

The gender dimension of minority and indigenous education

Kathryn Ramsay

March 2009 saw a historic sentence handed down in a courtroom in Gujarat, India. Six male professors of a women's college were jailed for life for repeatedly gang raping a Dalit girl studying at the college (see Box, p. 72). India's 167 million Dalits, known as Scheduled Castes (and by the derogatory term 'untouchables'), experience extreme discrimination in all aspects of life. Although the caste system has been legally abolished, violence, abuse, segregation and discrimination still occur against them. According to activists working with Dalits across India, rape is a common occurrence for Dalit girls, and perpetrators are rarely held to account.

Minority and indigenous girls are more vulnerable to this type of violence and problems of reporting because of their membership of an excluded group. They may experience violence at the hands of men from their own community or violence may be perpetrated by men from dominant communities as a form of discrimination, subjugation and control. Their disadvantaged position, as minorities and girls, makes reporting violence, having their reports taken seriously and cases brought against male perpetrators from their own and from other communities, extremely difficult. Impunity is widespread. All this makes the judgment in the case in Gujarat a landmark victory in an ongoing struggle for the right to access safe, quality education for minority and indigenous girls.

MRG's 2004 report *Gender, Minorities and Indigenous Peoples* (hereafter Gender report) defines gender as: 'the ascribed, social nature of distinctions between women and men'. Gender issues do not just concern women; socially ascribed distinctions also apply to men. Equally, intersectional discrimination (discrimination on the basis of both sex and race) can affect minority men and minority women. This chapter will concentrate predominantly on intersectional issues affecting minority and indigenous girls in education because of their disproportionately disadvantaged position highlighted above, and briefly touch on some specific examples for minority boys.

Although the factors that impact on the education of minority and indigenous girls are intrinsically linked, this chapter will consider them in three main sections: poverty, discrimination and cultural issues. It will set the context by highlighting problems affecting minorities in general, or girls in general, before examining in more detail how minority and

Below: A teacher helping a child to learn to read at a community school for San children in Botswana. Giacomo Pirozzi/Panos.

indigenous girls are specifically affected by intersectional issues and suggesting ways these problems could begin to be addressed.

Poverty

It is well documented that poverty is a major factor contributing to children not attending school. Poverty forces people into poor housing, it forces them to live in remote areas and far from schools, and they have to cope with hunger. Many countries charge fees for attending primary school and, even where school fees have been abolished, informal charges such as for books, requirements for children to wear uniforms or the payment of 'incentives' for teachers (which act as supplements to low salaries) prevent poor children attending school.

Minorities and indigenous peoples are among the poorest communities in many countries. This, combined with the other factors discussed in this chapter, means they experience greater difficulties in sending their children to school. The ramifications for minority girls are particularly severe.

When poverty prevents all children being educated, the education of boys may be prioritized over that of girls. Communities may not see any benefit in educating their daughters; girls' labour is frequently needed to help the family and, 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



‘They targeted her’

Manjula Pradeep, executive director of Indian NGO Navsarjan, tells *Leena Patel* about a young Dalit girl brave enough to take her rapists to court

On Friday 6 March 2009, a ground-breaking case was heard in the Fast-Track Magistrate’s Court in the north Indian state of Gujarat. Despite huge pressure from her family and community, and against the norms of Indian society, a young Dalit girl spoke out against six of her professors. They had raped her 14 times over three months as she struggled to complete her teacher training.

Despite the odds posed by centuries of discrimination against Dalits, and against women from the community in particular, the court found in her favour. All six men were sentenced to life imprisonment.

Manjula Pradeep, executive director of Navsarjan, an Indian NGO fighting for the freedoms and rights of Dalits in Gujarat, supported the girl through the court case.

As Pradeep went to the court to listen to the judgment, she was called names and shouted at by the wives and supporters of the accused. But she stayed to hear the court’s decision. She says it was a moving experience. ‘I was so relaxed and so happy I don’t have words.’

The young Dalit girl was a student at the girls-only government Direct Institute of Education Training – Primary Training College (DIET-PTC) in Patan district. The attacks took place both in the college grounds and outside. Two of the rapists were from the Dalit community.

Pradeep explained how the girl’s background and status made her vulnerable. According to Pradeep, ‘They targeted her.’

