

Preface

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Patriarchal violence affects women from all walks of life, in every country, and every community. It is the ultimate manifestation of gender inequality, committed by family members, partners, state and non-state actors. It also serves to sustain women's subordination to an unequal gender order, and violate their right to bodily integrity and the enjoyment of the full range of their human rights. Violence directly or indirectly limits women's and girls' freedom of movement, access to employment, education and healthcare, and participation in political, civic and economic life. Women in all societies continue to under report the physical, sexual and emotional abuse they experience because of shame, fear of reprisal or of being blamed for the abuse (as they know all too well that the police will do little to help them), or because they do not recognize that what is happening to them constitutes violence and a violation of their human rights.

While gender-based discrimination and violence occur universally, gender relations do not exist in a vacuum. Intersections of various systems of inequality and domination create diverse subject positions for women whose experiences are shaped by their ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities, as well as by other factors such as age, (dis)ability, geographical location, HIV status, and sexual orientation, therefore, creating layers of discrimination for some women. *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011* includes compelling depictions of the experiences of women belonging to marginalized and dispossessed populations, who are often uprooted from their lands and communities due to discriminatory government policies, the impact of armed conflicts, and the actions of private social, political and economic interest groups.

During my fact finding missions to different countries as the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, I all too often witnessed how 'minority', including indigenous and in many instances migrant women, faced high risk of multiple forms of violence with little or no access to support services and justice. Minority women stand at the intersection of gender and racial/ethnic inequality; they are discriminated against because they are women and because they are members of a marginalized group. As members of a minority group, they may be assaulted by members of the majority population, and / or by

agents of the state.

In my discussions with women in the North Caucasus in the Russian Federation in 2006, I heard accounts of Chechen and other minority women being targeted by the authorities, as they assumed more prominent roles in their communities (as men were increasingly absent, due to forced disappearances or terrorist activity). Muslim women wearing headscarves were particularly stigmatized and subjected to strip searches and arbitrary detention. In the North Caucasus and other conflict zones, reports of rape and sexual assault of minority women and the impunity with which it occurs is alarming. Similarly, the treatment of women in detention because of their group affiliation or alleged involvement in terrorist activity often amounts to ill-treatment and torture. Such assaults, in turn, leave women in danger of further abuse and ostracism from within their own communities, where due to a rigid, patriarchal morality code they are accused of having 'dishonoured' themselves and their families.

In other instances, where women are not specifically targeted on the basis of their minority or indigenous identity, the social, economic, political and often geographical marginalization of a particular minority group can leave women belonging to such a group disproportionately vulnerable to exclusion, exploitation and abuse. For example, some hill tribe populations in northern Thailand have no legal status, meaning they cannot access education and employment opportunities, or make use of public health services. Lack of citizenship rights combined with socio-economic marginalization makes women and girls from these hill tribes easy prey for sex traffickers. Elsewhere, female migrant domestic workers are often extremely vulnerable to physical, sexual and psychological abuse at the hands of their employers, due to their isolation, and because their employment and immigration status are dependent on their employers. In Canada, indigenous women are found to be three times more likely to be HIV positive than non-indigenous women, in part as a result of the high levels of sexual violence experienced by indigenous women.

Minority women are also at risk of violence from within their own communities. Such violence is often justified on the basis of 'culture' or 'tradition', ignoring both that certain harmful practices may in

fact be recent developments to subdue women, and that they serve the interests of dominant members of the group. This risk is compounded by the fact that redress and support services for these women may not be available or accessible. In Guatemala, despite being a numerical majority, the indigenous population is excluded from the mainstream institutions and denied access to the resources of the wider society. Indigenous women in particular face multiple exclusions and discrimination.

During my visit to the country in 2004, women's rights activists told me that levels of gender-based violence within indigenous communities are very high. Yet, the remote, rural locations of many indigenous settlements and language barriers make it difficult for indigenous women to escape abusive relationships and lead independent lives. Women in the North Caucasus reported that pressure to maintain community cohesion, as well as total lack of trust in the authorities made it virtually impossible for women to report domestic abuse, despite its high prevalence levels. Similarly in Sweden, Saami women rarely report violence or seek help from mainstream Swedish institutions, as they see such institutions as alien to their culture. Immigration policies may also make it difficult for minority women to access help if they are victims of gender-based violence. During my missions to Sweden and the Netherlands, I found that some migrant women remained trapped in violent relationships, either because they were undocumented migrants and feared deportation if they went to the police, or because their immigration status was dependent on their spouse.

Empirical and anecdotal evidence from around the world, including testimonies I have personally received as the UN Special Rapporteur reveal that minority women confront many challenges, which by their nature are intersectional and multifaceted. As a result, these women face a dual task. They may be seeking to defend their rights as members of an excluded group within a dominant society with its repressive or indifferent state apparatuses, discriminatory laws and institutions and prejudiced public opinion. At the same time, they may be questioning and resisting static, patriarchal perceptions of culture and tradition within their own communities, which are used to justify gendered subordination and violence. Ultimately, minority and indigenous peoples' struggle for social

Right: A girl from the Hmong minority, Laos.
Eric Lafforgue.

justice on a human rights platform will only be legitimate and therefore successful, if human rights problems within these communities, in particular violence and discrimination against women, are also acknowledged and addressed.

Minority women have not been passive in the face of these challenges. They have been developing strategies to counter public and private forms of discrimination individually and collectively. Awareness-raising programmes and other projects implemented in remote communities are making an impact in supporting women's empowerment and their mobilization for concerted action in their quest for equality, security and dignity for themselves as well as for their communities. In so doing, these women are facilitating dialogues between the various human rights movements and the global women's movement, linking their particular concerns with other struggles.

Failure to recognize the intersectional nature of systems of oppression and integrate a racial and gender perspective when analyzing indigenous women's status will ultimately result in further reinforcing their subordination to both patriarchy and racism. Evidence shows that greater autonomy for minority/indigenous communities does not necessarily result in enhancing the rights of women in these communities, and that gender equality strategies designed in a vacuum do not work. Therefore, in addressing the status of indigenous and minority women it is essential to identify racial elements of gender discrimination, as well as the gendered elements of race discrimination. The recently established United Nations entity for gender equality and women's empowerment – UN Women –provides an opportunity for revisiting our vision for gender equality to better respond to both the universality and the particularity of women's realities.

It is with great pleasure that I present this volume to the reader. I am confident that it will enhance our understanding of the intersectional nature of gendered discrimination and violence, and contribute to the ongoing struggle for their elimination. ■

