

Contribution of the Swiss Federal Commission against Racism (FCR) to the UN Forum on Minority Issues

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IV Equal Access to Quality Education for Minorities

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Madame Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to make the following statement on behalf of the Swiss Federal Commission against Racism, FCR, which is a national specialized Human Rights agency against Racism recognized by the United Nations.

The FCR shares the Forum's concerns and welcomes the recommendations regarding Point 4, Equal Access to Quality Education for Minorities.

We would like to share with the Forum a specific subject from Switzerland and present preventive measures that have been developed in order to mend the situation. As a preliminary remark, let me state that Switzerland does not have a coherent anti-discrimination law as, for example, the countries of the European Union do. This makes it more difficult to actively fight discrimination on the labor market and in housing matters.

Recognized NATIONAL Minorities in Switzerland, as defined by Switzerland regarding the Framework Convention on the Protection of national minorities of the Council of Europe, are the following: the three minority language groups, the travelers/gypsies and the Jewish population. All these groups are minorities of long standing in our country. However, Switzerland has many NEW minority groups that have immigrated into the country after the Second World War. They came as workers from European and Extra-European countries, some others as refugees. Autochthonous Swiss, so to speak, tend to identify members of these NEW minorities as "aliens" and as "not belonging here". These perceptions contrast with the multicultural reality in our country. Many of the newcomers settle in Switzerland, marry and inter-marry with local Swiss men and women, their children go to school, work and live here. Public discourse in Switzerland speaks of second and third generation migrants. Many however have become Swiss citizens, even if this procedure is long and complicated. Discriminations that we are addressing here therefore occur less according to nationality but

more so on the grounds of ethnic origin and stereotyped presumptions regarding culture, habits or religious practice. People of Muslim faith, coming from Turkey and Kosova mainly, but also from many other countries, are the largest religious minority group. Immigrants from African origins are a new and visible minority group in Switzerland. Both these groups are predominantly targeted by stereotyping, latent or overt discrimination and xenophobic attitudes, all of which are still prevailing in Swiss society.

Madame Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen, let me get to my example. Scientific studies show that young people, age 14 to 17 or so, who are in search of a place of apprenticeship and who belong to a recognizable minority group, have difficulties to find access to this important part of their education. Apprenticeship in Switzerland consists of training on the job combined with a secondary education in a professional school. The majority of the Swiss companies are small scale enterprises, counting ten or less employees. Employers, says the relevant research, tend to not invite a youngster for an interview whose name “sounds strange or Islamic” to them or is difficult to pronounce. Groups most discriminated against, regardless of their integration of long standing or their Swiss citizenship, but merely on the grounds of their ethnic origin which is recognizable by their names, are young men and women of Yugoslav and Turkish origin to which we have to add those of African descent. Employers say that they want to avoid any kind of problematic situations and that they fear “intercultural clashes”. Some stated they have to take into consideration the opinion of their customers in order to ensure a smooth marketing and sale of their products. Applicants are rejected even if their school marks have been excellent which makes things worse and emphasizes the discriminatory aspect.

It is obvious that this situation calls for preventive work. Recently, the Swiss Association of Commercial Employees has created a platform on Internet called “We are ready” (www.weareready.ch , in German). In a way, the platform project is based on the results of “practice testing”, a method developed by the ILO which reveals unequal treatment of two fictitious equal applications of candidates, but of different ethnic origin and/or nationality. The candidates on the platform “We are ready” are presented anonymously. Employers in search of an apprentice choose candidates directly from the platform. As a result, the impact of personal prejudice and stereotypes is blocked. Nearly 6000 young people in search of an apprentice job are presently listed on the platform; almost 600 companies declared themselves willing to hire applicants presented on the platform. The pilot project has shown positive results. In parallel with it, the Swiss Association of Commercial Employees runs a similar platform covering yet another tricky situation where discrimination might occur: when young people, just after apprenticeship, are in search for their first fulltime job. Focusing on this, a research study published in 2003 has shown that the degree of discrimination for youngsters of ex-Yugoslavian or Turkish origin amounts to nearly 70 percent.

Madame Chair, the example shows that positive actions by Third Parties can yield remarkable results. We therefore opt for including a paragraph in the recommendations that States should promote and finance such actions which aim at granting equal access to education.

Thank you for your attention.