‘Her father was a labourer and an alcoholic. But she was a very bright girl. She achieved 76 per cent in her twelfth grade exams. She could have been a

doctor, if she wanted, but they are very poor. She decided to be a primary school teacher.

‘Her father asked the school’s professors for help with the fees, as he did not have the money to pay them. He said he was putting the girl in the school, in their care and trust. She was staying in the hostel. She was frequently asked to come and help the professors at lunch times and breaks.

‘The first time the incident occurred, one of the professors asked to see her and there were two professors in the room. One of the professors grabbed her by the hand and the other removed her salwar. She was 17 years old at the time.’

Pradeep said the professors were blackmailing the young Dalit girl, and raped her again and again.

She said: ‘To fight against caste-based violence, the affected Dalit woman has to first face the challenge within the family, then the community and the society at large.’ The girl’s father threatened to commit suicide, and the Dalit community pressured the girl not to go to court. The girl’s father was threatened by a BJP Party member and the village head, who was an upper-caste leader, and the accused side offered bribes through caste leaders.

The girl was cut off from family and community and, said Pradeep, ‘obviously alone – everybody’s eyes were on her’. She was under police protection for 20 days while the trial took place.

The case highlighted that girls were abused at the school over a period of 10 years. Pradeep said: ‘After the filing of a complaint in this incident 58 girls wrote to the Education Department about similar experiences which they had also gone through. The girls who were targeted were from various castes but mainly from the lower castes.’

Pradeep has commented that the ‘rape of Dalit females is a regular occurrence that has largely gone unpunished’ throughout India. But she added that the case and the judgment ‘opened the eyes of many dominant castes’, and ‘the Dalit community has gained faith in the judiciary’.

The girl herself went back to the school to complete her final exams. ■

schooling. MRG’s 2008 report *A Double Bind: The Exclusion of Pastoralist Women in the East and Horn of Africa* highlights that Boran pastoralists in northern Kenya perceive that there are very few opportunities for pastoralist women to secure any paid employment that requires an education; therefore there is little incentive for families to sacrifice the benefits of their daughters’ labour to send them to school. In Vietnam, similar views are held among the Bahnar and J’rai communities, even though they are matriarchal societies. Natal families do not lose their daughters’ labour following marriage because girls do not join their husbands’ families; however, a lack of job prospects means the education of girls is not considered important. One teacher from a J’rai district noted: ‘An ethnic minority student who completed ninth grade could not find any job in the commune ... She got discouraged and dropped out of school ... Even with education, eventually the children would end up working on the field.’

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. One Khmer girl, who had to wait for her mother to return with rice after harvesting it for other people so the girl could cook for the family said, ‘The teacher asked [why I was late] and I answered that we didn’t have rice to cook any earlier in the day, so I didn’t come to school.’ She dropped out of school because of this. Batwa boys in the Great Lakes region of Africa may be given priority over their sisters in the amount of food they receive. Batwa girls go to school hungry and consequently are less able to concentrate.

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.

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 classmates. 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. UNICEF noted that in Vietnam, ‘J’rai girls often enter school late, and thus, by the time they reach lower secondary school, studying at a school without toilets was a great barrier that made them feel uncomfortable and contributed to their drop out.’ Minority girls may therefore drop out at the same age and for the same reasons as other girls, but will have completed fewer years of primary schooling.

Economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to education as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), must be implemented by states to ‘the maximum extent of their available resources’ (Article 4). This recognizes that immediate full implementation of the right to education for all is unrealistic, especially for poor countries; however, states are legally required to continuously improve the situation.

Minority and indigenous girls may suffer acute embarrassment about their family’s poverty, the low quality of their clothes or their difficulties catching up following periods of absence from school when they have to work, which affects drop-outs (see Box, p. 76).

Strategies

A wide variety of initiatives could be taken to improve the access to education of minority and indigenous girls affected by poverty. A thorough examination of the barriers, with the effective participation of the community, especially the affected girls, is needed to ensure that any measures are appropriately targeted and will have the desired effect. When asked for their ideas, the minority communities taking part in the UNICEF study in Vietnam suggested a range of schemes: providing stipends to girls for buying books, notebooks or for paying fees; awarding scholarships to high-achieving girls to continue in higher grades of schooling with the hope they would provide role models for younger girls; and improving school facilities, including sanitation.



