



United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues  
and Advancement of Women and the Secretariat of the  
United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues



# GENDER AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' EDUCATION

Education is both a universal human right and a fundamental means to achieve other human rights. Enjoyment of the right to education is essential to achieving equitable development and respect for cultural diversity. It is an investment for the future and a means to reduce poverty and counter discrimination. For women and girls, equality of access to quality and appropriate education is also crucial means of empowerment to participate fully in the economic, social and political lives of their communities and States.

**BRIEFING NOTE NO. 3**

The right of indigenous peoples to education is protected by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which reaffirms and applies the right to education to the specific historical, cultural, economic and social circumstances of indigenous peoples. The right of indigenous peoples to education is also protected by a number of additional international human rights instruments, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the rights of the Child, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

In spite of the protections afforded by these instruments, the right to education has not been fully realized for most indigenous peoples and a critical education gap exists between indigenous peoples and the general population. In its 2009 study on the right of indigenous peoples to education,<sup>1</sup> the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples found that “deprivation of access to quality education is a major factor contributing to social marginalization, poverty and dispossession of indigenous peoples. The content and objective of education to indigenous peoples in some instances contributes to the assimilation of indigenous peoples into mainstream society and the eradication of their cultures, languages and ways of life.”<sup>2</sup>

In terms of accessing education, indigenous girls tend to be even more disadvantaged than indigenous boys. For example, in Ecuador’s rural areas, 48% of indigenous women and 32% of indigenous men are illiterate, compared to 18% of non-indigenous women<sup>3</sup>. In Guatemala, only 54 per cent of indigenous girls are in school, compared with 71 per cent of indigenous boys. By age 16, only a quarter of indigenous girls are enrolled, compared with 45 per cent of boys.<sup>4</sup> In the Somali region of Ethiopia, a recent survey found that the literacy rate for female pastoralists was 4.8 percent, compared to a 22.7 per cent literacy rate for male pastoralists.<sup>5</sup>

The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues has made a number of concrete recommendations directed at the UN system and at States to improve the quality of life for indigenous peoples, including through access to and provision of culturally appropriate education. UNPFII recommendations have stressed that unless children are educated in indigenous languages, cultures and values, indigenous peoples and their unique and valuable cultures will not survive. The Permanent Forum also recommended that governments and United Nations bodies prepare specific policies and implement programmes “to safeguard indigenous peoples’ equal rights to education, especially indigenous girls, and adopt positive measures to address indigenous education issues”<sup>6</sup> to promote their human rights, strengthen, recover and conserve their languages, promote their culture and education, reaffirm their traditional knowledge, and contribute to their self-esteem.





### **Why are gender issues important to Indigenous peoples' education?**

Gender issues are a common impediment to education for both boys and girls in indigenous communities. In certain communities, social norms prevent indigenous girls from attending schools. Families may prefer girls to remain at home to perform domestic chores and care for children and siblings; others prefer their daughters to be married off at a young age.<sup>7</sup> In some instances, women have to leave their natal homes after marriage and work for their husband and his family. Consequently, parents are reluctant to send their daughters to school or to pursue higher education because this is not considered beneficial or productive. Such norms and practices, coupled with other ongoing exclusion and discrimination of indigenous girls and women, have led to serious consequences for the community and society.<sup>8</sup>

Indigenous children and youth often also face geographical obstacles to obtaining an education. Children and youth from communities that do not have local educational facilities must travel far from their home if they are to attend school. In some instances, they are compelled to leave their traditional communities and move to urban areas to pursue employment or education opportunities.<sup>9</sup> In the new urban environment, indigenous youth are often subjected to discrimination by the wider community and denied equal opportunities in employment and education<sup>10</sup>.

In instances where indigenous children and youth do access education, they must often also contend with educational materials that are not culturally appropriate and that are not offered in indigenous languages, and which can therefore threaten the ability of indigenous students to build self-confidence and self-respect. Indigenous girls may also face discrimination. For example, many Batwa women and girls in the Great Lake Region of Africa reportedly suffer verbal abuse, sexual harassment by male teachers and pupils at school and being ambushed on the way home from school.<sup>11</sup>

### **How does the application of a gender perspective make a difference to indigenous peoples' education?**

Application of a gender perspective requires consideration of the impact of gender on people's opportunities, social roles and interactions. In most indigenous societies, women and men have distinct ritual, social and economic responsibilities. There is a need to be aware of such gender-specific roles and whether these might disadvantage indigenous women or contribute to the creation of inequalities.

