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Minority Women/ Girls: The Right to Education

Minority Women & Girls in India:
Critical elements to consider towards Equity in Education

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I speak in the context of India, and largely though not exclusively, in the context of Muslims who constitute 13.4% of the total population and are the largest religious minority. In sheer numbers Muslims in India are well over 140 million people, with over 67 million Muslim women and girls, more than the entire populations of many European countries.

Yet Muslim women in India today have the lowest literacy indicators and lowest formal work participation rate of women from any socio-religious community. Addressing these deprivations means battling both global Islamophobia and in India a strong right wing movement with a national political presence.

Against this backdrop I will make a few critical points.

I. GENERAL RECOMMENDATION:

Violence targeted against Muslim and Christian minorities, against Tribals (indigenous peoples) and Dalits (the 'lowest' castes) has taken place with regularity in India over the years. Multiple forms of sexual assault against women from these communities have been a critical part of the overall pattern of violence. The most visible arm of the State – the police and law enforcement– are often seen to be partisan in these cases, and the wheels of justice have either not turned at all, or turned far too slowly.

Over time this has led to an enormous breach of trust between State and large sections of the Muslim community, particularly those in ghettos, those on the margins, and those who need State interventions for equitable development the most. State-led efforts for educational, economic or political empowerment of Minority women cannot succeed in the face of this general trust deficit. It must be bridged.

Therefore addressing the issue of targeted, and mass violence against minority groups and ensuring the right to life, justice and comprehensive reparation through robust State legislation has to be named as the critical backdrop to any educational initiative for minority women.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS EDUCATION FOR MINORITY WOMEN

A. 'Education' must be defined broadly: Mere declarations of intent towards 'education for women' (which includes adult and continuing education and capacity building) must be replaced by concrete programmes & substantial resource allocation.

India recently enacted a Right to Education Act, guaranteeing the right to schooling for children aged 6-14 years. This Act, while naturally welcome, has served to freeze-frame on schooling, and fueled desertion of other arenas of education. Yet there are scores of minority women, Muslim, Dalit, and Tribal, who remain outside the framework of basic literacy. If we are sincere about approaching the Right to Education through the lens of what minority women need, then prioritizing adult and continuing education in the overall education agenda, must be underscored. Neglect of this means the active neglect of the rights of millions of non-literate, non-skilled women who have not and will never go to any school. Current budget allocation for this is too small. And while we continue to pay diligent lip service to adult education, we appear to count on a 'volunteer based' approach. There can be no substitute for State intervention in this arena. In failing to do this, we are in effect turning our back on minority women's right to education.

B. Education for Minority Women: Democracy through New Media

With literacy as the fundamental first step, one of the most critical tools of empowerment for marginalized groups everywhere are the tools of new media¹. We must be able to use them to reverse the known forms of discriminatory access to information and to power. We must actively make recommendations that encourage governments and civil society groups to deploy tools of new media that can reverse the enormous power of representation that traditional media enjoys over minority groups in general and minority women in particular. To give Minority women access to the power of representation, and the right and the ability to tell their own stories and create their own images is and must be a critical part of the educational terrain. Because trapping minority groups, Muslim groups and particularly Muslim women in images that we beam at them - of both oppression and emancipation - is among the gravest injustices we do to them. The 'demonizing' impact of traditional media must be increasingly traded

¹ Most technologies described as "new media" are digital, often having characteristics of being manipulated, networkable, dense, compressible, and interactive. Some examples may be the Internet, websites, computer multimedia, computer games, CD-ROMS, and DVDs. New media does not include television programs, feature films, magazines, books, or paper-based publications - unless they contain technologies that enable digital interactivity. New media holds out a possibility of on-demand access to content any time, anywhere, on any digital device, as well as interactive user feedback, creative participation and community formation around the media content. Another important promise of new media is the "democratization" of the creation, publishing, distribution and consumption of media content. (Ref: Wikipedia)

in for the democratizing promise of new media, which offers the possibility of transcending the spatial and social ghetto, both literally and figuratively. (Good Practice: *'New Worlds, New Skills: Leadership Development with Muslim and Dalit Women'*, Nirantar, 2011. Delhi, India. <http://www.nirantar.net/leadership-24-11-11-web.pdf>)

C. A Pilot Leadership Training Model:

Placing Minority women in the vanguard of the 'pull' factor for education & development

Given that we have been asked to share with this Forum 'good practices' I also wish to share with you another Leadership Training model for Minority Women that we have developed in India, and are attempting to get the Government to agree to role out in a pilot mode.

