

Minority and
indigenous women
and the Millennium
Development Goals

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Dolores Fernandez is a leader among the Roma community in Spain. She has struggled for decades alongside other Roma across Europe to secure dignity and equality. But she has carried more weight on her shoulders than her male counterparts. In her words:

'Our fight has two fronts: at home, we are fighting to get [Roma] women to study and have freedom. We also have to raise awareness about our problems and needs with different government bodies so that these are taken into account. In addition, we have to continue carrying out our family obligations (i.e. caring for our husbands, parents and children) that we know we cannot abandon. [...] We have fought a lot, many times on our own. We have had little support from non-[Roma] women's organizations, institutions in general, Romani organizations and sometimes even our own families.'

Her words, recorded in a 2007 report by the European Roma Rights Centre, are echoed by minority and indigenous women activists across the continents, and show clearly that women and girls from minority and indigenous groups face challenges on several fronts. Discrimination, domestic expectations and cultural or religious constraints are among the major factors that have resulted in lower levels of education, lower wages and employment, higher rates of maternal mortality, and greater poverty for these women and girls.

The Millennium Development Goals

Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education

Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women

Goal 4: Reduce child mortality

Goal 5: Improve maternal health

Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability

Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development

These elements conspire to diminish the chances that minority and indigenous women and girls have to benefit from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Although development actors will sometimes acknowledge such challenges exist, there is an assumption that general or gender-specific measures will offer solutions. The evidence presented here will show that assumption to be misguided, and will present some suggestions for urgently needed reform, to ensure the full realization of the MDGs for minority and indigenous women and girls.

Gender and the MDGs

The MDGs were adopted in 2000 at the United Nations (UN) Millennium Summit. They are a set of commitments by states to address pressing development concerns by the year 2015. There are eight goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators. Although many of the issues included in the MDGs are relevant in both Northern and Southern states, broadly speaking, Southern state actors are implementing domestic MDGs plans, while Northern states are prioritizing the MDGs in their overseas development assistance, but not domestically. All states are invited to submit regular reports on progress towards realizing the goals.

The particular challenges faced by women and girls in achieving development outcomes are given special attention in the MDGs. Most prominent is Goal 3, to promote gender equality and empower women, followed by Goal 5, to improve maternal health. The true measure of the MDGs, however, is in the concrete targets that states have set, and the indicators used to assess progress. In examining the targets within each goal, there is evidence of a gender-aware approach, but also of limited aspirations. For example, Goal 3 has far-reaching intentions, but only one target is set specifically to eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015. The indicators for Goal 3 include measuring the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments, and yet no commitment was agreed to make this an official target for achieving gender equality. Moreover, of the 60 indicators, only 4 explicitly call for collection of disaggregated data by sex: 2.3, 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 (5.1 on rates of maternal mortality has been excluded because it only requires data collection on women). The official list of

MDG indicators states that 'all indicators should be disaggregated by sex and urban/rural as far as possible', although this practice is not strongly evidenced in the MDG reports.

From the perspective of women's human rights, the MDGs fall far short. Key issues like violence against women, lack of equal political participation and non-discrimination in access to land, financial services and inheritance rights are among the many human rights obligations of states that do not get full or even partial attention. Goal 5 on maternal mortality is reportedly the MDG where global progress has been slowest. Global crises in the financial sector and affecting the environment have increased women's hardship: as unemployment and food prices have risen, many women have had fewer resources to realize their own and their families' basic economic and social rights. The disproportionately low number of women in political and financial decision-making positions has given them less power to oppose these harsh realities and inequalities.

Minority and indigenous women and girls and the MDGs

Minority and indigenous women and girls across the world experience many of the same forms of discrimination, violence, abuse, exclusion and vulnerability that women and girls from majority groups face. Their identity as minorities or indigenous peoples and as minority or indigenous *women*, however, creates a number of particular barriers to equality that need to be addressed, including within MDGs programmes.

Minority and indigenous women and girls face intersecting discrimination, that is: discrimination on the basis of their national, ethnic, religious or linguistic identity; discrimination on the basis of their sex; and, in many cases, discrimination on the basis of their low economic status. They face discrimination from both outside and within the various identity groups to which they belong. For example, minority women can face discrimination from some women's organizations led by women from majority groups. Minority and indigenous women also face gender discrimination from members of their own cultural or religious communities. Discrimination can also manifest itself in different spheres of activity for minority and indigenous women: for example, women may not face discrimination in the home but may at the

village level or the national level, as regards their participation in society or governance and decision-making. These various aspects of discrimination compound to put minority and indigenous women into deeper levels of poverty and exclusion.

