

Moderator: Ms. Gay J. McDougall, United Nations Independent Expert on minority issues

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While education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right of every individual, in practice, many boys, girls, men and women have been historically locked out of educational systems. Minority girls face the greatest challenges. Their burdens are a unique intersection of discrimination based on ethnicity, restrictive traditional roles for women and in most cases, endemic poverty. Girls from minority groups also often live in remote geographic locations that are neglected by government social services. Often, they have to travel great distances to the nearest school, thereby multiplying the risks to the personal security of girls. When occurring together, these barriers can be almost insurmountable. The ramifications of being denied the right to a quality education are vast. Without strides in girls' education, minority groups are likely to face further economic and social marginalization.

Evidence demonstrates that investing in girls is more than a moral obligation, since it is likely to prevent the transmission of poverty from generation to generation and yield high economic and societal returns. The international community has reaffirmed the critical importance of girls' education at various junctures. Moreover, the international community has recognized the right to education for minority groups, and several conventions address the right to quality education by all people, including minority groups, including UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989); the UN Declaration on Minorities (1992); and the Education for All framework of action (2000).

Despite such commitments and efforts undertaken by national governments and international actors, discrimination in education persists against girls from minority communities. Most worrying, minority girls are often invisible in education policy, because of the lack of data and analysis on the specific issues facing them. As the State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2009 observes (in the context of education of minority girls), "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."

The objective of this discussion is to highlight the issues around minority girls' right to education. Specifically, the e-discussion will examine the multiple barriers faced by minority girls in accessing education, evaluate the legal and policy responses to the above question, discuss good practices from the regional and country level, and develop recommendations in line with the educational needs and priorities of minority girls.

Moving on to the question for this week: In your experience, what are the critical barriers faced by minority girls in accessing education? Please back up your point(s) with specific examples to enable us to move quickly from the theoretical to the practical.

The e-discussion is been moderated by Ms. Gay J. McDougall, who was appointed as the first holder of the position of United Nations Independent Expert on minority issues. A human rights lawyer, Ms. McDougall was Executive Director of the US-based international NGO Global Rights between 1994 and 2006. Among her many international roles, she served as an Independent Expert on the UN treaty body that oversees the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), and on the U.N. Sub-Commission on Promotion and Protection of Human Rights. As Special Rapporteur on the issue of systematic rape and sexual slavery practices in armed conflict, she presented a groundbreaking study calling for international legal standards for the prosecution of such acts. She was one of five international members of South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission, which successfully organized and administered that country's first non-racial elections.

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