Design Components: The pilot scheme will have 3 core components (with some overlapping inputs and cross-cutting impact)

- Leadership development
- Civic empowerment
- Life and livelihood preparation

Leadership development: Training inputs to a core group of selected women (per field site) will be given covering a broad range of gender empowerment needs, including understanding of personal life situation, community structures, political structures, legal information, information and training about government schemes and services, right to information, analyzing livelihood options, literacy and skill training to enhance or improve these options, and so on.

To encourage mobility among Muslim women, the leadership development component will include travel and study tours to learn from best practices in women's programmes elsewhere in the country and in the South Asian region. This component will also provide opportunities for inter-state sharing among women in areas covered by the scheme.

Civic empowerment: This component will focus on giving leadership skills in interacting and engaging with civic authorities, the school system, local government structures, local self-government structures, police, and the local legal structures, including courts. This component of the scheme will also budget for a series of "events" per field site in the form of public hearings or focused planned interactions with public officials as a local grievance redressal mechanism. This will be a critical means of operationalizing the "pull factor" to make the local system responsive to the needs of the community.

Life and livelihood preparation: As the process of empowerment and confidence building makes women desirous of improving the livelihood opportunities for their family, they will be given options, training and access to a revolving fund to operationalise improved self-employment or vocational training. The pilot scheme anticipates giving access to life and livelihood preparation to a select number of women per field site

We strongly believe that this kind of a 'comprehensive' leadership training model can present some answers to the problems that minority women face.

Not only is capacity building and leadership training for minority women an empowering end in itself, it is also a vital means to another end.

Because even as the State seeks to make social and physical infrastructure, civic amenities, and schools available in Minority neighborhoods, there is a critical need for 'push and pull factors' to work in tandem. In other words, the Minority community will also have to reach out to systems of local governance to make the system responsive. This pilot scheme for leadership development of minority women aims to place minority women in the vanguard of this 'pull factor'. For experiences of organizing women all over the globe, to which so many women in this very room can bear testimony, tell us that given the right support and inputs women *can and will* make the system respond.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL-BASED EDUCATION FOR MINORITY GIRLS

A. Education for Minority Girls: Why do we aim so low?

In making recommendations for minority girls, there is always an emphasis on elementary education. This is valid for there is an acute problem of basic education. Yet, it also means that we appear to stop dreaming the big dream for them. This reflects in our activism and our policies. When we ask States to ensure schooling for minority girls, we must also with equal vigour and passion ask them to ensure professional education, technical education and higher educational opportunities for minority girls, Muslim and Dalit. We need to think beyond the basic welfare approach to education, and create for minority girls a global public environment that legitimizes aspiration - towards true excellence and the highest possible intellectual endeavors. For this is how role models can be born, and minority women's leadership created.

B. Anti-Discrimination Legislation to cover Education

Finally, we need to speak not just about access to schooling, but right to an education that is dignified and empowering; that does not harm the child's sense of self or dignity; that questions and critiques; that which gives outcomes of both expanded minds and expanded job opportunities. In each of these arenas, education systems the world over are plagued by discrimination against minorities. I would suggest for the future an entire session of this Forum dedicated to unearthing, documenting and suggesting ways to end the multiple forms of anti-minority discrimination that afflict our education systems – in funding, in location, in teacher recruitment, in quality, in curriculum, in classroom practices, and in outcomes. We have heard the word 'Discrimination' many times, in all the statements by previous speakers this morning. But we cannot begin to end this without strong legal instruments. I believe there can be

no substitute for strong, robust domestic anti-discrimination legislation that covers school-based education, including structural discrimination and, most importantly, the minutiae of everyday forms of discrimination rampant in our classrooms. For a country like India, a nation of immense diversity but also with immense discriminatory hierarchies of gender, class, caste, region and religion, a comprehensive anti-discrimination law is long over-due, and for any nation it must be among the key mechanisms we use to guarantee in substantial measure the rights of minority women.

Thank You.

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