Overcoming poverty

Goal 1 is to eradicate extreme poverty. Although it is increasingly common to find gender-disaggregated poverty figures, further disaggregation by minority or indigenous identity is less visible. Poverty surveys consistently show disproportionately higher levels of poverty for minority groups but women can experience further disparities. One dataset (used in an article by Suzanne Duryea and Maria Genoni published by the Inter-American Development Bank) for Bolivia, Brazil, Guatemala and Peru shows that indigenous or Afro-descendant women consistently earned less than their male counterparts and considerably less than non-indigenous, non-Afro-descendants, even among the poorest workers (measured as those earning less than US \$1 per hour). For example, 67 per cent of Afro-Brazilian women earned less than US \$1 per hour, compared to 60 per cent of Afro-Brazilian men and 43 per cent of white women; in Guatemala, 81 per cent of indigenous women earned less than US \$1 per hour, compared to 59 per cent of non-indigenous women and 70 per cent of indigenous men.

High rates of poverty among minority groups are influenced greatly by the precarious nature of minority and indigenous women's employment opportunities. Goal 1, target 1b aims to 'Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people.' Minority and indigenous women are more prevalent in low-wage and informal sector work where labour rights are not enforced and where social security safeguards rarely exist. They commonly rely on jobs as domestic workers or agricultural labourers and/or migrate in search of work. A study by the Open Society Institute quoted in a recent Plan International report found that '54 per cent of Roma women in Romania worked informally in jobs that provided no benefits or formal work agreements'. In Guatemala, the World Bank reports that the proportion of indigenous and Afro-descendant women in non-agricultural wage labour is only one-fifth of that recorded for women from the majority groups. In Peru, only 4 per cent

of indigenous female workers have social security coverage compared to 10 per cent of indigenous male workers, 19 per cent of non-indigenous female workers and 26 per cent of non-indigenous male workers, as reported by Duryea and Genoni.

Securing wage labour outside the home can be particularly difficult for minority and indigenous women who often face greater burdens of 'time poverty' than other women. Research in South America by Claudia Piras, also published by the Inter-American Development Bank, shows that poor indigenous and Afro-descendant women 'have lower levels of schooling, higher rates of fertility and are more likely to lack access to electricity or running water, making child rearing and housework responsibilities more time consuming'. A study on pastoralist women in Tanzania indicates that the effect of declining viability of pastoralism as a livelihood has forced more men to migrate for work, leaving women as effective heads of household. This entails more work and responsibility, but rarely means increased rights and decision-making power, because, for example, they lack inheritance rights and have only limited rights regarding livestock.

Unequal access to land and inheritance rights severely limits the economic independence of women, making them more vulnerable to economic or social shocks. In many communities, customary law has governed the allocation of such resources, to the detriment of women. Irene Naguda, a representative from the Uganda Coalition for Crisis Prevention and a pastoralist from Karamoja speaking at the UN Forum on Minority Issues (December 2010), reported that women, 'are economically discriminated [against] within their community due to cultural domains of power limiting them from inheriting resources and assets despite national legislation enforcing equitable inheritance of property'. Men within communities express understandable fears that granting inheritance rights to women would make it easier for outsiders to appropriate land through marriage. In response, women advocate for a community-based solution and legislation to protect traditional lands that do not depend on gender-discrimination in inheritance or land rights. For example, one study from South Africa showed how indigenous women used appeals to custom and provisions of the Constitution in combination to assert claims to land under customary law that had traditionally

been allocated only to men, suggesting that shifting patterns to more female-headed families justified women's claims to these rights. The results varied, with some communities recognizing such rights *de facto* but only when a male relative retained customary title of the land, while others had made allocations to older women with children.

Accessing education

Education is widely seen as a tool for overcoming women's poverty and for improving health and education outcomes for children. Two of the MDG targets are focused on gender parity in access to education (Goal 2, target 2 and Goal 3, target 3). Girls from minority and indigenous groups often have less access to education and experience more marginalization and even abuse at school.