The application of gender perspective in indigenous peoples' education will improve the lives and opportunities of indigenous women, including as follows:

**Access to education on an equal footing:** When a gender perspective is applied in indigenous peoples' education, gender barriers to education will be addressed, improving the opportunity for all indigenous peoples to access education. Adequate and sensitive educational efforts will be made to mobilize indigenous women and girls and to involve them in the educational process. Intercultural and bilingual/multilingual policy in education programs will be adopted and approaches to education will be better geared to the needs of indigenous girls, creating a better environment for learning.

**Innovative educational approaches:** Education based on mother tongue curriculum, which incorporates indigenous histories, traditional knowledge and spiritual values, and bi-lingual or multilingual teachers, including indigenous female teachers, will help girls to join and stay in schools. The application of a gender perspective in indigenous peoples' education will emphasize innovative educational approaches that prompt to create and revitalize the learning environment for indigenous students, and in particular girls.

**Gender friendly socialization:** Educational institutions will enable all students, both indigenous and non-indigenous, at all levels of education, to have an appreciation and understanding of and respect for traditional



and contemporary indigenous histories, cultures and identities. Therefore, when girls and boys are educated in a gender sensitive way, they will grow up in an environment of gender equality.

**Special measures to overcome socio-economic and cultural constraints:** The empowerment of indigenous women is the key to better standards of living. Gendered forms of socio-economic and cultural limitations to attain formal education will be identified and special measures will be taken to overcome these barriers, including through the establishment of indigenous women's empowerment programs, community infrastructure development programs and income generation activities, as well as support for the effective participation of indigenous women in education management.

**Increased opportunities:** When indigenous girls and boys obtain an education they also increase their employment and entrepreneurial opportunities and improve their access to higher education.

**Decision making:** Education can be a means through which indigenous peoples better develop the skills to manage the development of their communities and to actively participate at all levels of decision-making processes.

#### **What are the key issues to be considered when discussing gender and indigenous Peoples' education?**

Indigenous women face barriers to education based on both their indigenous status and their gender. Solutions to problems faced therefore require that discrimination based on both must be addressed. Key issues include the following:

**Education in indigenous languages:** The inclusion of indigenous languages in the classroom is important both as a foundation for learning and also to ensure the maintenance and continued use of indigenous languages. Mother-tongue education is indispensable for effective learning process for indigenous children and for the reduction of dropout rates. This is recognized by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which calls for States, in conjunction with indigenous peoples, to take effective measures to ensure that indigenous individuals, particularly children, have access to an education in their own culture and provided in their own language.<sup>12</sup>

It is crucial that governments implement culturally sensitive educational programmes, curricula and actions addressing the needs of indigenous peoples<sup>13</sup>.

**Plurality of Indigenous communities:** Indigenous women share many concerns regarding poverty, human rights, and economic and social development with other women throughout the world and also offer a distinct and important perspective on these issues. The fact that "indigenous women" are not a homogeneous category but represent a wide variety of cultures with different needs and concerns, should be a central premise for the design of policies and programmes and for that it is indispensable to have disaggregated data.

**Access and participation:** Many indigenous communities live in remote areas where basic social and infrastructure services such as health, education, transportation, communication and other primary services are not available or are available on a limited basis. Therefore, it is necessary that governments, with the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples, develop and implement appropriate solutions, which will improve access of indigenous peoples, including women and girls to educational programs as well as other basic services.<sup>14</sup>

#### **What are the practical implications of a gender perspective concerning indigenous peoples' education?**

Indigenous peoples lag behind the general population in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in most, if not all, of the countries in which they live. Indigenous women often face additional gender-based



disadvantages and discrimination. The application of a gender perspective in indigenous peoples' education will have implications in a number of areas, including:

**Political and social implications:** Creating a truly equitable society is a long-term process. Mainstreaming a gender perspective will gradually improve gender relations within indigenous societies. It will facilitate indigenous women participating fully in all areas of their lives, whether in their home or in the public arena.

**Economic implications:** Governments should increase funds allocated for education and adopt measures to find additional resources to sustain improved, equitable education programmes for indigenous peoples, and particularly indigenous women. Such reforms would better enable indigenous women to gain leadership skills and to become community advocates and defenders for the right of indigenous women to achieve gender equity.

**Implications on development policies:** Tremendous pressure will be generated for changes not only in education policies, but also in overall development policies. Agendas will have to be inspired by equity and equality in resource sharing by sections of society. The adoption of measures that ensure the full and effective participation of indigenous women in implementation, follow-up work and monitoring of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals will help to eliminate inequality conditions.

