

Women and their families in Papua are continuing to be forced out of their homes when their land is cleared for mining purposes and the government does nothing to stop this, the leader of the Papuan People's Assembly said on Wednesday.

"Women are forced to leave their homes. It hurts them so much because they depend on the land to live and eat, find materials for housing and to cook for their families," Hana Hikoyabi said, adding that military officers conducting the land clearing activities had been known to sexually assault Papuan women who refused to move out of their homes.

"They are raped by the military personnel and suffer deep trauma, which is not easily healed," Hana said. "The women's husbands leave them over this and for those who are unmarried, no man wants them."

She said that the government had failed to provide either trauma support or legal aid for these victims of violence and had not done enough to investigate the cases and punish the perpetrators.

"The local communities and the churches are our only helpers. The government does not listen. Nobody from the Women's Empowerment Ministry has helped to empower us in Papua," Hana said, adding that local communities collaborated with nongovernmental organizations to conduct regular visitations and discussions with the victims.

Sometimes the victims were reluctant to share their stories, she said, adding that the struggle for Papuan women was much more complex than women in other provinces because in addition to enduring incidents such as illegal detention, kidnapping or even displacement, their conditions were worsened by Papua's remoteness and the difficulties getting access to good education and development.

"Women's rights remain abandoned in Papua," Hana said.

A resource-rich region that trails most other provinces in terms of development and welfare, Papua has been the scene of a low-level separatist insurgency since the 1960s.

Tensions between indigenous Papuans, settlers and security forces have been a fact of life in Papua since it was incorporated into Indonesia. Much of the conflict stems from a perception of injustice and discrimination by authorities.

Heidi Maeka, who works for a Women's Support Group in Poso, Central Sulawesi, another conflict region, said that women in these regions found it difficult to become economically independent.

"Many of them don't finish school and they lack the skills to support themselves and their

families. They are unable, for instance, to write up a good proposal to start up a small business," Heidi said, adding that their business proposals were often rejected because, even though they might have good ideas, they could not express them in writing.

Her organization, she said, plans to set up an informal school in Papua to provide women with basic education and technical skills to sustain livelihoods, with help from the regional government and a number of nongovernmental organizations.