Left: Heena (not her real name) teaches young children from her village in Madhya Pradesh, India. A Dalit, forced into prostitution at the age of 12 by her parents, she has recently started studying as well as teaching. *Atul Loke/Panos.*

majority language before entering school. For example, in Vietnam, although minorities have the right to receive mother tongue instruction in primary schools, and efforts are being made to improve the provision of bilingual education, for many H'mong children the only schools available use Vietnamese as the language of instruction. H'mong boys may accompany their fathers in social and communal activities, thus exposing them to the Vietnamese language before they enrol in school, whereas H'mong girls tend to help their mothers with agricultural work and housework and do not have the same chance to learn.

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. MRG's Gender report 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.

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. It is in this climate of stereotypes, violence and impu-

nity that minority and indigenous girls go (or try to go) to school.

Those stereotypes may make minority and indigenous girls vulnerable to violence at school from those who are supposed to protect and educate them (see Box, p. 72). Fellow pupils may also target minority or indigenous girls. An Amnesty International report into school safety highlighted the case of a 14-year-old Muslim girl in Canada who was sexually assaulted at school by male students who allegedly targeted her because they thought that, as a member of a minority, she would be less likely to report the attack to the authorities.

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. A 16-year-old Dalit girl reported being attacked by dominant-caste boys from her class on her way to school. They grabbed her and tried to drag her into the bushes 'to teach her a lesson' for touching the water pitcher at school the day before. ('Untouchability practices', such as refusing to allow Dalits to touch water or food utensils used by other castes, have been banned in India; however, occurrences are widely reported, especially in rural areas.) She was lucky that her screams alerted a passer-by and the boys ran away; however, after the incident she stopped going to school.

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. One H'mong mother said: 'I only want to let my sons go to school. If girls go to school and get pregnant, I'd be very ashamed.' In many countries pregnant girls are prohibited from going to school. A girl, particularly one from a stigmatized minority, who became pregnant following rape, would be highly unlikely to be able to complete her education.

Gender stereotypes not only affect minority and indigenous girls, minority boys are also particularly disadvantaged by some gendered ethnic stereotypes against them. In the UK, although the gap is narrowing, Afro-Caribbean boys achieve lower results than Afro-Caribbean girls or any other ethnic group. Diane Abbot MP reported to the UN Forum the 'possibility that Black children – particularly boys – are excluded from school more than their peers as

However, monitoring of the implementation and impact (both intentional and unintentional) of any programme is essential to ensure that the affected communities are reached. In India's federal system, states may make a variety of provisions for poor Dalit children through financial schemes, scholarships and reductions in fees, to help them attend school. Some of these provisions are general schemes for talented poor children and others are reserved for Scheduled Castes. The NGO National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) cited a case where a Dalit girl discovered that dominant-caste teachers had given scholarship money that was due to be given to Dalit students, including her, to dominant-caste children. She approached the dominant-caste headmaster to ask for her scholarship, was beaten for daring to speak out and suspended from school for a month.

Discrimination

The experience of minorities and indigenous peoples in the education system (as outlined earlier in this book) 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. 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 culture. 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.

Minority and indigenous children may be perceived as stupid if they struggle to understand the language of instruction. Minority girls may have had fewer opportunities to be exposed to and learn the

'We both share this one pen'

A report brings home the impact of discrimination in Vietnam. By *Karen Emmons*

The national primary enrolment rate of children in Vietnam stands at more than 95 per cent. But there are large numbers of children, and particularly girls, in ethnic minority areas whose absence from a classroom is conspicuous. Among some ethnic groups, rates have been only 40–70 per cent; and, worse, lower secondary enrolment can be as low as 20 per cent. The difference between girls' and boys' enrolment rates in those areas is as much as 20 per cent.

In 2006, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training asked UNICEF and UNESCO to carry out collaborative research among four ethnic groups – Bahnar, H'mong, J'rai and Khmer – in three provinces (north, central and south Vietnam). The children's testimony revealed the details of difficulties they deal with each day. Hunger: 'Sometimes I do not eat for two to three days.' Bullying: 'They teased me and said I'm very ugly', 'Boys often write nonsense on the back of my shirt and even hit me.' Lack of resources: 'The teacher loaned me a pen. I study in the morning, my older sister studies in the afternoon, and we both share this one pen', 'When [my one uniform] got wet in the rain, I stayed home or wore my own

clothes. I asked Mother for money, and Mother said, "Mother does not have money. You have to work and earn money to buy your own things."' The inability to communicate: 'My younger sibling studies in grade three but still cannot speak Vietnamese.'