Data on educational attainment appears to be the most readily available data disaggregated by gender and minority or indigenous status. The MDG Report from Laos, for example, indicates that 'compared with boys, girls from the Sino-Tibetan group [of minorities] are much less likely to be in school than those from the Lao-Tai group'. Similarly, the MDG Report for Iran shows that in three regions where marginalized minorities predominate – the provinces of Kurdistan, Khuzestan and Sistan Baluchestan – the ratio of girls to boys in education lags behind other regions. In China, girls from minority groups have experienced much lower rates of secondary school enrolment than Han girls, according to a 2010 article by Emily Hannum and Meiyang Wang, published by the World Bank. By the year 2005, Han girls had increased secondary enrolment by 46 per cent since 2000 and 82 per cent since 1990 (the MDG base rate), whereas minority girls had achieved improvements of only 29 per cent since 2000 and 54 per cent since 1990. Some 30.1 per cent of minority girls in 2005 were not in secondary school, as compared to 8.8 per cent of Han girls. Even where girls are overcoming gender barriers, discrimination on the basis of their minority identity can hold them back: for example, the MDG report from Brazil finds that 'the advantageous situation enjoyed by females in education is minimized when the color/race element is taken into account; Afro-descendent girls are almost always in a worse situation than white boys'.

The figures are helpful but they do not explain the

complex and intersecting causal factors of exclusion and inequality in access to education experienced by minority and indigenous girl children. Discrimination in the classroom is a common problem, manifest in various forms. Minority girl (and boy) children can experience harassment, teasing and insults from pupils and teachers. Teachers can have lower expectations of minority or indigenous girls, offering them less attention and fewer incentives to succeed. Curricula in general often do not mention minorities (or do so in negative or stereotypical ways) and positive images of minority or indigenous women will likely be even less visible. Overt discrimination can dissuade parents from enrolling children or cause children to drop out. Access to mother-tongue education is also lacking in many countries, making it difficult for minority and indigenous children to integrate and stay enrolled in primary school. This may be particularly difficult for girls who, because of domestic obligations and cultural norms, will have less contact outside the community before starting school than boys, and thus less exposure to the majority language(s). Minority and indigenous girl children may be particularly vulnerable to physical, sexual or other abuse by teachers or other students because they have less power to challenge authority and seek justice for crimes committed against them. For instance, Dalit girls at one school in India were particularly targeted for repeated rape by teachers. In this case, the case was heard and won in favour of the girls.

Minorities who are poorer than other groups will struggle to pay for school fees and related costs. Given the poor employment prospects for minority and indigenous women in many countries, this expense means that the girl child's education may not be prioritized when family income is limited, pushing girls into informal economy jobs before they can complete their schooling. There may be religious or cultural preferences of minority groups that impede equal access to education for girls: for example, gender-biased practices of early marriage or preferences for girl children to work and be educated in the home according to cultural or religious traditions. Parents of minority and indigenous girl children often do not have the chance to work with school authorities over such concerns; in Bangladesh, the non-governmental organization (NGO) Zabarang Kalyan Samity reports that most indigenous parents and community members in the Chittagong Hill

Tracts region 'are not empowered to participate in school affairs and the local institutions are not fully authorized to deal with the context specific education situation'.

Improving health and reproductive health care

The MDGs give particular attention to the field of health care, with a focus on reduction of rates of HIV, AIDS and other diseases (Goal 6) and on maternal mortality (Goal 5). Cultural practices, geographic location and discrimination can lead to differential levels of health and maternal mortality for minority and indigenous women. For example, research on pastoralist communities in Tanzania points to increasing rates of HIV infection, particularly among adult women, estimated for pastoralists at 15–18 per cent as compared to a national average of 8.8 per cent. Among the contributing causes are polygyny and strong cultural resistance to condom use. The government has failed to respond with targeted policies: for example, national education campaigns are only in the dominant language of Swahili and anti-retrovirals, although free, are not easily accessible in several districts where pastoralists live.

