Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)

Contribution to the discussion on the

Draft General Recommendation on Girls'/Women's Right to Education
(art. 10 of the Convention)

with a focus on

Minority and Indigenous Women's and Girls' Right to Education

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In 2009, MRG published, in collaboration with the UNICEF, a thematic report on right to education for minority and indigenous groups, showing what minority and indigenous children around the world face in their struggle to learn. The report includes many development which are relevant to the discussion on the General Comment, as it describes the mechanisms of exclusion, and points to the intersecting forms of discriminations on the grounds of gender and belonging to a minority or indigenous group. It describes efforts to overcome exclusion so that education is available, accessible, acceptable and adaptable for minorities and indigenous peoples, including minority and indigenous girls and women, and shows how far there is still to go.

*The present submission draws mainly from this report, and from other pieces of work undertaken by MRG. **Most of the statistics and figures were collected in 2009.***

The full report can be downloaded here: http://www.minorityrights.org/7948/state-of-the-worlds-minorities/state-of-the-worlds-minorities-and-indigenous-peoples-2009.html

Introduction

Of the 101 million children out of school and the 776 million adults who cannot read and write, the majority are from ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities or indigenous peoples. Statistics show that minority women and girls are particularly concerned by this phenomenon of exclusion. A 2006 analysis noted that of the 60 million girls not in primary school (based on 2002 figures showing 115 million children then out of school), a full 70 per cent came from ethnic minorities and other excluded groups.

Often, national laws bar or reduce minorities' access to school, or teaching passes over the history or culture of minority groups; further, schooling is often only available in the dominant, official language rather than in mother tongues spoken by minorities, or else personal abuse is heaped on people from minorities by other pupils and even teachers. In most developing countries – but especially in those schools attended by minorities, which tend to be in poorer, more remote areas – overcrowded classrooms, dilapidated buildings, few textbooks, few sanitary facilities and poor teaching are all too common, and are holding back the educational and life opportunities of millions of children.

The marginalization of minorities is never the product of just a single factor. It is often the product of complex forces which affect individuals at particular points in their lives. While factors relating to income and livelihoods have been identified as the important economic causes of exclusion, the cultural and social factors that lead different groups to experience and value education differently are also important explanatory factors.

Overcoming exclusion of minority women and girls in education is key to advance other basic rights, not only for women but also for other members of the society. For instance, education of mothers improves public health, tending to lead to better nutrition, lower fertility, better uptake of childhood immunization and improved knowledge of HIV prevention. In many countries, having a mother with secondary or higher education more than halves the risk of child mortality compared to having a mother with no education. In Bangladesh, having a mother who has completed primary education cuts the risk of children being stunted by 20 per cent. UNESCO also argues that education helps to build people's support for multi-party democracy and to equip populations with more skills to challenge autocracy, and also that it can provide children with the learning needed to better understand complex environmental challenges, such as climate change.

1) **An intersectional issue: access to education for minority and indigenous girls**

This section is a summary of the chapter written for MRG 2009 Annual Report by Kathryn Ramsey entitled 'The gender dimension of minority and indigenous education'

This section will concentrate predominantly on intersectional issues affecting minority and indigenous girls in education because of their disproportionately disadvantaged position.

Although the factors that impact on the education of minority and indigenous girls are intrinsically linked, this section will consider them in three main sections: poverty, discrimination and cultural issues.

1.1) Poverty

When poverty prevents children being educated, the education of boys may be prioritized over that of girls. Communities may see lower benefits in educating their daughters; girls are see as less likely to be able to benefit from a formal job needing literacy or primary school completion. Girls' labour is frequently needed to help the family manage domestic tasks and, the view is taken that, in the longer term, should they get an education and secure better work, that labour will benefit their husband's family rather than benefiting their parents who paid for the schooling.

Though the prioritization of boys' education over girls' is frequently the case in majority communities as well, the higher poverty rate of many minority and indigenous communities means that they are more likely to be forced to make this choice. Minority and indigenous girls are therefore disproportionately affected.

Hunger is also a factor that impacts on minority girls. A UNICEF study in Vietnam found that the need for Bahnar and Khmer girls to find or prepare food for the family contributed to them dropping out of school.

