

UNICEF is honoured to be part of this year's session of the Forum on Minority Issues, particularly in the wake of the appointment of the new Independent Expert, Ms. Rita Izsak.

We would like to welcome her in her new role and wish her success in her journey to promote the rights of national, ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities around the world. We look forward to deepening our collaboration in the coming years.

This year's theme: "Guaranteeing the Rights of Minority Women" comes at a time when we in UNICEF are renewing our equity-focus with the aim of ensuring that the most excluded and marginalized children are reached with services necessary to ensure their survival, development and protection.

Our Mission Statement obligates us to promote the equal rights of women and girls and to support their full participation in the political, social, and economic development of their communities through our country programmes, using the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women as our primary points of reference

While education is widely recognized as a fundamental human right of every individual, in practice, minority populations generally lag behind in all levels of education due to persisting situations of exclusion rooted in history. It is important to underscore the common issues affecting minority children in general: Education systems are yet to respond to issues which are pertinent to the realisation of the rights of minority children, particularly those whose mother tongue is a minority language, and thus contribute to their exclusion. Rules imposing a national language of instruction in schools deny children the opportunity the right to learn in their mother tongue, contrary to the article 30 of the CRC which provides that: In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities or persons of indigenous origin exist, a child belonging to such a minority or who is indigenous shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of his or her group, to enjoy his or her own culture, to profess and practise his or her own religion, or to use his or her own language (Article 30).

Additionally, textbooks frequently reinforce stereotyped images of minority groups, resulting in further stigmatization and social exclusion. The Convention on the Rights of the Child underscores the opportunity presented by the education system to prepare the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship

among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin" (29 (1) (d).

Minority girls face unique challenges, made by complex intersecting forms of discrimination based on ethnicity, restrictive traditional roles for women and in most cases, endemic poverty. Girls from minority groups also often live in remote geographic locations generally neglected by government social services and requiring travel to great distances to the nearest school, thereby multiplying the risks to their personal security. The serious shortage of information about these issues means that the day-to-day reality faced by minority girls remains hidden and is a severe barrier to addressing their situation.

UNICEF's field presence in over 150 countries gives us a unique opportunity and obligation to support a number of initiatives benefitting women and girls, particularly in the field of education. Basic Education and Gender Equality is one of the five Focus Areas of the organisation's Medium Term Strategic Plan (2006-2013) with the objective of realizing the right to education for every boy and girl. I would like to share with the Forum a few examples from the field, and more specifically from our work with and for Roma girls in the CEECIS region where UNICEF chairs the inter-agency process on Roma inclusion.

In an effort to reduce gender-based and other disparities and to ensure increased access, participation, and completion of quality basic education, UNICEF Uganda has developed Girls' Education Movement (GEM) clubs in Lango communities, providing supportive forums for both boys and girls to discuss their concerns. These include measures which could prevent many girls, from dropping out, while dealing with barriers to girls' education among many minority communities

The Government of India has committed itself under the eleventh Five-Year Plan (2008-12) to inclusive delivery of public services to meet the MDGs. In light of this the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for the same period outlines its central goal as: 'promoting social, economic and political inclusion for the most disadvantaged, especially women and girls'. UNICEF cooperates actively with the

Government to ensure that girls from marginalized groups can enjoy their right to quality education.

Across Central and Eastern Europe, discrimination and non-inclusive education systems systematically deprive children from Roma communities of their right to education. In some countries, only about 20 percent of Roma children ever enroll in primary school, compared with more than 90 percent of their non-Roma peers. Those that do enroll are likely to drop out before the end of basic schooling due to racism, in schools and the lack of capacity of the education system to respond to their special needs. In South-Eastern Europe, for example, only 18 per cent of Roma attend secondary school, compared with 75 per cent of the majority community, and less than 1 per cent of Roma attend university.

Many Roma children are found in 'special' schools and classrooms for children with disabilities simply because of their language differences. This leads to large gaps in the quality of education received by Roma children and their non-Roma peers.

Pre-school coverage for Roma children in South-Eastern Europe is low, ranging from 0.2 per cent in Kosovo to 13 to 17 per cent in Romania. This lack of access has been identified by Roma NGOs as a major contributing factor in the educational failure of Roma across the region. The World Bank (2010) notes that educational enrolment in Central and Eastern Europe among primary-school age Roma children is on average a quarter of the corresponding rate for non-Roma children.

Even when Roma children gain access to primary school, drop-out rates are high. In Slovakia, Roma children are 30 times more likely to abandon school than the rest of the population.

In Serbia, only 13 per cent of Roma complete primary school. As a result of the high drop-out rate among Roma children, their participation beyond primary school is dramatically lower than that of the majority population. Educational achievement among Roma is low. A Hungarian survey found for example, that the grade average of Roma pupils was lower

than that of majority peers with half receiving, failing or near failing marks in Hungarian language and mathematics.

It also takes longer for Roma children to finish their schooling. Of the Roma children with less than eight grade levels, nearly all are entirely or functionally illiterate.