The topic of reproductive health is given specific attention elsewhere in *State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2011*, but suffice it to say here that living in remote regions where maternal health services are poor, and the lack of cultural awareness among maternal health practitioners, are among the factors that increase maternal mortality among minority and indigenous women. In Guatemala, maternal mortality for indigenous women is three times higher than for non-indigenous women, and while 68 per cent of non-indigenous women have had professional prenatal care, only 45.6 per cent of indigenous women report similar. In India, figures for 2005 show that only one-third of women from Scheduled Tribes received prenatal care, compared to a national average of 49 per cent. The disparity between these figures can be the result of inadequate service provision in minority regions, poor nutrition, limited access to clean water and adequate housing, cultural beliefs around maternity and childbirth, poor communication and intercultural understanding of health practitioners, and also the higher levels of poverty among minorities and indigenous peoples who are then less able than other women to pay for antenatal services.

Better access to services

Geographic location, including urban/rural divides, impact strongly on access to social services for minority and indigenous women. According to the MDG Report for Nepal, among Dalits in Nepal, girls living in mountainous areas have less access to schooling than those living in Kathmandu. In China, research by Emily Hannum for the World Bank shows that ethnic minorities living in urban areas faced lower disparities on socio-economic indicators compared to the Han majority than do rural based ethnic minority groups. Two things are important here: first, disparities still existed even in urban settings, suggesting that geographical location is not the only explanatory variable of inequality. The same study, for example, showed that in both rural and urban settings, minority children were three times as likely to be excluded from primary education as the Han majority children. Second, the chronic underinvestment in social services in regions where minorities and indigenous peoples live is contributing to disparities, a pattern repeated in many countries.

It is not uncommon for governments to misguidedly employ resettlement schemes to increase access to services for remote communities. The impact of such schemes on various indicators of health, income and food security has been shown to be negative, but the burden can be particularly harsh for minority and indigenous women. For example, women's role in food production can be undermined when displacement moves families away from traditional forms of agriculture and food gathering into unfamiliar environments. This decreases the value of women's knowledge on these issues and also seriously impedes their ability to feed their families and earn income from traditional agricultural products. One study from Laos reports that 'being in charge of collecting the daily firewood, fetching water and gathering forest food products, [Mon-Khmer women] are the first to be affected by increased competition over resources due to resettlement'. The same report found that increased poverty post-resettlement was making minority women more vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation, abuse and HIV.

Protection from harm

Due to the nature of contemporary conflicts, often built upon inter-ethnic or sectarian grievances,

minority women can be particularly at risk of targeted violence during conflict, or as they deal with the effects of conflict, such as displacement and widowhood. The use of rape as a form of ethnic cleansing or humiliation of male combatants makes minority women extremely vulnerable to such acts. Prejudices and taboos around rape within minority communities can mean that women are ostracized or dissuaded from reporting these crimes. For example, in her report on her 2006 mission to the Russian Federation, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Yakın Ertürk, reported on 'Operation Fatima' in Chechnya, where Muslim women wearing headscarves are targeted for searches by security forces under anti-terrorism policies. There have been reports of rape and other sexual violence during searches and detention, but many women have been fearful to step forward, for fear of reprisals by authorities or ostracization by their family.

In periods of economic crisis, minority or indigenous women and men may be the first to lose their jobs because of discrimination in the workplace, decreasing household income and placing greater care burdens on women. The effects of climate change and environmental degradation can impact greatly on the traditional food production practices of minorities and indigenous peoples, much of which is often done by women. For example, grazing and water for animal husbandry can dramatically decline, or biodiversity and forest resources can become less available, all impacting on traditional livelihoods, fuel sources and food production. The net effect for minority and indigenous women is that they have less household income, higher costs for fuel and greater burdens regarding food security. This has been the experience of pastoralist women in East and Horn of Africa; among the effects of increasing drought are greater labour to find water, reduced availability of wild foods to supplement the family diet, and greater frequency of dismantling and rebuilding houses to migrate in search of viable pasture.

Policy responses: a human rights-based approach to the MDGs for women and girls

Urgent efforts are needed to ensure that minority and indigenous women and girls are not excluded from MDG gains. A handful of MDG reports acknowledge this fact, but few show evidence of



concrete steps to address the situation.

As a first step, recognition is needed that the situation of minority and indigenous women and girls requires special measures to achieve inclusion. The 'invisibility' of minority and indigenous women is a major contributing factor in their continued marginalization. Governments and those working towards the MDGs need to acknowledge the

particular barriers faced by women from minority and indigenous groups.

