Day

8th March, 2020

Manila: It can be argued that enforced disappearance (ED) might very well take on a woman’s face. This year the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) celebrates the International Women’s Day by remembering the collective and individual struggles of women family members of ED victims. These women who bear the burden of having a loved one disappeared are the icons of brave resistance and struggle for survival in the face of overwhelming psychological, social, cultural, and economic challenges.

In patriarchal societies where women have lower social status, are oppressed, and are exploited, EDs further exacerbate an already deplorable situation for the women family members. The disappearance of the male breadwinner exposes these women to the brutal reality that they need to fend for their families while pursuing a tough and seemingly never ending battle for justice. Violence against women continue to be perpetrated at an increasing rate putting women in highly vulnerable situations, especially as the application of laws for women’s protection is limited.

In Asia, gender inequality is common and also acceptable to a certain extent and women family members of the disappeared may face rejection, removal from the in-laws house, and are left to fend for themselves which often pushed them to poverty.

In Bangladesh, women family members of the disappeared have repeatedly faced threats and intimidation at the hands of the State forces, making it increasingly difficult for them to seek justice.

In Indian-administered Jammu & Kashmir (J&K), the Indian state refuses to acknowledge enforced disappearances. J&K has about 1500 half widows who are being denied the right to truth and justice. Legal and moral impunity of Indian armed forces has indefinitely delayed the justice process.

Similarly in Indonesia, families of the disappeared continue to suffer with successive governments failing to criminalise enforced disappearances. Within a social context where gender inequality remains a persistent problem, the situation of women family members of the disappeared becomes precarious.

In Nepal, regardless of the transitional justice process, the compensation coming from the government does not help ensure the families’ sustainability. Most of the families of ED victims remain mired in poverty.

In Pakistan, women family members of the disappeared are often threatened, harassed, and intimidated, especially those whom have been more public with their protests and have campaigned openly for justice for their loved ones. The women are subjected to harassment and bullying both online and offline.

In the Philippines, women have been leading the struggle against EDs. Despite the condescending remarks of President Duterte about women and women human rights defenders, these women continue to act against political repression.
In Sri Lanka, women are at the forefront of actions that demand to know about the whereabouts of the disappeared. But these women’s rights defenders have been facing all forms of intimidation, including sexual harassment for their stand against ED. The hope from the Office of Missing Persons for delivering justice is fast dwindling.

In Timor Leste families are still waiting for the truth about what happened to their loved ones. Women face enormous psychosocial pressures.

In South Korea, female family members of the disappeared experience continuous financial difficulties and mental anguish arising from North Korean abductions. Over 98% of the post-Korean War abductees were male, fishermen and the head of their households. The North Korean government refuses to acknowledge enforced disappearances of South Korean citizens.

Despite all the challenges, women family members of the disappeared have shown that their resolve to fight for truth and justice will not waver. These women have survived and become a force to be reckoned with. AFAD will continue to pursue actions and programmes that will help create an environment where women human rights defenders, coming from the families of the disappeared, continue to grow and thrive. AFAD stands in solidarity with these women and their daily struggles.

Signed by:

Khurram Parvez
Chairperson

Nilda L. Sevilla
Secretary-General

The Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) is a regional federation of human rights organizations working toward a world without desaparecidos. AFAD members are based in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Kashmir, Laos, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Timor-Leste. It advocates truth, justice, redress, reparation, and empowerment for the victims and the reconstruction of the historical memory of the disappeared towards the eradication of enforced disappearances.