

Intervention by Jamileh Sharhani to the United Nations Human Rights Council.
Forum on Minority Issues, Fourth Session, 29-30 November 2011 in Geneva

Agenda Item 3, Minority Women and Girls and the right to Education:

Honorable chairperson, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen

My name is Jamleh Sharhani - I belong to Ahwazi-Arab minority ethnic group in southwestern Iran.

Ahwazi Arabs constitute an indigenous, ethnic, national and linguistic minority in Iran. Historically, this indigenous Arab community, women and men alike, have been marginalized, excluded and discriminated against by successive governments in Iran. There estimated to be 6-8 million Ahwazi-Arabs in al-Ahwaz or Khuzestan and 8-10 million Arabs throughout Iran, compromising about 10% of the population.

Ahwazi-Arab share of government jobs is only 10% while 75% of the province population is Arab. Women share of these jobs are few to none.

Our right to education in our mother language, Arabic, has been denied. In Iran, despite its multi ethnic and multi-lingual nature, Farsi or Persian language is the sole recognized official language.

While Ahwazi women, as all women in Iran, face discrimination, as Arab minority woman, we face multiple layers of discrimination.

While the Islamic Republic of Iran exploit our oil and rakes over 100 million dollars a year and open Persian language schools in South America, Africa and other parts of the world, most villages and towns in Al-Ahwaz lack schools or have to travel tens of KMs to attend one. Where there are schools, our children are forced to study in a foreign Farsi or Persian. The result is a high illiteracy and high unemployment among Ahwazi-Women and girls.

While the illiteracy rate in Iran, according to government statistics is 14%, among Ahwazi-Arab men is over 50% and among Ahwazi women is even higher. The illiteracy rate among Ahwazi women is 4 times the national average. And unemployment is 6 times the national average.

The dropout rate of Ahwazi students is 30% during elementary school, 50% during secondary school and 70% during high school. Only one out of 4 Ahwazi students graduates from high school, while 3 out of 4 Persian students graduate from high school. In Iran Farsi/Persian language, which is native only to a 1/3 of the population, is the sole official language. Arabic and all other languages such as Kurdish, Turkish and Baluchis are banned therefore denying them their linguistic rights and the competitiveness in the job market.

The government officials in Arab Majority Khuzestan province do not speak our language. All officials including the chief of women affairs in Ahwaz, Ms. Mariam Haidarian, like her all other predecessors, are non-native, non-Arab sent from Tehran.

No Ahwazi woman has ever been allowed to take a job in the political establishment- no Ahwazi men or women allowed to be Khuzestan governor, officers, mayors or get a high or a mid-level government positions- all these jobs in Khuzestan have consistently been appointed from non-Arabs.

We have no access to Iran's justice system as we do not speak the language and are not allowed to take Arabic translator to court.

In the Chamran University in Arab majority Ahwaz City, it is estimated that only 10% of the students are Ahwazi –Arab women and men.

With inadequate education and political representation, we the Ahwazi-Arab women are unable to address the injustices we face in the economic, cultural, political and judicial spheres.

We recommend the following:

1. All government positions in Al-Ahwaz or Khuzestan province that deal with women issues, to be filled with women belonging to Arab minority.
2. That Iran recognizes and acknowledges the existence and the group rights of the Ahwazi-Arab women and men and other ethnic minorities and provide official and accurate census data by ethnicity.
3. Facilitate access to education in Arabic and establish a minimum quota to employ indigenous Ahwazis in the oil and Gas industries.