Disaggregated data

Reforms in data collection, research and reporting can expedite this recognition. MDG reports and indicators should be expanded to include data that measures change by gender and minority or



Left: A Karenni girl at school in the Thai village of Ban Nai Soi, close to the Thailand-Burma border. *Eric Lafforgue.*

Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) and other domestic legislation to ensure non-discrimination.

More research is needed on the specific obstacles minority and indigenous women are experiencing in all sectors of development policy. It is not too late for governments and other development actors to commission baseline studies on the position of minority and indigenous women vis-à-vis MDG attainment, in order to help guide further intervention policies that will meet the needs of the most marginalized. Data collection also needs to be part of a wider impact assessment process for MDG initiatives, to measure the potential and actual effect of interventions on the status of all women. Project proposals that include provisions that are directly or indirectly discriminatory must be ruled out before initiatives are approved.

It is also vital that data collection is undertaken with the full participation of minority and indigenous groups. Conventional indicators like household income may not reflect fully the aspirations of groups for whom poverty is measured also in terms such as loss of traditional livelihood, access to natural resources, or other aspects of cultural life. Minorities and indigenous peoples should be engaged in the data collection process to safeguard against misuse of data and violations of privacy, to avoid inaccuracies in data due to lack of cultural awareness or discrimination, and to ensure that data collected is useful for identifying the needs and concerns of minority and indigenous groups.

Protecting rights and preventing discrimination

Applying a human rights-based approach (HRBA) to the MDGs requires particular attention to non-discrimination, participation and accountability; minority and indigenous women have struggled to secure all three. HRBA efforts need to be adapted to meet the needs and rights of minority women if they are to tackle the structural causes of poverty and marginalization. There are important international standards to draw from, including ICERD, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The UN Declaration on the Rights of

indigenous identity. Gathering this information may be more time-consuming and more costly, but it will help to identify those populations most at risk, where minority and indigenous women often can be found. Such data also helps states to meet their obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the International Convention on the

Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities holds that 'States should consider appropriate measures so that persons belonging to minorities may participate fully in the economic progress and development in their country' (Article 4 (5)). The recently adopted UN Declaration on the Rights on Indigenous Peoples makes specific reference to indigenous women (see Articles 21, 22 and 44), as well as numerous provisions relating to indigenous peoples' right to development (e.g. Article 23). National legislation can further extend these commitments.

Mechanisms for preventing and remedying discrimination need to be effective and accessible for women. Domestic legislation should take into account intersecting forms of discrimination and consider new safeguards for addressing such discrimination. For example, legal aid could be targeted at women from minority groups, including through outreach and providing translation services. National human rights institutions (NHRIs) could designate a programme of work to analyse the implementation of non-discrimination legislation for minority women, and recommend the adoption of policy or legislation reforms in cooperation with minority women. NHRIs can also support government actors in training on non-discrimination in provision of public services and awareness of cultural or religious identity issues that relate to service provision and national development strategies. In Brazil, the UN Country Team is working closely with the Special Secretariat of Policies for Women (SPM) and the Special Secretariat of Policies to Promote Racial Equality (SEPPIR) under the auspices of the MDG Achievement Fund to launch a series of initiatives on gender and race. These will include training government managers on the introduction and implementation of gender and racial equality projects; reforming disaggregated data collection practices; targeting the media to better examine issues of gender and race; and aiming to achieve greater gender and racial parity in decision-making at all levels.

Accountability

Accountability goes hand in hand with non-discrimination mechanisms. Because of their position of marginalization, minority and indigenous women will typically find it much

harder to access existing accountability mechanisms. Ministries with responsibility for women, for example, should develop specific programme lines aimed at empowering minority and indigenous women to claim their rights, including through the justice system. All women must have equal protection from the law, including protection against domestic violence, all forms of abuse or labour rights violations by employers, and violence or abuse stemming from inter-communal tensions. Surveys can be conducted on how accessible key social services are to minority and indigenous women, to ensure that women are not facing discrimination at the point of contact. Civil society actors are starting to engage governments in gender budgeting; involving minority and indigenous women in such processes can further ensure that resources are used to the best effect in reaching the most marginalized. Minority and indigenous women are also highly concentrated in the informal economy. Trade unions can reach out to such women to build their capacity to defend themselves against exploitation, and seek protection of their labour rights.

