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Human Rights Council

4th Session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues

29-30 November 2011

Item 7, Concrete Steps Aimed at Guaranteeing the Rights of Minority Women

Statement by Minority Rights Group International

Thank you Madam Chair.

Minority Rights Group welcomes the comprehensive draft recommendations and we have a few concrete suggestions for strengthening them.

There is a balance to maintain between the right of minorities and of minority women to protect their cultural identity and the right of minority women to be free from discriminatory or harmful practices. MRG believes the recommendations could be more nuanced in order to better reflect that balance. Recommendation 23 rightly reminds Governments that violence against women happens in all communities and highlights that principles of equality mean that minority women have an equal right to protection from violence as majority women. There needs to be a similar acknowledgement in recommendation 30 that harmful practices are not only found in minority communities. Without that explicit recognition, there is a danger of the recommendations perpetuating stereotypes of minority communities. This can lead to two different problems:

- a) that states ignore harmful practices within minority communities because they are reluctant to interfere with cultural practices. This means that minority women are not protected on an equal basis as other women or
- b) that states use the existence of harmful practices as a reason to crack down on all cultural practices of the minority whether harmful or not. This results in discrimination against the community.

In practice we suggest the following amendments to recommendation 30: It should start by saying that "All women have the right to protection from harmful practices. Harmful practices may be found in all communities – majority and minority". It should then go on to state "Governments should take measures to eliminate all harmful traditional and cultural practices, including those that discriminate against minority women and girls..." followed by the rest of the recommendation.

The final sentence of recommendation 22 could be strengthened by specifying that public sensitization programmes that address violence within minority communities must be very sensitively carried out so that it does not exacerbate discrimination against the community.

In addition to Government and law enforcement officials etc receiving training on non-discrimination and women's rights specified in recommendation 24, the recommendation should include ensuring sanctions against those officials who discriminate against minority women.

Article 9 of the Declaration on the Rights of Minorities requires the specialized agencies of the UN to contribute to the realisation of the rights in the Declaration and MRG would like to see the recommendations to the UN system strengthened. Recommendation 38 calling for all agencies to address minority issues and adopt a gender perspective is welcome. In addition to calling for UN agencies to appoint a specialist in intersectional discrimination, it

should also call on all UN agencies which haven't already done so, to adopt a specific policy on minority issues, including paying particular attention to the rights of minority women. Similarly, recommendation 59 on education could include a specific recommendation to UNICEF to ensure full inclusion of minority girls in their education programmes.

MRG would like to highlight a point in the recommendations of last year's forum which is very relevant again this year. A voluntary fund for minorities should be created to enable minority representatives, including 50% minority women to participate in the human rights mechanisms of the United Nations system.

Finally, echoing the call made yesterday by the distinguished Member of the CERD Committee, it is important that everyone – governments, UN agencies and human rights bodies, NGOs and donors – ensure that gender and attention to issues of minority women are not sidelined or reduced in the current difficult economic situation. Given that gender is frequently one of the first areas to suffer, it would be good to add a recommendation on this to the first section of general recommendations.

Thank you Madam Chair.