

Geneva, 7 July 2014

Oral intervention at the Half-Day General Discussion on "Girls'/Women's Right to Education" of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

## **AUTISTIC GIRLS' AND WOMEN'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION**

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Our NGO, 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 UN, WHO, and human rights treaty bodies. Myself, I was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, a condition on the autism spectrum, only as an adult, at the age of 38.

Self-advocates view autism not as something to be prevented or cured, but as a neurological difference that is equally valid. We understand autism awareness as only the first step on the way toward autism acceptance, recognition, and respect for autistic persons. Only autism acceptance will ensure our full and equal participation in all areas of public, economic, and social life, as called for by a 2012 resolution of the UN General Assembly, and only autism acceptance will meet the requirements of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

With regard to the planned General Recommendation on girls' and women's right to education, we urge the Committee to elaborate and expand on its brief General Recommendation on "Disabled Women" in the light of education provisions contained in the CRPD, particularly as they pertain to inclusive education, non-discrimination, equal opportunity, accessibility, and individualized support. Education systems that are inclusive of persons with disabilities, including girls and women with disabilities, will also be inclusive of girls and women in general.

Under no circumstances must the education of autistic children, adolescents, and adults, including girls and women, aim at turning them into something they are not and cannot be, namely non-autistic. The general principles underlying the CRPD include "equality between men and women", but also "respect for difference and acceptance of persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity" and "the right of children with disabilities to preserve their identities".

It is unfortunate that the public discourse on autism is dominated by negative stereotypes, often perpetuated by the very organizations that would presume to be speaking for us. It is of paramount importance that educational decision-makers at the local, national, regional, and global levels start working with and funding autistic self-advocacy organizations and initiatives, rather than continuing to rely on autism-related

organizations run by often misguided parents of autistic children, with no or little autistic involvement.

The wishes and interests of parents or guardians who may perceive autistic children as burdens must never be confused and equated with the best interests of the child.

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 self-advocacy is about more than disability rights. Autism is a distinct culture and identity. The only one we know. Regardless of where in the world we live, autistics are more like each other than like the people surrounding us. Autism is a neurological difference that is both genetic and hereditary. There is no cure, and we do not believe that a cure will ever be found. The autistic minority includes those diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome and various other conditions on the autism spectrum as well as those children and adults who remain undiagnosed.

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 General Discussion as well as other women's rights and right to education stakeholders in the near future.