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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Joint written statement* submitted by Al-khoei Foundation, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status, Minority Rights Group, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and The Institute of Development Studies, non- governmental organizations in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is
circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[03 February 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



Statement on the impact of discrimination on the ground of religion or belief on the enjoyment of economic and social rights

Our organisations work throughout the world to promote freedom of religion or belief and to protect the rights of religious minorities.

Our work with religious minorities on different continents has led to the conclusion that discrimination on the grounds of religion in many cases exacerbates poverty and impedes equal access to services, including to health and educational services, in a way that substantially affects the capacity of religious minorities to enjoy their economic and social rights.

While the nexus between discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief and the enjoyment of civil and political rights is relatively well documented, and has been the object of much – and well deserved – attention from UN human rights mechanisms, we have found that the nexus between discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief and the enjoyment of economic and social rights has been largely overlooked.

The aim of this written statement is to call on the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) and its Mechanisms to further investigate, study and report on the link between discrimination on the grounds of religion and/or violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief and equal or unequal access to services and fulfilment of social and economic rights.

We make this call in the awareness that the intersection between poverty and discrimination on the grounds of religion / violations of freedom of religion or belief violations remains under-researched, is under-reported and is less understood than other nexuses of human rights abuses and contributory factors.

Preliminary evidence of links between discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief and lack of access to economic and social rights leading to poverty

From our experience in the field, the nexus between discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief and lack of access to social and economic rights, leading to poverty, manifests itself in many ways.

In some contexts there is direct discrimination. For example, in Pakistan this may occur when low status and low paid jobs are advertised with the statement that they must be filled by non-Muslims.¹ Even if adverts are later amended, it signals to non-Muslims (primarily Christians and Hindus) that they should not aspire to higher paid and more skilled jobs. It also underscores the inferior social status of these faith communities in the eyes of the majority faith community. The association of non-Muslims with lower status (often cleaning) jobs may further interfere with access to services as they may be perceived as dirty or unclean by those of the majority religion. This seems to have been a factor in the refusal of emergency treatment to a Christian worker rescued from a sewer who was alive when he reached the hospital but died before treatment commenced, with the delay resulting from a doctors' instruction to clean the casualty according to family members.²

In other cases, indirect discrimination may limit the opportunities and access to services of those of certain faiths. In some contexts, those who follow a particular religion may face difficulties accessing identification documents (ID) which state their faith in a manner with which they are comfortable. This is the case for Baha'is in Egypt, whose religion can only be

¹ All-Party Parliamentary Group for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, All-Party Parliamentary Group for the Pakistani Minorities, *Religious Minorities of Pakistan: Report from a Parliamentary Visit*, 2018, page 19, accessible at: <https://appgfreedomofreligionorbelief.org/media/190918-Full-Report-Religious-Minorities-of-Pakistan-Report-of-a-Parliamentary-Visit.pdf>

² BBC News, "The last hours of a Christian sanitary worker in Pakistan", June 2017, accessible at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40203982>

represented by a “dash” on ID cards.³ Baha’is are left with the choice of either not taking out an ID, which constrains access to many government services and work opportunities, or compromising on how they express their faith.

Discrimination accompanied by threats and actual violence against a faith community may cause that community to distrust services provided by governments or NGOs, as community members may fear that accessing these services may leave them vulnerable to further attack or extreme forms of disrespect and insult. This is known to be the case in Myanmar, where Muslim women have expressed fear of accessing maternal health services due to reports that doctors carry out forced sterilisations of Muslim women.⁴

Finally human rights violations committed against religious minorities, as well as tensions between religion or belief communities, is widely associated with violence and conflict, and the erosion of trust and inter-dependence, which in and of themselves are major contributory factors to both widespread poverty in society and inequality.

Trade relations and joint initiatives across ethnic and religious divides in conflict prone societies are known to have some protective effect in minimising violent conflict or preventing wider escalation of conflict.⁵ When societies are divided along religious lines with limited contact between individuals of different religious beliefs, whether through service provision, trade, tackling joint challenges (e.g. provision of street lighting or disposal of rubbish) as is the case for the Ahmadi community in Pakistan, and which is increasingly the case between Christians and Muslims in the middle belt of Nigeria, then the prospects for a sustained peace that allows economic and social life to flourish are poor.

An issue largely overlooked by UN human rights mechanisms

We have undertaken a study of the work of UN treaty bodies and of Special Procedures in the past ten years that has led us to two conclusions.

Firstly, UN human rights mechanisms working on the issue of extreme poverty and access to economic and social rights have dedicated considerable attention to discrimination against certain groups, including ethnic and linguistic minorities, indigenous peoples, persons with disabilities and LGBTI persons, but discrimination against religious communities is almost never mentioned as a significant barrier to the enjoyment of economic and social rights.

Secondly, and symmetrically to the first finding, our survey of past work showed that UN human rights mechanisms working on freedom of religion or belief or on discrimination against religious communities seem to have largely overlooked the issue of the impact of discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief on development and on the enjoyment of economic and social rights.

Our study leads us to the conclusion that the nexus between discrimination based on religion or belief on the one hand, and the enjoyment of economic and social rights and poverty on the other hand, has been under-addressed by UN human rights mechanisms and that this nexus needs to be further explored.

Recommendations

At a time when states and other stakeholders are mobilising to implement the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with the understanding that development goals cannot be achieved if entire communities are left behind, we call on the HRC, associated human rights mechanisms and other relevant stakeholders to pay greater attention to the

³ Minority Rights Group International, *Justice Denied, Promises Broken: The Situation of Egypt’s Minorities Since 2014*, January 2019, page 18, accessible at: <https://minorityrights.org/publications/justice-denied-promises-broken-the-situation-of-egypts-minorities-since-2014>

⁴ CSW interview with women’s rights activist, Bangkok, February 2019

⁵ Graf, S.; Paolini, S.; Rubin, M. (2014). "Negative intergroup contact is more influential, but positive intergroup contact is more common: Assessing contact prominence and contact prevalence in five Central European countries". *European Journal of Social Psychology*. 44 (6): 536–547

impact of discrimination on the basis of religion or belief in accessing economic and social rights, and on the linkage between religious discrimination, poverty and under-development.

We urge the UN Special Rapporteurs on freedom of religion or belief, on minority issues and on Extreme Poverty and human rights, as well as the Expert Mechanism on the Right to Development to explore the intersection of these rights further, addressing implicit and explicit forms of discrimination on the basis of religion or belief which can result in poverty and social inequality.

We urge UN Member States to partner with civil society actors and religious leaders in the creation of programmes designed to rebuild social cohesion and reconcile communities that have been in conflict. This work is particularly important in situations where IDPs are being supported to return to their communities.
