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UN Forum on Minority Issues, "Guaranteeing the Rights of Minority Women"

Montagnard - Foundation, INC

Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of our Indigenous Degar women, we are grateful that this opportunity to speak has been extended to us.

Today we would like to speak about the lack of representation of indigenous Degar women in Vietnam's government structures, the causes of this situation and some important consequences.

Degar women are very unrepresented in Vietnam's political structures. Because of discrimination, poverty, lack of educational opportunities and deliberate repression, they are unable to hold even local government positions.

Degar women's barriers to education are a major factor in their inability to gain political or administrative positions in the Vietnamese government. Despite a policy of free education, most Degar parents are still required to pay for all school-related expenses after primary education. These fees are prohibitively expensive for families in the Central Highlands, most of whom have just barely enough income to survive. Girls are often the first to drop out of school because of discrimination and when families cannot afford the fees.

The participation of Degar women in politics is also a result of fear. Degar people experience extreme discrimination as a result of their religion and ethnicity, and are often arrested and subjected to detention and torture for participation in even the most peaceful political activities. Women are particularly vulnerable to such threats.

The lack of political empowerment for Degar women significantly affects their ability to protect their rights. Degar people are often unaware of the human rights they are guaranteed by international instruments and Vietnam's own legislation, and their political exclusion prevents them from taking action at the political level on abuses against them.

This issue particularly affects Degar women and girls given the ongoing campaign of forced sterilization that seems to be explicitly targeting Degar women. Without knowledge of their rights or political empowerment, Degar women are more vulnerable to the coercive methods, including threats of fines or imprisonment, that are used to force women to be surgically sterilized. Several NGOs have reported on the use of forced sterilization policies against ethnic women in Vietnam. Degar women alone have reported over one thousand cases of forced sterilization. A number of women are said to have died after surgery as a result of substandard medical care.

In addition to addressing the poverty and discrimination that block Degar women from education, it is necessary for Degar women be empowered to protect their own rights. We fully support the draft recommendations on political participation, particularly paragraph 12 recommending elimination of language and religious requirements that unfairly exclude minority women. We ask that this section also make mention of the importance of primary education for minority women's political participation, and that it specifically address the role that fear and vulnerability play in preventing minority women living under conditions of state-sponsored violence and repression.

Thank you