Research was conducted by the Research Centre for Ethnic Minority Education from January to May 2006. The report gave evidence from 79 focus group discussions, in-depth interviews with 62 girls and 24 boys (both in and out of school) and observations of 42 classrooms. It included statements and solutions from parents, teachers, community leaders and local officials. It was the first time a government education study directly interviewed children, using a participatory approach.

To help the young people and parents rank their barriers and propose solutions, teams of five researchers used sorting cards and a problem/solution matrix. Local minority people were trained as translators, with instructions to retell responses honestly and avoid personal judgement. The questionnaire and other approaches were first tested among two ethnic minority communities for appropriateness. Changes were needed: questions were too general or not friendly, or salutations were out of line with local custom.

Each ethnic group identified five primary barriers to girls' education: economic and financial, the need to work, the poor quality of teaching and learning, inadequate school infrastructure, and parents' and girls' perceptions of an education's value to girls. The findings also showed these barriers ranked differently in importance for each ethnic group, indicating a need for contextual responses. For example,

the economic and financial barrier was the most important for three of the four groups. The report describes many not-surprising issues such as lack of food, money, nice clothes and bicycles for getting to school over distances of up to 23 km. There also are major language difficulties, issues of caring for siblings and wanting to help parents work, bad teacher behaviour, security concerns in boarding facilities, early marriage and gender discrimination, as well as a disconnection between education and future needs. The most recurring theme throughout is children's embarrassment about what they lack.

The report's final recommendations include immediate strategies for enabling a community, stipends or elimination of direct costs, boarding and sanitation facilities, and new secondary schools. Longer-term strategies include support to school leaders, child-centred and culturally appropriate teaching, safe learning environments, bilingual education, gender-sensitivity training, ethnic minority teachers, vocational education and microfinance schemes.

In October 2008, 40 policy makers discussed the findings. They vowed to use existing policies to lighten the burden on ethnic minority girls, and called for a specific policy that protects their right to an education. They pledged to finalize a decree for mother tongue learning from pre-school through higher learning. One participant said: 'Many cases mentioned in the study broke our hearts, as we have marginalized those disadvantaged children.' ■

and experiences of dominant groups are included. Teachers need to be equipped to challenge intersectional discrimination and stereotypes that negatively impact on minority and indigenous students whenever they occur.

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.

An education that is rooted in their experience and relevant to their lives is more likely to motivate and inspire children. The education provided in state-run schools may not be relevant to the lives and cultures of minorities and indigenous peoples. In some cases, curricula designed by the majority may ignore the history and culture of minorities, sometimes through a government policy of assimilation. In other cases, the culture of the minority may be so different from that of the majority that what is taught may be alien to minority children. 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. A district education officer in Uganda said of Karamojong pastoralists: 'In Karamoja, parents believe that if their daughters attain formal education they will become less competent wives, prostitutes, or run off to marry non-Karamojong men who will divert them from the Karamojong way of life.'

In some cases, restrictions imposed by states on cultural practices can force minority girls to choose between their culture and gaining an education. The ban in France on the wearing of visible religious symbols in schools is phrased in neutral terms but disproportionately affects Muslim girls who wish to wear a hijab. France's last report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination

a result of some form of institutional racism: being assumed to be more violent/disruptive/unruly than their peers'.

Strategies

States have an obligation to ensure the elimination of discrimination in education – both direct discrimination (for example, excluding children from a school because they are minorities) and indirect dis-

crimination (where, for example, an apparently neutral provision has a disproportionate negative impact on minorities or indigenous peoples). Legislation in line with international principles, which defines and outlaws discrimination, is imperative.

Specific strategies to eliminate discrimination against minority and indigenous girls include the training of teachers on anti-discrimination and the particular needs of minority and indigenous girls.

Procedures should be put in place for complaints of discrimination to be investigated impartially and disciplinary measures taken against perpetrators of discrimination or violence, whether they are teachers or fellow pupils.