#### **What are some of the challenges that need to be addressed concerning gender and indigenous peoples' education?**

Achieving cultural pluralism and diversity represent real challenges in public policy. Some of the challenges in the area of education that need to be addressed include:

**Structural barriers:** Administrative and institutional structures are among the major barriers to the advancement of indigenous peoples' education initiatives. Existing laws, regulatory measures and mechanisms may not address, adequately or at all, the issues of systemic disadvantage concerning gender and indigenous peoples' education. Thus, there is a need for special measures to be adopted through national legislations to address these concerns.

In this regard, the UNPFII in its fourth session (2005) recommended that governments *"Ensure an increase in the number of indigenous persons in the educational sectors, including in policy, administration, teaching indigenous culture, history and contemporary society, indigenous languages and production of educational materials."*<sup>15</sup>

**Technical deficiencies:** There is a need for the revision of curriculum contents of non-formal education in order to increase enrolment of girls in school. The adoption of effective and appropriate measures to stop indigenous children from dropping out of school and to improve their learning achievements will bridge the gap between indigenous girls and boys.

To tackle this issue the UNPFII in its fourth session (2005) recommended that States: *"Establish effective arrangements for the participation of indigenous parents and community members in decisions regarding the planning, delivery and evaluation of education services for their children, including in the designing and implementation of their own education at all levels, including developing appropriate teaching materials and methods."*<sup>16</sup>

**Mother tongue education and bilingual inter-cultural education:** Indigenous children especially girls, experience particular difficulties relating to access to education of quality and socio-cultural relevance at all levels. In this regard, the UNPFII in its fourth session (2005) recommended that States should *"Develop bilingual and culturally appropriate primary education for indigenous children to reduce dropout rates. The mother tongue must be the first learning language and the national language the second language; curricula should reflect indigenous peoples' holistic worldviews, knowledge systems, histories, spiritual values and physical activities, physical education and sports."*<sup>17</sup>



**Economic deprivation:** The recognition of indigenous peoples as distinct peoples and the respect for their individual and collective human rights, rights to lands and territories and sustainable use of natural resources are crucial for achieving a just and sustainable solution to the widespread poverty in their midst. Deprivation of basic rights has hindered their participation in education as they are preoccupied with the struggle for their survival.

**Financial resource constraint:** Additional financial resources will be necessary to initiate affirmative action education policies and programmes in favor of indigenous peoples, keeping gender equity and equality at the core. Many governments may face difficulties in launching affirmative action programs to increase the access of indigenous women and girls to education due to lack of resources. International development cooperation programs therefore need to address this problem on a priority basis.

### **References:**

- <sup>1</sup> A/HRC/EMRIP/2009/2
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, Annex I, para. 4.
- <sup>3</sup> *A Portrait of Indigenous Women of the Americas, Sheet 1, Rights and Democracy*, 2006. [http://www.dd-rd.ca/site/\\_PDF/publications/indigenous/sheetsWomen/1en.pdf](http://www.dd-rd.ca/site/_PDF/publications/indigenous/sheetsWomen/1en.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> UNESCO (2008), p.104-105.
- <sup>5</sup> Naomi Kipuri and Andrew Ridgewell, Minority Rights Group International, *A Double Bind: The Exclusion of Pastoralist Women in the East and Horn of Africa* (2008)
- <sup>6</sup> United Nations, *Third Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2004/43, paragraph 16.
- <sup>7</sup> A/HRC/EMRIP/2009/2. para. 96.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> United Nations, Leaflet No.9: *Indigenous Children and Youth*, <http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/guide.htm>
- <sup>10</sup> United Nations, Leaflet No.9: *Indigenous Children and Youth*, <http://www.ohchr.org/english/issues/indigenous/guide.htm>
- <sup>11</sup> Fay Warrilow, Minority Rights Group International, *The Right to Learn: Batwa Education in the Great Lakes Region of Africa* (2008).
- <sup>12</sup> A/RES/61/295, para 14 (3).
- <sup>13</sup> United Nations, *Fourth Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2005/43, paragraph 47, c.
- <sup>14</sup> United Nations, *Fourth Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2005/43, paragraph 48, a.
- <sup>15</sup> United Nations, *Fourth Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2005/43, paragraph 48, f.
- <sup>16</sup> United Nations, *Fourth Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2005/43, paragraph 48 e.
- <sup>17</sup> United Nations, *Fourth Session Report of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*, E/2005/43, paragraph 48, i.

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