Ensuring participation

Participation of minority and indigenous women at various levels is vital for improving MDG strategies. Minority and indigenous women are often under-represented in governance structures, excluded from traditional decision-making processes, or ignored in civil society consultations. Many will not have the resources or capacities to form strong organizations to give themselves a voice. MDG interventions could usefully address this by ensuring that women from minority groups are active in consultations and decision-making for MDG projects that will affect them. For example, meetings can take place in regions where minorities and indigenous peoples live, child care facilities can be provided, translation can be offered into minority languages, and incentives like beginning meetings only when a sufficient number of minority or indigenous women have arrived can be adopted. Access to information by women will often be low, so extra measures will need to be taken to build their capacity to contribute their views at meetings, and to make well-informed decisions on proposed activities. The NGO Sidreh works to empower Bedouin women in Israel, and has established a number of innovative

initiatives for strengthening women's participation. These include literacy training and adult education programmes, the creation of women's committees in villages, taking women on excursions outside their home and village to build confidence and awareness, and publishing a feminist newspaper to promote positive images of Bedouin women.

At a political level, much can be done to open up opportunities for minority and indigenous women. Political parties and legislatures can adopt quotas or other structures to increase participation of women. In Vietnam, for example, the National Assembly has made efforts to prioritize greater representation for women and non-Kinh ethnic minorities, according to a 2009 Inter-Parliamentary Union study. Some 30 per cent of deputies are women from minority groups and 14 of the 33 minority groups present are represented only by minority women. In New Caledonia, indigenous Kanak women mobilized to secure the adoption of a parity law (requiring 50 per cent men and 50 per cent women in alternating order on election ballots) and have achieved (with non-indigenous women) a near gender parity in political representation at different levels of governance. Parliamentary committees established by minorities or by women can ensure full participation by minority women. Because of their starting position of marginalization, minority women representatives in government can benefit from extra support to assert their authority. The Navsarjan Trust, a Dalit NGO in Gujarat, India, has worked to bring together at state level all Dalit women *sarpanches* (elected village heads) and hundreds of Dalit female *panchayat* (village assembly) members, to help them find strength in networking and the confidence to raise Dalit women's issues in their roles.

Women's participation in traditional decision-making structures can often be weak or non-existent. Such male-dominated institutions are nevertheless important tools for securing the free, prior and informed consent of communities to development interventions that will affect them or the regions in which they live. It is also necessary to work with male leaders to transform harmful practices against minority and indigenous women, and traditional laws that discriminate against women and girls, for example on land and inheritance rights. The involvement of male leaders in workshops intended to develop the skills of

indigenous women leaders helped to change the men's perceptions of indigenous women for the better. Support to women's organizations can also help to elevate their status in decision-making. In Tanzania, Maanda Ngoitika created the Pastoralist Women's Council in 1997 to empower women in such processes: '[W]e bring pastoralists together to give each other encouragement and to break the cycle of silence and oppression.' In Kenya, Amina Zuberi, a District Convenor in the Mombasa Regional Women's Assembly, reports that her organization is working with Muslim leaders to increase school enrolment among Muslim girls, by showing how securing education for girls can decrease the poverty rates of entire families. It is through such processes of engagement, women's empowerment and persuasion that traditional structures can be utilized and transformed.

Adopting targeted approaches

Measures targeted specifically at minority and indigenous women are one tool of an HRBA. While mainstream approaches to achieving the MDGs may help some minority women, and gender-mainstreaming approaches potentially could reach even farther, the effects of intersecting discrimination mean that many minority and indigenous women will still not benefit fully from general social inclusion initiatives. Targeted approaches include creating specific projects for minority women, creating quotas for participation of minority women in general projects, and creating mechanisms that ensure the equal participation of minority women in decision-making that affects them. For example, recognizing low levels of education among minority children, the government of Nepal has made targeted efforts to increase recruitment of women teachers and teachers from minority groups; figures have been gradually increasing. Further intersecting these goals, that is, to recruit minority women teachers and particularly Dalit women, would help to break down both gender and minority identity barriers in the classroom.

