

AUTISTIC MINORITY INTERNATIONAL

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Oral statement at the sixth session of the Forum on Minority Issues ("Beyond freedom of religion or belief: Guaranteeing the rights of religious minorities") of the United Nations Human Rights Council

THE KEY PILLARS OF MINORITY PROTECTION AND US

Madam. Chair, Ambassadors,
distinguished delegates, dear colleagues,

In her concept note, the Independent Expert on Minority Issues, Ms Rita Izşak, highlights "four key pillars of minority rights" around which discussions during this forum are to be based. They are "protection of existence and prevention of violence against minorities; promotion and protection of minority identity; equality. and non-discrimination; and the right to effective participation in all areas of public, economic and social life".

The NGO I represent, Autistic Minority international, headquartered in Geneva, is the first and only autism self-advocacy organization active at the global political level. We aim to combat bias and prejudice and advance the interests of an estimated seventy million autistics, one percent of the world's population, at and through, the United Nations, World Health Organization, human rights treaty bodies, and other international organizations. As a person on the autism spectrum, diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, as well as a scholar of political theology, it is my great privilege to address this-esteemed forum.

We believe that autistic self-advocacy is about more than disability rights. Autism is a distinct culture and identity. The only one we know. Linguistic peculiarities are among the main diagnostic criteria. Many autistics are non-verbal, and all of us use language in unusual ways and have difficulty communicating with non-autistics. It is thus important to us not only to express our support for the rights of religious minorities, but at the same time to advocate for tolerance and the rights of autistics within religious minorities. Paragraph 13 of the draft recommendations before us here today rightly highlights the "diversity that exists within religious minority groups" and the need to recognize and respect the "rights of every single member of such minority groups", particularly those who experience "compounded" and "intersectional" discrimination based on their "other identity", such as autism, and being perceived as "'other' or not fully belonging".

While autistics are to be found among all religions, a disproportionately large number of us may be non-believers, atheists, or agnostics. We thus wish to especially stress freedom of thought and conscience and the equal rights of those individuals who do not identify with any religion or spiritual belief system, in accordance with General Comment No. 22 (1993) of the Human Rights Committee, as cited in the legal framework and made explicit in paragraph 12 of the draft recommendations.

As individuals and as a group, autistics are denied the four key pillars of minority rights. Our very existence is in danger as long as autism, without regard to severity, continues to be viewed as something to be eradicated. Violence against us takes the form of behaviour modification, institutionalization, and abusive medical and therapeutic practices, such as electric shocks.. Instead, we should be taught self-esteem, self-confidence, and how to advocate for ourselves. Autism is a neurological difference that is both genetic and hereditary. Regardless of where in the world we live, autistics are more like each other than like the people surrounding us. The autistic minority includes those children and adults who remain undiagnosed and those of us who hide their condition for fear of discrimination. Only acceptance, recognition, and respect for autistics will lead to our full and equal participation in all areas of public, economic, and social life.

We urge the Independent Expert on Minority Issues and the Human Rights Council to pay much needed attention to the concerns of autistics and to consider dedicating the next session of the Forum on Minority Issues to the rights of persons with disabilities within national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities.

Thank you.

Erich Kofmel, President
Autistic Minority International

Background information

In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2 April World Autism Awareness Day. On that day in 2013, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon wrote: "This international attention is essential to address stigma, lack of awareness and inadequate support structures. Now is the time to work for a more inclusive society, highlight the talents of affected people and ensure opportunities for them to realize their potential."

In 2012, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted resolution 67/82 "Addressing the socioeconomic needs of individuals, families and societies affected by -autism spectrum disorders, developmental disorders and associated disabilities". In this resolution, the UN member states recognize "that the full enjoyment by persons with autism spectrum disorders [...] of their human rights and their full participation will result in significant advances in the social and economic development of societies and communities" and stress "the important contribution that non-governmental organizations and other civil society actors can make in promoting human rights for [...] all individuals with autism spectrum disorders [...] and their integration in societies". The GA voices its concern "that persons with autism spectrum disorders [...] continue to face barriers in their participation as equal members of society" and calls this "discrimination" and "a violation of the inherent dignity and worth of the human person".

Autistic Minority International welcomes contact from and is open to collaboration with UN member states, the UN system, the wider NGO community, autism charities run by non-autistics, researchers particularly in the social sciences and international law, the private sector, and individuals. We look forward to interacting with participants in the forum as well as other minority rights stakeholders in the near future.