The Roma initiative of UNICEF in Romania identified the key social, economic, cultural, and systemic barriers leading to Roma children's non-enrolment, non-attendance, and school drop-out in Romania. These include: precarious health conditions, gender-norms favoring the education of boys, poor child self-image, and poor school achievement.

Of Roma children who had dropped out cited lack of interest, two thirds cited lack of interest, 20 per cent said they had experienced feelings of rejection, and only 10 per cent had a positive attitude to school.

That office has therefore' invested in assessing and analyzing the problems and the causes of Roma marginalization in the context of education, as well as the obligations of the Romanian state.

Roma education gaps also have an important gender dimension.

About three quarters of Roma women do not complete primary education, compared with one fifth of women from majority communities. Although disaggregated statistics are only beginning to be collected, evidence is emerging that literacy and other indicators are poorer for Roma girls than boys. Roma women in Albania have spent an average of 5.5 years in school, as compared with 8 years for men.

Some of the barriers causing the poor educational outcomes for children from Roma communities, include:

Lack of access to early childhood care and education services;

Lack of birth registration;

Poverty and social exclusion;

Segregation between and within schools;

Poor quality learning environments;

Lack of targeted financing mechanisms; and

Lack of political will.

UNICEF adopts both human rights and gender perspectives in efforts to address violations of Roma children's rights to and in education. In collaboration with Roma partner NGOs, communities and families we support the following:

Access to Early Childhood Development and related training for Roma and other teachers working in Roma communities;

Literacy programmes and development of educational manuals and materials for Roma children;

Initiatives aimed at eliminating early marriage and pregnancy, encouraging the participation of Roma children in public life, and combating child labour;

Advocacy campaigns to promote equal chances and opportunities for Roma children, to end segregation of Roma children in the education system;

UNICEF advocates for all schools and education systems to be responsive to children's rights, meaning that schools should:

Be inclusion of all children, particularly children from ethnic minorities, children with special educational needs and children with a disadvantaged social background.

Offer good quality teaching and learning with individual instruction appropriate to 'the developmental level, abilities and learning capacities of all children, thus ensuring that no child is left behind.

The curriculum and content of education must be relevant to the needs of the society — its social cohesion and labour market.

Provide a safe, healthy and protective school environment in which 'children are protected from violence, abuse and, harm and in which essential life skills and values of respect, tolerance and democracy are promoted.

Be gender-sensitive and promote gender' equality in both enrolment and achievement; adequate attention must be given, to the situation of girls in some countries but also to the growing disadvantage of boys in upper-secondary and higher education throughout the region.

On the basis of our field experience we would like to propose a number of recommended actions for the Forum's consideration. We call on Governments and societies to:

Openly confront discrimination, introduce and enforce legislation prohibiting it, and implement initiatives to combat exclusion faced by women and girls, ethnic and indigenous groups, the disabled as well as those who live in poverty.

Targeted initiatives to address exclusion faced by women and girls, ethnic and indigenous groups and the disabled are needed, along with legislation to prohibit discrimination.

In relation to this taking account of the view of the Committee on the Rights of the Child that State Parties need to identify those individual children and groups of children who require, special measures aimed at overcoming inequalities.

This would involve rigorous disaggregated data collection to enable discrimination, or potential discrimination, to be identified.

Take into account that the non-discrimination principle further necessitates consideration of multiple facts of discrimination experienced by some children. It requires that particular attention should be given to girls in order to ensure that they enjoy their rights on an equal basis to boys.

Invest in teacher training, including training of teachers from minority communities, to include anti-discrimination, gender sensitive and intercultural training. Educational curricula should promote human rights education and gender aware materials with the aim of overcoming stereotyped and demeaning images of minorities, girls and women.

We in UNICEF are also aware of the need for us to invigorate and scale up our initiatives. Since our participation in the Forum last year, the previous Independent Expert, Ms. Gay McDougall and the Executive Director of Minority Rights Group, Mr. Mark Lattimer, met with the UNICEF Executive Director to discuss a

number of issues affecting minority Children.

One such important issue discussed was the need for UNICEF to support the collection of data on the socio-economic indicators of pertinent value to monitoring and improving their situation.

In 2012, the organization will take steps towards expanding its own data collection methods through MICS with a view to ensuring that minority communities are captured in data collection in succeeding years.

We have initiated the design of the organizations Programme Guidance on Indigenous and Minority Children. This will provide our Country Offices with more specific hands on assistance on how to programme for and with children of minority and indigenous background in a more systematic manner and to larger scale.

And finally, in collaboration with the Office of the Independent Expert, discussions are on-going to produce the second State of the Worlds Indigenous and Minority Children in 2012, to serve as tool for enriching the evidence base and enhancing advocacy on behalf of minority children.

Before closing, let me use this opportunity to thank the Independent Expert for inviting UNICEF to contribute to this year's Forum. Madam, we look forward to working with you in the years ahead and wish you and delegates success in your deliberations.