

Dear Madame Chair and Ms Gay McDougall, Independent Expert on Minority Issues,

So far only spoken language minorities have been discussed here in the first Forum. Therefore I would like to bring up the issue of sign languages since they constitute at least half of the languages of the world and form an important part of the global cultural and linguistic diversity.

As the President of the World Federation of the Deaf, an umbrella organisation for 130 national deaf associations all around the world, I am here today representing over 70 million deaf people. Deaf people face exactly the same problems that have been discussed today and yesterday during this forum, as hearing linguistic and cultural minorities. Themes mentioned in the draft recommendations on minorities and the right to education apply to us also. Sign language users' linguistic rights which entail the right to use their own language are not carried out and in fact sign language users suffer linguistic genocide every day.

Deaf sign language users consider themselves mainly a cultural and linguistic minority, rather than merely a group of persons with disabilities. Sign language users also include for instance hearing children with deaf parents, in other words children who have grown up with sign language as their mother tongue. They all have right to become bi- or multilingual citizens through quality education using bi- or multilingual and multicultural approaches.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) mentions the rights of sign language users in many articles. It defines clearly that languages include both spoken and signed languages (Article 2 Definitions). It affirms that states must recognise and promote deaf culture and linguistic and cultural identity of sign language users as well as their right to receive education in their own language. It also affirms that the states must recognise and promote the use of sign languages (Article 21 Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information).

Article 24 of the CRPD states, that States Parties shall facilitate the learning of sign language and the promotion of the linguistic identity of the deaf community. In addition, article 30 mentions that persons with disabilities shall be entitled, on an equal basis with others, to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including sign languages and deaf culture.

According to a recent survey on the Human Rights of Deaf people deaf children rarely enjoy the opportunity to go to school where sign language is the principal mode of communication. Overall, the dominant educational communication method is Oral Education where spoken language is considered to be the basis for standard social and academic communication instead of sign language. This in turn leads to a low level of literacy and a weak social, economic and political status of deaf people. Only in 19 per cent of the countries that participated in the survey deaf students have, at least in theory, the possibility to attend classes at the university level thanks to interpreting services.

I strongly believe that this Forum and the Independent Expert on Minority Issues should include the situation of sign language users in all its work as well as take our rights and needs into consideration when working on the recommendations discussed here today.

Moreover, it is equally imperative to keep in mind all the other members of minorities with disabilities, who also live in a difficult situation. They all also have right to receive quality education through use of Braille, alternative script, augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication with their own minority languages and majority languages used in their societies.

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