Targeted measures can be introduced within the MDG framework. In Thailand, the MDGs report records that the government elaborated additional targets under Goals 4 and 5, namely between 2005 and 2015, to reduce by half the under five mortality rate and the maternal mortality rate 'in

highland areas, selected northern provinces and three southernmost provinces', all regions where minorities predominantly live. The Romania MDGs Report states that the government has created Roma Community Health Mediators to make improvements on ethnic disparities in health, including maternal mortality. In the Philippines, the 2003 MDG report discusses:

'alternative nonformal education systems for indigenous communities such as Magbasa Kita (Let Us Read) that teaches women and girls and parents of working children to read. School-based child-minding centers were also set up in the [indigenous] cultural communities so older children, mostly girls of school age who take care of younger siblings, can attend classes despite baby-sitting chores.'

Among the key outcomes of the most recent MDG Summit was the commitment to a new Global Strategy for Women's and Children's Health, recognizing the significant lack of progress on the related goals. There is an important opportunity within that strategy and fund to design specific interventions targeted at minority and indigenous women and girls, given that issues of culture, poverty, residence and discrimination intersect to create specific barriers to realizing the health-related MDGs.

A specific focus on minority and indigenous women can yield far-reaching results. It is widely recognized in the development field that a focus on women produces better returns because women are more likely to invest their income in their families and communities. With greater capacities, minority and indigenous women are able to improve the prospects for themselves and their children, but also the wider community, becoming generators of well-being and wealth. For example, one literacy and basic skills project in Laos, reported by Lorraine Corner for the UN Development Programme, targeted over 3,000 minority women, but estimated that 'another 16,000 people will benefit indirectly, including children and other family members, as well as villages'. By investing in social enterprise schemes targeted at minority and indigenous women, for example in handicrafts, small land holdings or livestock breeding, women can build new business-related skills and increase their decision-making power in household budgeting, the economic status of the community can grow,

and the public and private status of women can increase. It is important as well to look beyond these traditional gendered occupations, investing in women's and girls' education, literacy (including in dominant languages), vocational training, land rights, and credit and market access so they can realize their economic rights, and both seek and *create* new forms of employment within and beyond their community. Opportunities for technology transfer can focus on minority and indigenous women to alleviate their often higher time poverty burdens, freeing them to be more active in the education of their children and to participate equally in social, cultural and political life.

In any such targeted interventions, it is important to respect the cultural, ethnic, religious or linguistic identity of minority and indigenous women and girls. Minority and indigenous women's empowerment does not come from assimilation into dominant cultures, not least because gender discrimination will equally be a feature in the dominant culture. Examples of good practice could include curricula reform that gives special attention to empowering the girl child from minority and indigenous groups. This could be done by integrating intercultural education that is sensitive to the expectations of minority culture or religion, but which also helps to transcend gender discrimination. Moreover, a good understanding of cultural and religious identity issues can lead to better development interventions. On HIV prevention, for example, understanding the social and cultural norms around sex in minority communities can identify the higher socially determined risk factors for infection by minority women, and help to devise prevention programmes that are culturally relevant. Finally, it is important to state that minority and indigenous women and girls may not share dominant or conventional views on development priorities, either for themselves or for their community. Alternative forms of economic and social life should be respected in line with the right to self-determination, and women and girls should have the equal right to determine freely what 'development' means for them.

Conclusions

As the pressure builds on governments and other actors to achieve the MDGs in the next five years, they will need to reconsider whether

their interventions are achieving the best possible results. The most recent MDG Summit produced an outcome document that reiterates the need to address the particular situation of indigenous peoples, and to take account of culture in development. Regrettably, other ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities are not mentioned explicitly. Minority and indigenous women and girls often have farther than most to come before they reach the MDG targets and, consequently, there is a great risk that they will be left out.

Adopting a human rights-based approach to the MDGs can help avoid such negative outcomes, by drawing from the human rights obligations of states to address key structural barriers, such as discrimination on the basis of gender and ethnic, religious, linguistic or cultural identity. All MDG interventions need to be analysed with appropriate disaggregated data. Understanding and responding to the particular factors in the exclusion of minority and indigenous women and girls will improve development outcomes. Minority and indigenous women and girls need to be at the centre of policy and programme development geared towards the MDGs. They have a right to participate in this decision-making and to participate in development with dignity and respect for their contributions. The challenges of achieving equality and non-discrimination are great, but investing in minority and indigenous women and girls yields better results for families, communities and societies as a whole. ■

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