

Address of Professor Gita Sen,
Chairperson of the Third United Nations Forum on Minority Issues
“Minorities and the Effective Participation in Economic Life”
Geneva
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Mr President,
Madam High Commissioner,
Madam Independent Expert,
Excellencies,
Distinguished Participants,
Colleagues and friends,

Allow me firstly to thank the previous speakers for their kind words on my appointment as Chair of this Third session of the Forum on Minority Issues. Mr. President, Madam High Commissioner, Madam Independent Expert, it is indeed an honour for me to take up this role and I do so with great pleasure and commitment. I would also endorse the comments that have been made about the value of this Forum and the importance of its work in the field of minority issues. I particularly wish to congratulate Gay McDougall, the Independent Expert for her guidance and preparation of this session and for making my task a little easier.

I know that many of you here are from civil society and are minorities yourselves who struggle with these issues on a daily basis and who feel the impact of the lack of fair and effective economic participation intimately. I would like to add my voice to those of my colleagues on the podium this

morning in truly welcoming your participation in this Forum as experts who know the challenges better than any one else. Too often those whom such meetings as this exist to benefit find themselves relegated to the sidelines and spoken for or about, rather than able to speak themselves. I congratulate the Human Rights Council for creating a truly participatory and inclusive Forum on Minority Issues.

The issues that we will address in the coming intense two days of work – minorities and effective participation in economic life - are ones that I am deeply committed to and which urgently require such dedicated attention. When the conditions exist for fair and effective participation in economic life, the result is just, fair and stable societies in which all may contribute equally and prosper equally. Such societies reap the benefits of their diversity. However, too often such conditions are not in place for some disadvantaged minority communities. The result is frequently poverty, exclusion or marginalization, and social division that damages not just minorities but the whole of society.

I would like to emphasize that the issues that we will address, while certainly challenging, are problems that can be resolved and have been resolved effectively in many instances and in many countries. There is indeed much good and positive practice to build upon and lessons that have been learned through long and often difficult experiences – lessons and practices that can and should be transmitted elsewhere. Frequently those solutions do not cost vast amounts of national financial resources and they do not require long and costly programmes of implementation or generations of cultural or social change.

What they do require is firstly the recognition that a problem even exists and that there are disadvantaged communities, the members of which, do not have the same opportunities as others, or who are deeply and negatively affected by activities that may benefit some, but not all. So recognition and the data that reveals the extent of problems facing minorities are essential if States and others are going to even begin the process of moving forward towards change. Another vital component is the political will to make that change real and to make a commitment to addressing discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization, and to promoting equality and the sustainable conditions for equality. The legal and human rights provisions must also essentially be in place.

When those key elements exist, I believe that the potential exists to quickly and effectively implement real change that improves the lives of thousand and even millions of people dramatically. Some of the solutions are tried and tested and exist in such areas as strengthening the infrastructure in minority regions and for minorities to allow them to reach markets for their crops or goods and to ensure equal access to education, health and other services. Initiatives in the area of training and equality of access to employment are equally essential. However, we must also be creative and recognize new and emerging possibilities as we seek solutions and I urge you to do so in our deliberations. Take for example the impact of new communications technologies, the internet and the mobile phone. In many regions such technologies are having a dramatic affect on economic participation of previously marginalized people and they will continue to do so.

It is my hope and expectation that this Forum will recognize in its work that we should not speak only in broad terms about minority communities, but

that we must delve deeper inside those communities and their problems. In doing so, we reveal hidden challenges and those issues that are frequently overlooked or neglected. Age, disability, gender, sexual orientation and gender identity can often serve to compound the discrimination that minorities already face. For minority women, for example, the effects of marginalisation in economic participation can be particularly powerful. The challenges of double or multiple-discrimination, due to their status as minorities and as women serves to reduce the opportunities available to women to benefit from their participation in economic life. Double and triple burdens of work compound the lack of basic amenities such as clean water and sanitation, cheap and clean cooking fuels, availability of child care support, and protection against domestic, work-place and societal violence. They render the conditions under which women, and all too often young girls, work and earn incomes difficult, if not harmful or even dangerous. The growing informalisation of labour markets consequent on globalization has brought more women into paid work, but often with low pay and under poor working conditions. Equally, entrenched gender roles and status leave women and girls highly vulnerable, for example, with regard to ownership of land or property or inheritance rights, the ability to access post-primary education, credit, technology or markets.

Colleagues and friends,

In drawing attention to key issues in the next two days, let us not forget the elephants in the room. The global financial and economic crisis that we are presently living through has had massive impacts not only at the heights of global governance but in the lives of people, especially those such as minorities who are already in the most difficult economic situations. Similar

dislocations are expected to flow from global climate change and its effects on food, water, habitats and livelihoods. Insufficient attention to recording and collecting information about these consequences for minorities can mean that counteracting measures will remain weak. Times of economic crisis can be particularly difficult for minority groups that may already be subject to societal discrimination and stigma, and who may be undocumented or migrant workers. Societal pressures to blame those who are the most vulnerable can become explosive unless governments play a moderating role and act as guarantors of protection from violence and abuse.

I would conclude by saying that the work of this Forum is hugely significant and I have high expectations of it. Let us not forget as we begin our work this morning that in many of the poorest societies and even in some of the wealthiest, the struggle of minorities and others for effective economic participation is also a struggle for survival – for the livelihoods and incomes of individuals, families and entire communities. Without an equalising social, legal and political environment for economic participation children go hungry, poverty takes hold, families and communities fall apart.

I have seen the outcomes and recommendations of past sessions of this Forum and I am impressed by their potential to catalyse change – but only if they are implemented. So we must keep an eye also on the future and, in shaping our recommendations, on making them as concrete and achievable as possible so that they can be put quickly into practice.

The relevance of what we do here in these days is well captured by this quote from a speech given in New York by the Secretary General on the occasion of Human Rights Day: “...Human Rights Day commemorates the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is not called the partial declaration of human rights; it is not the sometimes declaration of human rights. It is the universal declaration, guaranteeing all human beings their basic human rights...without exception...”

It is an honor to Chair this Forum and I look forward to a constructive, dynamic, and successful session together.

Thank you.