



INDIGENOUS NAVIGATOR

Data by and for Indigenous Peoples



Policy Brief **6**

Making the “Minority Within the Minority” Visible: The Indigenous Women of the Philippines

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Introduction

In the 1990s, the academic literature on indigenous women, particularly in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), had reached a consensus that the western feminist thesis of the “triple burden” (i.e., productive, reproductive and community roles) does not generally apply in the region’s IP communities (Casambre et al. 1992; Jeffremovas, 1992; Mackay 1993; Rovillos, 1996). This means that, except in the realm of community politics, indigenous men and women share the “burdens” in production and reproduction. This body of work also agree that women in the Cordillera are not hindered by any societal



and cultural norms from having access to and control over the resources and benefits in doing productive and reproductive roles. These studies implied that where indigenous customary laws and socio-political institutions are still intact and are relatively strong, women's oppression, discrimination based on gender or gender inequality are not evident.

This was more than a decade ago. These studies should be replicated in the present, to take into account the impacts of these IP communities' greater integration into the cash economy and globalization, changing social/demographic conditions and other emerging conditions obtaining in these communities.

The Indigenous Navigator-Philippines (2023) report revealed findings that would challenge the earlier conclusion that indigenous women do not suffer from gender discrimination and oppression. Reinforced by the recent CEDAW shadow report (2023) and the World Bank report (2024), quantitative (which is ethnicity and gender-dis-aggregated) and qualitative data show that indigenous women are the most marginalized "sector" in Philippine society-- the "minority within the minority" groups.

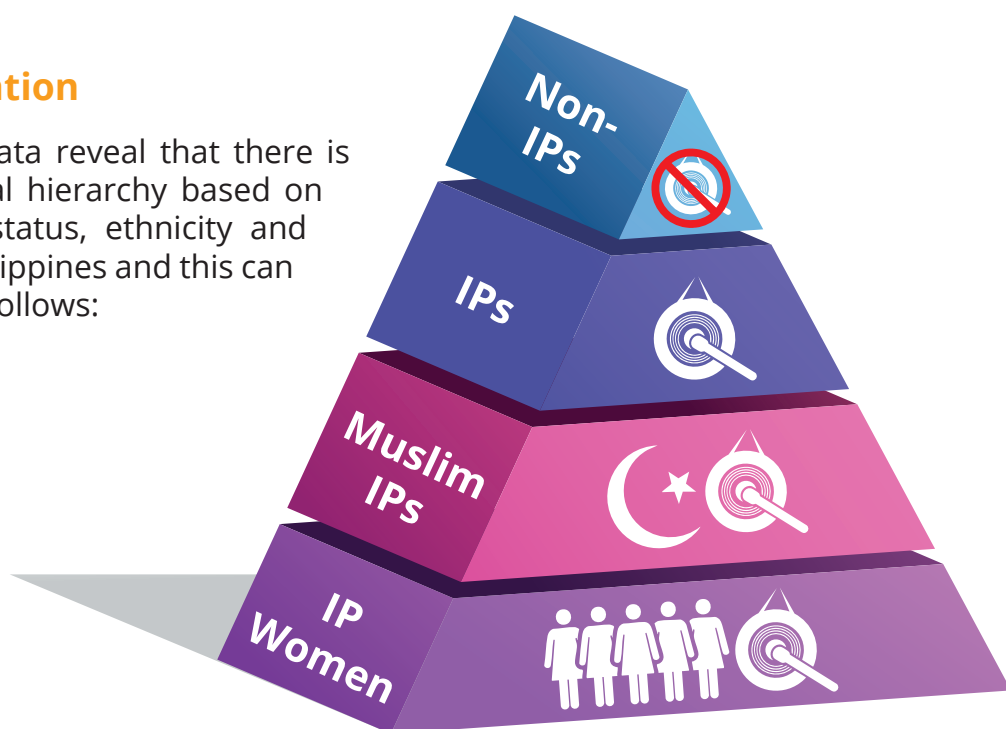
This policy brief aims to present facts and figures on the socio-economic conditions of indigenous women in the Philippines and puts forward policy recommendations towards strategically addressing the "gender gap" while simultaneously addressing the "ethnic gaps" (see IN Policy Briefs 1 to 5).