Many minority and indigenous communities live in remote areas. These frequently suffer from higher levels of poverty than the national average and have fewer facilities or services. Therefore, minority children may have further to go to get to school. Bad or non-existent roads may make the journey dangerous, especially during seasonal rains. This may disadvantage minority girls whose parents are unwilling for them to travel long distances alone. Some stereotypes about minority and indigenous women in society as a whole can lead to physical danger for girls from those communities, with severe consequences for their education. Christine Chinkin and Fareda Banda, in [MRG's Gender report](#) in 2004, noted that in southern Africa, perceptions of indigenous San women as inferior, weak and promiscuous lead to violence against them from majority groups. In the Great Lakes region, Batwa women's vulnerability to rape is increased by a widespread myth in the region that sex with a Batwa woman cures backache. So whilst all girls who live further from school are affected by this risk, in many cases, minority girls will face a higher risk due to their perceived low status or specific cultural factors and views about them held by majority community members.

While violence against women is endemic in many, if not all countries, and minority and indigenous women and girls may experience violence from men in their own community, violence, including sexual violence may also be perpetrated against them because of their minority or indigenous identity (particularly in conflict situations). It is frequently used by majority communities to subjugate and exert control over the minority. Sexual violence not only harms the women, it acts as a form of collective humiliation for minority and indigenous men who are perceived to have been unable to perform their traditionally perceived roles of protecting women from the community.

Finally, the widespread impunity which exists for perpetrators of violence against women across many countries is even stronger when the victims are minority and indigenous women and girls, who are thought of as inferior and/or stereotyped as sexually available to dominant groups.

The journey to and from school may be fraught with danger too; girls may face bullying or harassment from their fellow pupils or local men. The threat of this violence contributes to the reluctance of minority and indigenous parents to send their daughters to school. Parents worry

about the consequences of possible violence against their daughters – pregnancy, HIV and the resulting shame these would bring on the family.

Minority girls are frequently enrolled in school later than their male peers, or miss large amounts of schooling and so have to repeat classes. Poverty contributes to this. Therefore minority girls in primary school can be several years older than their class- mates. This has an impact on their self-esteem; it also means they reach puberty by grade 3–5, setting them apart from the group. Lack of adequate sanitation facilities compounds the problem.

1.2.) Discrimination

The experience of minorities and indigenous peoples in the education system is frequently one of discrimination and exclusion. Discriminatory attitudes prevalent in society are also present in schools: teachers and fellow pupils may hold stereotyped ideas about minorities and indigenous peoples; textbooks may reinforce stereotypes by containing racist references or by having zero visibility of minorities, their culture and ways of life.

This can lead to negative treatment of minority and indigenous children, such as low teacher expectations of their abilities or bullying from their peers. Such discrimination can contribute to a decision to drop out, low self-esteem or a negative perception of their own cultures. The forms this discrimination takes may impact differently on girls and boys from minority and indigenous communities.

The 2007 UNESCO report *Education for All by 2015: Will We Make It?* cited a variety of studies worldwide showing that, in general, girls are often marginalized in class and given less attention by teachers, leading to low self-esteem. Stereotypical views of minority communities, combined with these views of girls, have a double impact on minority girls. Negative assumptions about their academic ability may lead to low expectations and therefore a lack of encouragement from teachers. For linguistic minorities this is especially true where the language used in education is not their mother tongue.

1.3) Cultural Issues

There are a number of cultural issues which impact on education for minorities and indigenous peoples. These can be cultural barriers, tensions or dilemmas between the majority education system and minority or indigenous culture that inhibit access to education or make dropping out of school more likely. As with other types of difficulty, there is a gender dimension to these cultural issues which affects and disadvantages minority and indigenous girls and boys differently.

The education system may teach minority and indigenous children that their culture and way of life is backward, wrong or inferior. These factors have particular impact on minority and indigenous girls. Girls are often perceived to be the custodians and transmitters of traditional culture; as such, parental concerns over the curriculum may be stronger for girls.

