

Foreword

Gay J. McDougall

*United Nations Independent Expert
on minority issues*

Minority groups are not monolithic, but the diversity within minority communities is often overlooked, both by those who are guided by prejudice, and by those who, with well-meaning intent, want to 'accommodate' the 'culture' of minority groups as a whole. Meanwhile, the aspirations of minority women are often sacrificed by internal group dynamics to demands for loyalty to broader community struggles, before issues of feminism and women's rights can be advanced. And so women's self-realization may be surrendered for notions of group culture and solidarity, into which women have had little input.

My mandate as United Nations Independent Expert on Minority Issues explicitly requires me to apply a gender perspective in my work. This has led me to seek out women in minority communities around the world on my country visits; to convene them in separate forums, as well as to sit with them in their kitchens, places of work and agricultural fields. I have listened to their issues and concerns.

I have found two concerns among women in all the minority communities that I have visited, regardless of the region of the world. First, within each community, there is activism among minority women to address the condition of women and that of their larger community. In many cases, they are leading their community struggles, sometimes by default, always by their vision and the force of their determination. But their leadership role comes at greater cost than that of their male compatriots, who need not also defeat general negative notions about the appropriateness of female activism.

Second, there is a common struggle for recognition and voice within the broader movement for women's rights. The feminist movements of majority women in both developed and developing countries are fraught with hierarchies and disregard for minority issues. They have not made space for the full empowerment of minority women within the movement.

Women members of minority and indigenous groups in all regions of the world are struggling to be recognized and heard. They are hidden behind walls of prejudice, patriarchy, paternalism, traditions, culture and the boundaries of the home. They are easy and common targets of violence in the home, their communities and the larger society. Many strive to knit families together in

communities fractured by conquest, colonization, slavery, imperial domination, and armed conflict. Poverty, ethnic prejudice and gender-based restrictions can weigh heavily on women and girls. And marginalized women bear the most severe negative consequences of the modern globalized economy.

In developed countries, I found women struggling for personal autonomy in the context of either debates about banning the *burqa* in some countries, or 'multicultural' policies in other countries. Immigrant women in Europe are dealing with the consequences of male-centered immigration laws that deny wives separate status, thereby creating added vulnerabilities of deportation in situations of domestic violence or divorce. Or they may face immigration regimes that deny them the right to work, regardless of their own professional credentials.

I talked to Roma women who lowered their voices to a whisper when the subject of domestic violence was raised, but let me know that it was out of the question to seek assistance from police, because of the general antagonism between the police and all Roma.

In Canada, single black mother-led families have three times the poverty rate of mother-led families of the majority population. Even in the fast moving economy of Brazil, where upwards of 50 per cent of the population is now considered to be of African descent, Afro-Brazilian women are largely seen as either maids, or cultural icons of the tourism trade. As one indigenous Colombian woman recently said to me: 'Indigenous women are tired of being projected in romantic notions'.

Minority women in rural or remote areas in some developing countries must cope with profound isolation, exacerbated by lack of education and language barriers. Their workload is made heavier by a lack of basic amenities such as clean water and sanitation, cheap and clean cooking fuels, the availability of child-care support, and protection against domestic and societal violence. Entrenched gender roles leave women highly vulnerable, particularly in regard to ownership of land or property, inheritance rights, and access to credit, technology or markets.

In India I heard the testimony of scores of Dalit women who had been beaten, raped or had their families threatened because they were serving on

Right: Dalit women work to collect recycling at an illegal dump near the Gujarati village of Kalol, India. *Andy Martinez.*

local governing councils. I also had the privilege to stand with nearly 1,000 Dalit women as they rallied to declare themselves 'free' of the degrading work of 'manual scavenging'; that is, cleaning the excrement from dry toilets by hand—a task reserved for women of the lowest caste, despite the practice having long been banned in India. Those women were raising their voices to claim their rights and dignity and had symbolically burned their manual scavenging baskets. I was struck by their bravery. Many of them had known no other way of life and had no guarantee of an alternative source of income for their families - yet they were making a stand.

Several of the Afro-Colombian women that I met had taken leadership positions in the Community Councils that have authority to make decisions regarding collective lands. They were in fear for their lives, faced with credible death threats. But they complained that their leadership positions were being discounted by sexist national security forces that refused to provide them the protective measures that were warranted because they were women and they were black. Others pulled me to the side after a day-long community meeting to plead for help for their children—the offspring of gang rape by marauding ex-paramilitary forces—who were unable to attend school because of the bullying and rejection they were suffering from their neighbors.

Each one of these stories presents challenges that must be addressed to unlock the full potential of individuals and societies. They are challenges to the United Nations system for the promotion and protection of minority rights, and the larger framework of human rights. They are challenges confronting every nation, since in today's world, all nations have populations with ethnic, racial and religious diversity. And they are challenges to the global feminist movement.

This volume of *State of the World's Minority and Indigenous Peoples* seeks to highlight many of the barriers and issues that must be tackled for minority and indigenous women to realize full economic, social and political equality. ■