Methodology

This policy brief heavily draws from the community and national surveys that were conducted by the Indigenous Navigator (IN)- Philippines (2023) and the World Bank (2024) report. The IN national survey gathered data from secondary sources, while the community surveys in the selected communities in Palawan and Mindanao are primary sources through the conduct of key informant interviews, focused group discussions and community meetings.

Data Presentation

Recent/current data reveal that there is a prevailing social hierarchy based on socio-economic status, ethnicity and gender in the Philippines and this can be illustrated as follows:



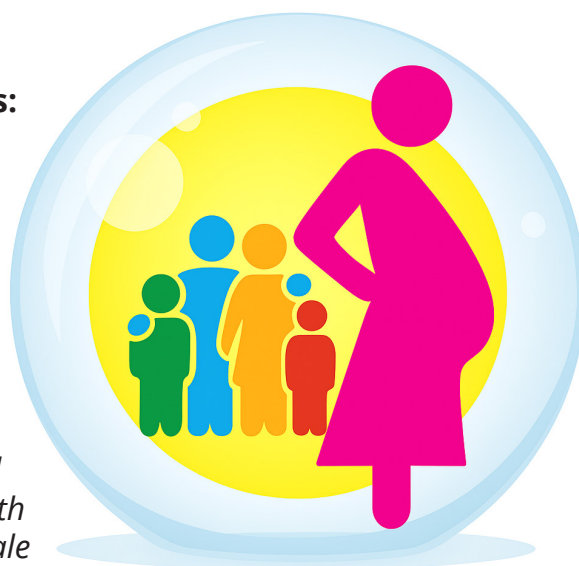
Empirical evidence reveal what indigenous activists have been saying for the longest time- that indigenous women are the “minority within the minority,” (Tebtebba, 2023 and AIWN, 2015) or “the other’s other.” Let us begin with the statistical/quantitative findings of the World Bank (2024), which led to this conclusion:

Gender gaps in the labor market appear to be larger among IP and Muslim ethnic groups. Across all ethnic groups, women who do work tend to engage in the services sector and less in agriculture, and they also engage more in high- and middle-skilled occupations than men. While the overall labor force participation rate is lower among women in IP and Muslim ethnic groups than for non-IP women, the proportion of IP and Muslim ethnic group women engaged in low-skilled occupations and agriculture is more than double the rate for non-IP women. Working women also tend to engage more than men in unpaid family work, and these proportions are also higher among IP and Muslim ethnic groups – where the share of women in unpaid family work is more than three times higher than their non-IP counterparts (WB, 2024 page 14).

This conclusion is supported by the following data that we are lifting verbatim from the WB report:

On the family/household and reproductive status:

- *Women who head households among IPs and Muslim ethnic groups seem to be more vulnerable than women from other groups. Although household gender composition is similar across ethnic groups, the proportion of women who are the head of household is much lower among Muslims (13 percent) relative to both IPs (17 percent) and non-IPs (23 percent). The marital status of women who head households also varies across ethnic groups, with over 60 percent of both IPs and Muslims female household heads widowed or separated, compared to only half among non-IPs (page 48).*
- *Women in Muslim ethnic groups tend to marry at younger ages and have higher fertility rates. At the national level, the share of IPs, Muslims, and IP & Muslim ethnic group women who marry before the age of 18 is at least double the share among non-IP women. This share is highest among IP & Muslim ethnic group women at 25 percent, 15 percentage points higher than the rate among non-IP women. Among IPs, there is wide geographic variation in the proportion of women marrying at younger ages. While the average share of IP women marrying before age 18 is 20 percent, it falls to 14 percent in Luzon and rises to 27 percent in Mindanao (page 48).*
- *Muslim women also have higher fertility rates, particularly among those who marry young. Around 43 percent of Muslim women who married before age 18 had three to four children, compared to 30 percent among non-IPs and 29 percent among IPs. While fertility is generally higher among IP and Muslim women, child mortality may also be higher. An estimated 4 percent of IP and Muslim women have lost children, compared to less than 3 percent of non-IP women. Early marriage may explain the large number*



of dependents in Muslim households: as families grow, household care needs increase and women tend to disproportionately bear these commitments. Household circumstances may limit women's participation in various productive opportunities, negatively affecting their socioeconomic empowerment prospects (page 49).