Revision of textbooks is needed to ensure the removal of discriminatory references and the inclusion of minority and indigenous contributions and concerns in the same way as the historical narrative



Left: For 20 years, the Masai residents of the Highland town of Dol Dol have claimed that soldiers from the nearby British army camp have sexually abused their women, yet no soldier has ever been punished. *Sven Torfinn/Panos.*

tion. According to the National Committee on Traditional Practices of Ethiopia, rates of marriage by abduction are as high as 92 per cent in one province, the Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Region. Where a man's family does not have enough money to pay a 'bride price' to a girl's family it is customary for him to forcibly abduct her, rape her and then afterwards negotiate to pay a small amount to the girl's family so he can marry her. Adolescent girls are particularly vulnerable to abduction on their way to and from school. Few school-age girls who are abducted return to school afterwards. Fear of abduction can also lead to girls dropping out of school.

The UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women highlighted that in Iran a Kurdish man decides, 'whether or not his daughter, sister or spouse attends school ... For this reason, the literacy rate of Kurdish women and girls, particularly in the rural areas is either the lowest or one of the lowest in the country.' These strict social codes hinder outsiders (including state officials) from addressing Kurdish girls' education.

But barriers to the education of minority and indigenous girls can be the result of multiple factors. Bedouin girls in the Negev region of southern Israel have a drop-out rate of 77 per cent in some of the 'unrecognized villages' (much of the Negev was declared state land between 1948 and 1966, with settlement on this land declared illegal; around half the Bedouin population live in 39 villages which remain unrecognized by the Israeli government). The UN Forum in 2008 heard how these 'unrecognized villages' have no basic services such as electricity or drinking water, and there is no high school anywhere nearby. Bedouin culture requires girls to be accompanied by a relative when leaving their villages and they should not study with or be in the company of unknown boys. This means that the long journey to the nearest school is a great obstacle and leads to the high drop-out rate of Bedouin girls.

The multiple factors impacting on the education of these girls must be examined; it cannot simply be assumed that the Bedouin restrictions on girls'

movements are to blame. The reasons for a lack of schools locally, or in areas where girls would be able to travel, should also be examined. As discussed above, fear of violence perpetrated by members of other communities may also be an issue. There is an obligation on the state to protect minority girls, punish perpetrators of violence and provide access to quality education.

Law and strategies

States have a duty to protect women and girls from practices that violate their rights whether the practices are carried out by a majority or a minority community. However, balancing this with the right to identity can be a particularly difficult area for both governments and minorities. The UN Declaration on Minorities (UNDM) provides guidance on the issue (the UNDM is not legally binding; however, it was adopted by consensus which means that no state objected to its provisions). Minorities have the right to protect and develop their culture except under two circumstances: where specific practices are in 'violation of national law' and where they are 'contrary to international standards'. The reference to national law is problematic, but it is clear that it would be meaningless if states were permitted to adopt whatever laws they wished against the cultural practices of minorities. Prohibitions on cultural practices must be based on reasonable and objective grounds. 'Contrary to international standards' means that states are free to (and should) prohibit practices that violate other international human rights standards.

But states may not use provisions permitting them to prohibit harmful cultural practices in order to prohibit whole cultures on the grounds that a practice violates human rights norms; the restrictions must be on the specific practices. Neither may they act in a discriminatory manner, prohibiting harmful practices in minority communities while ignoring those of the majority. Legislation is needed to prohibit specific practices in violation of human rights norms – but legislation alone will not be sufficient to end these practices. For example, in Ethiopia, the government has set the legal age for marriage as 18 and outlawed marriage by abduction; however the practice continues. The most effective methods of eradicating harmful practices require the cooperation of all sections of the affected community and are implemented in a way that is non-

Against Women (CEDAW) stated that at the start of the school year when the ban was introduced, of the 639 children wearing religious symbols, 626 were Muslim girls. During that school year, 47 children were expelled from school because they did not comply with the ban (three Sikh boys and 44 Muslim girls) and 96 others left the state education system to circumvent the ban, moving to distance-learning courses or private schools, or leaving education completely. The choice they were left with was to give up a cultural practice, to leave education or to move to a form of education outside the state system where they would effectively be segregated because they do not have the opportunity to mix with children of other backgrounds.

Restrictions on cultural practices designed to regulate the education system must not discriminate (either directly or indirectly) against minorities or indigenous peoples, and international law does not permit states to adopt any restrictions they choose.

For example, restrictions on religious practices must conform to standards on freedom of religion. Any restrictions must be 'prescribed by law' and 'necessary to protect public safety, order, health, or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others'. States also need to monitor the effects of the restrictions to ensure that minorities and indigenous peoples are not suffering discrimination by being disproportionately affected.

