

Human Rights Council Forum on Minority Issues
Fourth session Geneva, 29-30 November 2011

Prepared by: Nagwa Musa Konda

Minority women and effective participation in economic, social and cultural life

The President of the Human Rights Council, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Chairperson of the Forum, the independent expert on minority issues and all participants, I greet you all. I very much appreciate the opportunity to share with you my experience on effective participation of minority women in economic, social and cultural life. To me this is a very crucial and fundamental meeting as we discuss practical and concrete measures aimed at “Guaranteeing the rights of minority women” across the globe.

As it is clear from the previous sessions, it is evident that minorities are still often poorly represented in employment or work in an informal jobs, no access to loans, businesses and they live in the poorest and remote regions of the world, including slums, refugee camps and IDP camps. Just the living arrangements of these minorities limit their prospects for economic development and make them more vulnerable to human rights violations. A disproportionately high number of minority pupils who do not attend school and many others receive education of a lower quality, yet they have little or no access to information about their rights or about advocating for their effective participation and justice.

Reflecting on the historical context, we see that although there have been massive global initiatives since the 1950s e.g. (The European Convention on the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms in 1950) or even earlier, to ensure human rights of minority women and other vulnerable groups is respected and realized. While many countries are progressing towards achieving gender equality and realizing human rights principles, others are regressing by escalating more violence and discrimination against minority women such as Sudan, Somalia, Eritria and othersⁱ

To ensure effective participation of minorities in economic, social and cultural life, we need to consider full, equal and meaningful access to education, employment and housing, and access to sustainable return processes for displaced people and to credit and development programs. This means full reorganization of all structures, and recognition of all forms of diversity by governments and other duty bearers. That is why it is so important for this forum to break the long silence in many cases on the minorities’ issues and focus on practical mechanisms for transforming local realities.

As it is well articulated in the recommendations of this forth session, most actions for guaranteeing the rights of minority women is the ultimate responsibility of governments. However, in most cases the minorities have been marginalized and oppressed by those who are in power (governments) themselves. Therefore, we need to rethink the principle of human rights “the moral obligation to protect” versus sovereignty. Thus, in many countries minority women count on the international community to lead and put an end to these sufferings “we need actions not just pretty worlds”.

In my experience, the minority people in Nuba Mountains, Blue Nile, Abyei and Darfur are being oppressed by their own government and it has become obvious that the government does not respond to civil society organization or international treaties, even if they are signatories. In many countries like Sudan the constitution has no provision for women's right, instead, it reflect institutional gender discriminationⁱⁱ. Therefore, these efforts must not cease. It is time, now more than ever before, to put an end to the humiliations against minorities in critical situations such as in the 10 countries ranked by the MRGⁱⁱⁱ as highest having most people under threat.

The policies and legislation have been controlled by the fanatic leaders who do not have the political will to empower minorities, leave alone minority women, they also control the media and mislead the public including the international community. Therefore, transformation of legislations and policies in those countries and changing the leaders from dictatorship to democracy and to restructure the center of power is crucial. Otherwise the situation will remains the same despite all efforts being made by concerned bodies and institutions. In these cases, civil society organizations and NGOs need to be assisted to carry out their noble mission of transformation.

Democracy in countries where there is a lot of minority groups often the minority groups are over looked if there is a large ethnically affiliated group, especially in Africa. There for there must be a system set up in these democracies that ensure a voice for these minorities and that promotes diversity of vote and not just voting for the person that is from the same tribe or ethnicity. Than minority opinion will be more important in Democracies.

We also need to consider different contexts and local realities, while learning from countries with good practices. National/International human rights institutions, the private sector and other stockholders have the obligation to study obstacles and recommend legislative and policy reforms in line with the local context and assist in developing programs to guarantee the implementation of non-discriminative legislation with regard to such areas as minority women's access to education and training, employment, social security, financial services and property ownership.

Development agencies must have physical presence in the areas of minorities and should work in collaboration with Governments "having the political well" and civil society to identify barriers to development and remedy the root causes of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by minority women. This should result in their economic and social inclusion to ensure the full and effective participation in all programs or projects cycle that will affect minorities or the regions in which they live. They also need to interact with minority women and understand their challenges in order to come up with practical solutions that are sustainable and result oriented.

In search for freedom and human dignity, we need to create an atmosphere that enables minorities deeply engaged in a political dialogue that will result in an umbrella for change and for democracy and equality. This should be supported by the international community such as the United Nations system, human rights mechanisms, Human Rights Council, MRG etc. with new approaches and values shared between national civil society organization and those

technical institutions. Otherwise our efforts will be in vain and the formula of war, misery, marginalization, discrimination, exclusion and poverty will continue.

I believe that working toward guaranteeing the rights of minority women is a vital requirement for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Therefore, empowering the local communities by strengthening their capacity to be able to cater for their dignity and human rights is crucial. That would definitely need support from multiple stakeholders, including all of us who are here today in this forum. The United Nations High Commission for Human right has been at the forefront in defending the rights of the voiceless, followed by other institutions, and indeed they hold places of honor in the hearts and minds of the vulnerable people including the minorities.

To this end, Minority women should be capacitated and empowered to seek active and effective participation in civil society consultations, so they may consider creative and suitable ways to ensure their rights has been respected and protected. Furthermore, holding such meetings in regions where minorities predominantly live, and by facilitating attendance of minority women and improving their participation in such gatherings is an advantage to the fulfillment of this forum's objectives.

Finally, let me express my gratitude and honor for this rare and historic opportunity. It means a lot to the minority women in general and Sudanese in particular, and I thank you all for organizing this forum and facilitating my participation.

Thank you

ⁱ SIHA Network-Banjul Report 2011

ⁱⁱ The Interim National Constitution of the republic of the Sudan 1998 and Sudan criminal Act of 1991

ⁱⁱⁱ Minority Rights Group International 2011 report