- Pregnancy and birth rates are comparable among IP and non-IP women, but there are important variations across regions in terms of teenage pregnancy. The IP HH Survey shows that IP and non-IP women aged 15-49 show similar rates of having experienced at least one pregnancy (around 62 percent). However, among these women, the rates of having at least one birth are slightly higher among non-IP (98 percent) compared to IP (96 percent). Teenage pregnancy is more prevalent among IP women, with 11 percent of IP women aged 15-19 reporting at least one pregnancy, compared to 8 percent among their non-IP counterparts. Within IP, the highest rate of teenage pregnancy is observed in Other Luzon (Cagayan Valley and MIMAROPA) at 13 percent; among non-IP, it is highest in BARMM at 30 percent. Rates of teenage births also skew higher among IP, with 78 percent of those reporting having been pregnant also reporting having given birth at least once, compared to 60 percent among non-IP (page 49).

On education:

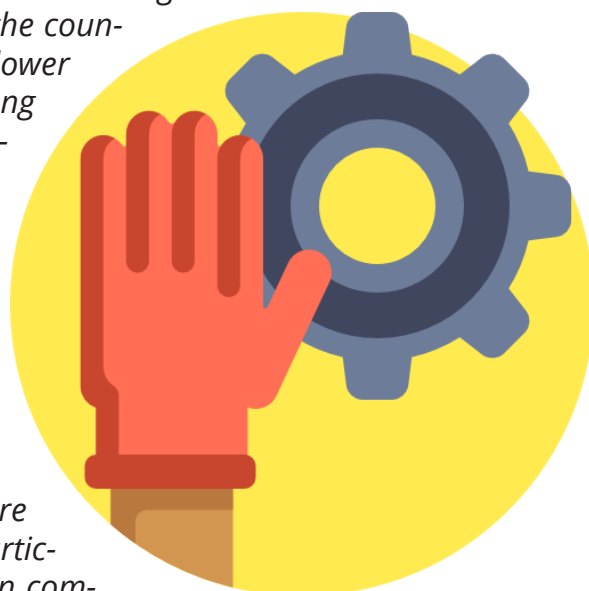
- School drop-out rates increase after age 15, particularly among boys. Across all ethnic groups, school attendance is slightly higher among girls than boys. Compared to non-IPs, however, attendance remains lower for IP girls, girls from Muslim ethnic groups, and IP & Muslim ethnic group girls compared to non-IP girls. School attendance starts declining at age 15 and drops below 30 percent for students aged 20 to 24 years. School dropout rates seem to be slightly higher among boys than girls, but these figures mask large variations across geographic areas and ethnic groups. Among IPs, school dropouts are highest in Mindanao, where about 23 percent of children aged 15 to 19 years are out of school, compared to 16 percent in Luzon. School dropout rates are 2 to 5 percentage points higher for IP boys than girls in all regions in Mindanao and Luzon, except SOCCSKSARGEN and MIMAROPA. Among Muslim ethnic groups, school dropout rates in the same age group are 2 to 6 percentage points higher for boys than girls and are highest in the provinces of Basilan (39 percent) and Sulu (36 percent) in BARMM. Among IP & Muslim ethnic groups, school dropout rates reach very high levels in some provinces in BARMM, as much as 64 percent for boys and 66 percent for girls in Sulu, and 43 percent for boys and 40 percent for girls in Basilan. These disparities in education levels and attendance rates limit opportunities for skills development, subsequently restricting career prospects and upward mobility among young IPs (pages 51 and 52).
- The IP HH Survey shows that the reasons for non-attendance vary widely by gender and region. Among boys aged 16-24, work and the lack of financial resources are the