Cultural restrictions placed on them by their own communities can also make education more difficult for minority or indigenous girls, and in certain cases these can be harmful and also violate their other rights, for example, female genital mutilation (FGM) or early or forced marriage (which also occurs in majority communities). Girls do not usually return to school following FGM as they are considered ready for marriage.

Among a number of ethnic groups in Ethiopia there is a traditional practice of bride abduc-

threatening to the overall cultural identity of the community. For example, states may use the education system to encourage eradication of a specific cultural practice affecting minority or indigenous girls. However, without the cooperation of the community, it may result in more girls being withdrawn from school by parents who are fearful of the school changing their daughters' opinion of the practice and thereby losing their culture.

Minority or indigenous communities experiencing discrimination or marginalization may perceive legitimate state concern over specific cultural practices that violate human rights norms as a further attack on them. There may be a negative reaction from the community (or from community leaders who tend to be men) to what they feel is state interference or pressure. However, no culture is homogeneous – majority or minority – and very often there are individuals or groups within a community who do not participate or are working to eradicate harmful practices. When minority and indigenous women refuse to conform to cultural practices that violate their rights and/or work to eradicate them, they very often face resistance or hostility from both men and women in their community. MRG's 2008 report on Pastoralist women highlighted the case of a woman from the Sabin community (one of the very few groups in Uganda which still practise FGM) who avoided FGM by staying with relatives. She tried to participate in politics and was told by community leaders she was still a 'child' and not to waste her time. Women (and also men) who actively work to stop harmful practices might be told that by speaking out, they are giving the government and the majority more reasons to attack their community. The arguments used are often that it is more important to secure the rights of the group first before addressing other 'less important' issues relating to women's rights. They may be accused of pandering to the majority or aiding assimilation by trying to change a cultural practice that is seen as a cornerstone of the culture. They may even be threatened or suffer from violence. In Sierra Leone, where most communities practise FGM and it is estimated that 94 per cent of women aged 15–49 have undergone it, one campaigner has received death threats, been threatened with machetes and had over 100 people protesting outside her house. According to media reports, four female Sierra Leonean journalists were abducted by a pro-FGM

group, stripped and made to march through the streets naked simply for reporting on an anti-FGM campaign.

States, NGOs and community groups need to be aware of the diversity of opinions within minority and indigenous communities. They should be sensitive to, and supportive of the difficulties faced by women from those communities who are working to eradicate harmful practices.

Conclusions

Though the experiences of the minority and indigenous girls highlighted above represent a fraction of the world, they are illustrative of the problems faced by many. The serious shortage of information about these issues means that the day-to-day reality faced by minority girls remains hidden and is a severe barrier to addressing their situation. Governments and development agencies need to know about the realities of their lives and understand the interlinkages between the various contributing factors in order to ensure that efforts to improve the situation are effective. Without adequate data and analysis, programmes may not help get minority and indigenous girls into school. For example, a cursory examination of a situation might show the most obvious reason for minority girls not being in school to be the poverty of the family. As a result the government may set up a scheme to provide income supplements for poor minority families; however, the most important factor for that community may actually be the distance from the minority area to the school and related safety concerns. Therefore the income supplement scheme would be ineffective and minority girls would remain unable to access education.

While legislation against discrimination is vital, it is not enough to ensure protection. Effective implementation is necessary, as are specific policies and programmes designed to reach long-disadvantaged minority and indigenous girls. The policies that are most likely to succeed will work at a number of levels, recognizing the barriers to participation that minority girls face at all levels of society. Working directly with the excluded minority and indigenous girls themselves, in order to ensure a full understanding of their experience and what they feel, is necessary to address the situation.

Parents and the local community (recognizing that no community is homogeneous and that 'community leaders' may or may not be fully rep-

resentative of the group) should also be consulted. Participation by schools (teachers, managers and other students), with local government and other relevant local organizations such as NGOs, is essential, and with the national government and other national or international organizations (education bodies, teachers unions, UN agencies and NGOs).

A 15-year-old Barwa girl in Burundi said, 'School is very important because when you have been, you have a better life, better health.' All minority and indigenous girls have the right to go to school, but as this chapter has shown, they struggle to access it. The situation of these girls, who face double discrimination, requires urgent attention if the balance is to be redressed, and they are to take their equal place in society. ■