

Statement by UN Watch
4th Session of Forum on Minority Issues
Guaranteeing the Rights of Minority Women
Agenda Item 3: Minority women and girls and the right to education
November 29-30, 2011

Thank you, Mr. President.

Education is a basic human right guaranteed under Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Access to education in many parts of the world is challenging, but it is especially difficult in areas where minority women face discrimination because of their gender and their status as a minority. UN Watch wishes highlight three specific countries in which discrimination against minority women leads to violations of their right to education.

First, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, the government discriminates against Baha'i women. While Muslim women in Iran have access to education, Baha'i women are often banned from attending university. For example, after serving as a teacher for 15 years, Mahvash Sabet, a Baha'i woman, was dismissed from her job after the Islamic Revolution. Her gender and her religion prevented her from working in the public education system.

The targeting of Baha'i educators continues today. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, and the UN General Assembly's Third Committee, which deals with human rights, have both expressed serious concern at Iran's restrictions against religious minorities and the government's limitation of access to higher education for Baha'i women.

A second example is Pakistan, where Hindu girls face the most severe obstacles to education because of their religion and their gender. According to a recent study by the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, there are disturbing expressions of anti-Hinduism in Pakistan's schools. This contravenes Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which provides that "education shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial, or religious groups." Public schools close on Muslim and Christian holidays, but remain open on Hindu religious holidays, forcing students to choose between attending religious ceremonies or school. Female teachers are threatened by Islamist militants, and less than 25% of Pakistan's schools are open to females. In some regions, girls' education is prohibited for "religious reasons."

Finally, there is the situation on Myanmar, where the government persecutes the Muslim minority group of Rohingyas, denying them citizenship. In particular, Rohingya women are suffering at the hands of the government. Freedom House has reported mass military rapes of Rohingyas. Fearing for their lives, many of these women have been fleeing the country. For example, a young Rohingya woman named Haziqah was forced to leave her home in Myanmar when soldiers attacked her village. She has since been living in a refugee camp with limited means for survival, and no access to education. In his 2011 report for the Human Rights Council, the Special Rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar expressed serious concern for the Rohingya population, referring to the "endemic discrimination against the Muslim minority."

Mr. President, minorities throughout the world face persecution under the rule of oppressive governments. Minority women are especially endangered because of societal

perceptions about the alleged inferiority of females. It is the right of every human being to have access to education. As a female university student, I am grateful for my own education and I recognize its unique value. Education is essential for development, stability, and peace. We urge the members of this body to address discrimination against minority women, and to take action to ensure that every human being enjoys basic access to education.

Thank you, Mr. President.