most common reasons for not attending school, with a larger share of IP citing work reasons (34 percent compared to 28 percent among non-IP) and a larger share of non-IP citing lack of money (27 percent compared to 21 percent among IP). Across CAR, Other Luzon, and Other Mindanao (Zamboanga Peninsula, Northern Mindanao, Davao, SOCCSKSARGEN, and Caraga), work remains the most common reason for not attending school for both IP and non-IP, while in BARMM, the most prevalent reason is lack of money, cited by 44 percent of IP and 67 percent of non-IP. In contrast, marriage or pregnancy is the most common reason among IP women aged 16-24 across regions, cited by more than a quarter of those not in school. Regionally, the share of IP women citing marriage or pregnancy for non-attendance is highest – and 14 percentage points higher than non-IP – in Other Luzon and BARMM. Among non-IP, work continues to be the most common reason for non-attendance (29 percent overall), particularly in BARMM (75 percent) (page 52).

On employment:

- Gender gaps in employment participation seem to be larger among IPs and Muslim ethnic groups. Across the country, engagement in gainful activities is much lower among women than men, and it is lowest among women in Muslim ethnic groups. Around 33 percent of working-age IP women and 36 percent of non-IP women are employed in gainful activities, compared to only 21 percent among Muslim ethnic groups and 19 percent among IP & Muslim ethnic groups. Among men, the proportions are considerably higher, reaching 72 percent for IP men and 69 percent for non-IP ones (page 56).
- When they work, women tend to engage more than men in higher-productivity sectors, but participation is lower among IPs and Muslim women compared to non-IPs. Throughout the life cycle, women from IP & Muslim ethnic groups consistently have the lowest levels of participation in gainful activities until age 65 and above. Trajectories also vary across ethnic groups, with participation among non-IP women peaking earlier (at 35-44 years) before declining significantly by age 65. In contrast, participation among women in IPs and Muslim ethnic groups peaks later, between the ages of 45 and 54, and continues to hover above 20 percent even after they reach the age of 65. Across all ethnic groups, more women tend to engage in the services sector and less in agriculture. They also engage more in high- and middle-skilled occupations than men. However, engagement in more productive sectors and occupations seems to be much lower among women in IPs and Muslim ethnic groups. Among these groups, 25 percent or less of women are in high-end services or high-skilled occupations, compared to more than 30 percent of non-IP women. The proportion of women from IPs and Muslim ethnic groups engaged in low-skilled occupations and agriculture is more than double the rate for non-IP women. Across all ethnic groups, working women tend to engage more than men in unpaid family work, though proportions are higher among IP and Muslim ethnic groups – where the share of women in unpaid family work is more than three times higher than their non-



IP counterparts. On the other hand, across all ethnic groups, women's engagement in government and private household activities, which tend to offer higher pay than self-employment, is higher than men's engagement in those activities. Ultimately, while most of the gender gaps seem driven by gaps in women's rates of participation in economic activities and engagement in income-generating activities, gender disparities in productive jobs by ethnicity remain large (page 58).

The above-discussed situation of indigenous and Muslim women were also cited in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) Report in 2023. The report “noted with concern the inadequate progress made in addressing the situation of disadvantaged and marginalized groups of women and girls, in particular Indigenous and Bangsamoro women in all areas of their lives.” (CEDAW, 2025, p. 3). In addition, the CEDAW 2023 also highlighted other important conditions of indigenous and Muslim women, which are:

- The absence of comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation to protect disadvantaged and marginalized groups of women facing intersecting forms of discrimination in the State party, in particular Indigenous and Bangsamoro women;
- Lack of representation of women (especially indigenous women) at all levels of government, as well as in the judiciary, the public service, the foreign service, academia and international organizations, in particular at decision-making levels;
- The State party's denial of the use of the Anti-Terror Act (2020) to legitimize the targeting of government critics, environmental defenders, human rights defenders and journalists, including through “red-tagging”.

Data Analysis

Clearly, indigenous women are the most marginalized sector in Philippine society. Gender disparities are large in the areas of household and reproductive roles, access to basic social services like health and education, and employment. This is not a matter of accident. Contrary to earlier studies on gender and ethnicity (cited in the introduction above), this disparity may be attributed to systemic, structural and (even) cultural factors that discriminate against indigenous women as women. These institutions are patriarchal, in the sense that they privilege male dominance in the family/household, community, as well as in religious and political institutions. Certain indigenous beliefs and practices, such as arranged marriages at the age of puberty also contribute to this, as IP women are prevented from obtaining education and participating in productive economic activities since they are the ones who are expected to take care of the growing family.

