

**United Nations Forum on Minority Issues – Inaugural session**

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**Intervention by Anastasia Crickley**

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I welcome and would like to thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's important discussion on Minorities and the Right to Education. I particularly welcome the choice of the right to education as topic for this first Forum on Minority Issues and welcome the approach taken by Gay McDougall and her colleagues to the Forum's organisation and process towards inclusiveness and participation and thank you Madam Chairperson, Victória Mohácsi, MEP.

Education is a fundamentally important tool for empowerment of minorities and marginalised so that rights denied, including the right to education, can be named and claimed by all.

In my intervention as well as drawing in particular on my role as Personal Representative to the Chairman in Office of OSCE on Combating Racism, Xenophobia and Discrimination, also focusing on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions, I will also refer to the work of the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) which I have the honour to chair as well as my work with Roma, Sinti and Travellers and migrants over three decades and finally in Ireland

as Chair of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism (NCCRI).

It is clear from this experience as many of you have already articulated that minorities and minority ethnic groups including Roma, Sinti and Travellers and migrants experience discrimination in education. Consensus based decisions by the 56 participating OSCE States, the development of a Roma Contact Point with staff within the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights along with annual reviews of progress, form part of the OSCE's response. With regard to education and addressing education disadvantage the OSCE is giving particular importance to pre-school education as a means of early promotion of the right to education.

Much however remains to be done - not just in a few states but throughout the European region - to address the educational disadvantage, marginalisation and discrimination which act as barriers to the right to education for minorities and minority ethnic groups. Research and Annual Reports of the European Union's Fundamental Rights Agency underline this reality. Reports on Roma, Sinti and Traveller education point also to the continued existence in some places of segregated education provision and/or a lower quality than the mainstream, with educational outcomes very significantly below those experienced by the overall population.

Friends, may I now speak briefly to four matters to which my experience, including as a migrant and work, has led me to give importance. All are complementary to the recommendations circulated and are presented to inform dialogue and discussion on the important issues they raise.

Firstly, in considering the right to education for minorities it is clear, as has been pointed out by earlier interventions, that one size cannot fit all. We are women and men, girls and boys. Even limited access to education may be experienced differently. If women and girls are not named in our discussion, they will be excluded and their issues will not be addressed. Disaggregated data, as the experience of the FRA and earlier the EUMC in researching various forms of discrimination indicates, is an essential component in this process. You cannot manage, let alone address what you cannot measure in some way.

Secondly, from the work of the National Consultative Committee on Racism and Interculturalism in Ireland I am clear that in considering these matters, the development and implementation of an intercultural approach in education represents a positive approach to the question of the realisation of the right to education for minorities.

An intercultural approach recognises and values cultural diversity and the accommodation of diversity within education while at the same time acknowledging the existence of racism and the need to eliminate discrimination, be it manifested directly

or indirectly. Furthermore, it is not necessary that minorities be present in the classroom for intercultural education to be relevant and required. Whether present or not, the power dynamic still remains to be addressed. The Irish Department of Education and Science is currently developing such an Intercultural Education Strategy to inform education provision at all levels.

When considering intercultural education, it is useful to refer to the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue recently developed by the Council of Europe. This document provides a useful framework that acknowledges the power dynamic and the need to address it in order to create intercultural dialogue.

Alongside an intercultural approach to education, with regard to religion, education can play an important role in teaching about different religions, an essential element to develop mutual understanding and help eliminate discrimination in this area I direct you to the guiding principles developed by the OSCE as a useful tool in this context, for minorities and majorities alike.

Thirdly, when considering access to education for minorities, it is essential in my view to go beyond focussing only on access. Getting past the door is simply not enough. We need to consider and to monitor access, participation and educational outcomes for minorities including ethnic minorities. All initiatives taken and the recommendations before us need to reflect this.

Finally, the education environment is key to ensuring equality of access to education for minorities and facilitating real and equal participation in education as well as contributing to the attainment of equal educational outcomes. It is important that an intercultural environment is reflected at every level and that all who are part of education – not just teachers but all – are involved. The development of intercultural and anti-racist capacity within education institutions should be considered as grounds for the promotion of the right to education.

Training, as reflected in the draft recommendations, can play a key role in developing an inclusive, intercultural education environment. However, we need to go beyond training to also developing appropriate whole school institution policies at all levels. While supporting educators and others to develop personal and institutional intercultural capacity, policies need to be in place sending the message that this capacity is a requirement and not a choice. This environment can play a central role in enhancing opportunities for integrated education. While it is important to recognise the right of minorities to establish their own educational institutions, it is also important that we also recognise that for many members of minorities participating in segregated education, this is not a choice. Their experience of segregation may be as a direct result of an active policy by government to segregate minorities within education and from mainstream society.

Interrogation of the curriculum including in universities is another critical factor in ensuring that minorities including ethnic minorities can access their right to education; to appropriate and relevant education which affirms and develops a positive sense of identity and self-esteem.

In sum, recognition of minorities and of the reality of their often negative experience within education, segregated education or exclusion from education is necessary. An intercultural approach to education represents a positive approach to ensuring minorities access their rights. Those with responsibility for education need to consider access to education in terms of equality of access, participation and outcome.

None of this can be done for people. It needs to happen with participation of minorities in making, shaping and monitoring their education provision (as indeed the Forum models) rather than on the back of consultation exercises which can be manipulated or ignored. The rights articulated in the process do not stand alone but are part of the linked global framework which needs to be fully involved and integrated towards essential human rights for all.

Thank you.

## References

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