Poverty, discrimination and cultural barriers: the case of indigenous girls in Kenya

Statistics showing school attendance in Kenya by county (age three years and above), while imperfect, show that girls from regions where minorities live are below the national attendance average (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics). Obvious economic and physical barriers prevent girls from marginalised communities from obtaining quality primary education and transitioning to secondary school, but cultural barriers - coming from within communities – are also a major factor. Early marriages, cultural pressures and expectations on girls all contribute to a very low demand for girls' education from families, teachers, communities and the girls themselves. Reducing inequality of educational opportunities is crucial not only to provide individual girls with the means to overcome poverty and achieve wellbeing: educational success is also key to enabling minorities to advocate for their rights.

The common challenges faced by girls in the Abasuba and Endorois communities include early pregnancies, negative social attitudes regarding the importance of their education, endemic poverty, attitudinal changes after circumcision, as they perceive themselves (and are perceived by community members) as adults and school as an institution for children. Girls from these minority groups live in remote geographic locations that are neglected by government social services. Many girls have to travel great distances to the nearest school, thereby multiplying the risks to their personal security. Long distances combined with high workload of domestic tasks (e.g. care for siblings, fetching water, cooking, washing clothes) mean that there is not enough time in the day for girls' to complete their work as well as to walk to and from and attend school.

It is estimated that only 4% of Suba girls attend secondary school. One of the main reasons for this low percentage is sexual gender-based violence (SGBV). According to a baseline survey on violence against women and girls, sexual violence is the most common in the Suba District, followed by physical violence at 37.2%, while the other forms of violence account for 14.7%. SGBV and poverty, associated with low levels of awareness of their own rights, are the main reasons for an extremely low demand for girls' secondary education .

The Endorois are a minority and indigenous pastoralist community made up of 60,000 people living in the Rift Valley. Endorois girls face problems such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, domestic violence and sexual violence. The expectations of Endorois girls are low, whether in the minds of parents, the girls' themselves, their teachers and employment opportunities are limited.

Both communities feel marginalised and threatened and many community members are defensive of their traditional culture and thus are not open to official or external interventions. Change needs to start from within the community and to work with the few women who have completed their education as role models for younger girls.

2) A positively plurilingual world: promoting mother tongue education

This section is a summary of the chapter written for MRG 2009 Annual Report by Claire Thomas entitled 'A positively plurilingual world: promoting mother tongue education'

Decisions about the language medium used in schools affect most minorities and almost all indigenous peoples. It is these groups who most commonly speak a language other than the prevailing national or majority one. As such, minority and indigenous children are most often affected by the absence of education in their 'home' language, and suffer the most severe consequences; for generations, they are relegated to life on the margins. Very high numbers of children are affected. For example, according to the Institute for Development Studies in the UK, approximately '1.38 billion people speak local languages – languages that are less well-known, without written forms and not used in formal education. This includes an estimated 221 million school-aged children.'

It seems obvious to say that children learn better when they understand and speak the language of the classroom. But currently many children around the world are taught at school in a language that they do not understand either well or at all. This has a direct impact, resulting in lower educational achievement, higher drop-out rates, loss of heritage languages and lower self-esteem for these children.

There is evidence that mother tongue multilingual education throughout the primary school years improves minority children's primary school enrolment, attendance and completion. Although this is an under-researched area, additionally there is some evidence that this link or impact is stronger for girls than for boys.

3) The importance of gender and ethnic data for promoting the right to education

This section is a summary of the chapter written for MRG 2009 Annual Report by Zoë Gray entitled 'The importance of ethnic data for promoting the right to education'

Lack of quantitative and qualitative data is a problem affecting minority and indigenous communities around the world. The information that is available frequently shows lower enrolment rates, higher drop-out rates, disproportionately high disciplinary rates and lower achievements, with the situation usually even worse for minority girls. A clear picture about how different ethnic, religious and linguistic minority girls benefit or are disadvantaged by educational policies and projects is essential to raise awareness about problems and as a starting point to resolve them.

UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) *Global Monitoring Report 2009* projects that 29 million children will remain out of school in 2015 unless all disparities – gender, ethnic, rural and other – are tackled. Amongst the key recommendations the report calls for improved targeting to reduce disparities based on ethnicity and other indicators of disadvantage.