The plight of indigenous women may also be attributed to their discrimination and marginalization as Indigenous Peoples. As we have pointed out in previous policy briefs (cf. IN Policy Brief Numbers 1-5), the state of poverty and marginalization of Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines is due to land tenure (ancestral land and ancestral domain) insecurity, lack or absence of access to basic social services and state neglect of indigenous/customary laws, practices and institutions towards their self-determined development. All these are supposedly legally protected and promoted by the landmark legislation, the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997. However, as we have observed earlier (IN Policy Briefs), the implementation of IPRA has been snail-paced, especially in the current Administration. In many instances, the grant of CALTs or CADTs may not necessarily lead

to the emancipation of IPs, if their land and resources are not managed sustainably by IPs themselves (due to lack of capacity) or when they fall into the hands of unscrupulous big business interests/corporations.

Conclusion

There is robust evidence to support the conclusion that indigenous women are “the minority within the minority,” thus making them the most marginalized sector in Philippine society. Gender disparities are large in the areas of reproduction (family/household roles and status), health, education and employment. Following a deep analysis of the situation, we have attributed the marginalization of indigenous women to the systemic, structural, including cultural factors that relegate women to the margins. These patriarchal institutions and values have disproportionately affected indigenous women. On top, if not parallel to this, are the historic, systemic and structural factors that continue to discriminate Indigenous Peoples, despite the existence, and the weak implementation of the IPRA.

Recommendations

1. Expand and strengthen extreme poverty alleviation programs for indigenous women, such as, but not limited to: Kalahi-CIDSS, Conditional Cash Transfer (4 Ps) program, and the GIDA strategy of the State. Relatedly, we support the CEDAW 2023 recommendation to *“intensify efforts to ensure service delivery in rural areas to promote access of rural and Indigenous women to health care, including sexual and reproductive health services; decision-making; leadership positions; education; formal employment; social protection; housing and adequate water and sanitation; and modern farming technologies, including knowledge on food harvesting techniques, preservation, storage, processing, packaging, marketing and entrepreneurship;*
2. Revisit and support the community-based alternative learning systems and IP education programs that truly benefit the IPs;
3. Develop community-based health programs that offer both biomedical and indigenous health interventions/options;
4. Conduct culture and gender sensitivity trainings in IP communities and other development stakeholders;
5. Fully implement the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act of 1997;
6. Monitor and evaluate (in partnership with the IPOs) the implementation of the Ancestral Domain Sustainable Development and Protection Plans (ADSDPP);
7. *Accelerate the adoption of the Comprehensive Non-Discrimination Bill and ensure that it covers direct and indirect discrimination in the public and private spheres, as well as intersecting forms of discrimination, in accordance with articles 1 and 2 of the Convention, the Committee’s general recommendation No. 28 (2010) on the core obligations of States parties under article 2 of the Convention and target 5.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which is to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere (CEDAW 2023);*

8. Ensure the representation of women (especially indigenous women) at all levels of government, as well as in the judiciary, the public service, the foreign service, academia and international organizations, in particular at decision-making levels (CEDAW 2023);
9. *Ensure that women human rights defenders, women journalists and activists, in particular those advocating for land rights, protection of the environment and the rights of Indigenous and Muslim women can freely carry out their advocacy for women's human rights and exercise their rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association free from harassment, surveillance or undue restrictions, including arbitrary arrest and arbitrary prosecution (CEDAW 2023); and*
10. *Investigate and prosecute all acts of harassment, gender-based violence and discrimination, and intimidation and reprisals against women human rights defenders, including online, and ensure their constitutional right (under article 3.1 of the Constitution) to due process of law and the equal protection of the laws; provide remedies and reparations to victims; and establish a specific registry of such incidents, with disaggregated data and publicly available statistics (CEDAW, 2023).*

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