

Minority Issues on the Rise: A Canadian Prairie Perspective

Presented by Ms. Belma Podrug

Abstract

Belma Podrug is Executive Director of the Global Gathering Place (GGP). GGP, a settlement agency for immigrants and refugees, is located in Western Canada, in the city of Saskatoon. GGP serves approximately 1500 clients per year, providing one-on-one support and offering a diverse range of programs including English language classes, life skills instruction, social programs, and a variety of courses and sessions to enhance particular skills and knowledge in topics such as housing, employment, or health care. In all that it does, GGP operates according to the principles articulated in the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities through its programming and public awareness campaigns. The city of Saskatoon is currently experiencing a period of sustained high growth due to immigration and this is changing the fabric of the community from one of a relatively homogeneous society to a truly multicultural one. Ms. Podrug will discuss her agency's successes, positive measures, and challenges associated with achieving the goals set out in the Declaration, and she will appeal to all levels of government to work to ensure that the outcomes of the Declaration are achieved, with specific reference to the challenges that Global Gathering Place has faced.

**Secretariat of the Forum on Minority Issues
Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
Geneva, November 2012**

Minority Issues on the Rise: A Canadian Prairie Perspective

I want to thank the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and in particular the Independent Expert on Minority Issues for inviting me to present at the Forum this week and for facilitating my travel to Geneva.

My name is Belma Podrug; I am from Saskatoon, a small city in the heart of Western Canada and like so many others in Saskatoon, I moved there from Bosnia in 1994. The reasons for moving to Canada are varied as the people making the move. People move for political reasons, for economic reasons, to reunite with family, for reasons of personal safety. For the past fourteen years, I have been Executive Director of the Global Gathering Place. We exist to assist with the enormous task of integration by providing skills-building, language, and networking opportunities. We provide services to approximately 1500 immigrants every year from 110 different countries in a way that respects their rights and dignity, free from discrimination.

In my experience, the ideals and principles of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious, and Linguistic Minorities are not well known to the clients we assist but they form an overarching basis of our programming and are a part of the core beliefs and principles of our organization. In our small way, we work constantly to spread awareness of the Declaration while promoting and protecting the rights of our clients, all of whom belong to minority communities.

Most importantly, we listen to minorities' concerns. We recognize that they have an enormous depth of experiences, wisdom, and abilities. We work to support their independence by empowering them with knowledge and by offering a range of services which avoid labeling their needs. When we hear similar needs repeated, we take additional steps by introducing new programming, by approaching funders, by engaging our contacts in all levels of government. Minorities have so much to contribute. Through them, our cities achieve political and social stability.

In spite of many successes, minorities still need help. Canada's constitution identifies our country as officially multicultural and bilingual. On a government level this is true; however, on the ground, newcomers continue to suffer discrimination and bigotry. Housing or employment can be more difficult to obtain if you have an accent or a non-Canadian sounding name.

In preparation for this forum, we reviewed the 2009 recommendations from the Independent Expert and considered them in the context of the work our agency does in serving newcomers and immigrants. I speak for minorities today when I say that many of the issues reported in 2009 continue to be in the forefront of their experience.

In terms of job ghetto-ization, minorities continue to feel trapped in minimum wage jobs, barely able to afford the basic necessities of life. The support for equal opportunities in employment and career advancement needs to be accelerated.

Minorities continue to experience delays in accessing immigration services. The processing times are long and rules sometimes seem to change without notice, leaving people in limbo while they wait for government to approve applications.

Minorities continue to experience difficulty in accessing credit which can be a barrier to those wishing to start their own business or enterprise, continue their education, achieve home ownership, or obtain even simple items like a cellphone.

Positive 'immigrant' role models continue to be few and far between. According to recently released Canadian Census figures, fourteen per cent of Saskatoon's residents speak an 'immigrant language'—a language other than English or French. That number is huge. However, when you look at the management sector, when you look at our leaders in government or on the Boards of Directors in both the private and public sectors—when you look at people in positions of authority, that same level of diversity is not apparent. There is a gap at the senior management level which means the voice of that fourteen per cent is not present when key decisions are made. Our agency has initiated a program aimed directly at closing this gap; providing leadership training for minorities and pathways into board governance.

On a very positive note, we have witnessed real improvements and encouraging practices within Saskatoon's Police force. Police officers are now required to take Cultural Diversity training in order to increase their sensitivity to the needs of new Canadians. Our agency holds a seat on the Saskatoon Police Advisory Committee on Diversity and works to show minorities that the police are a part of our community, not apart from it. In addition to this, we have seen the Saskatoon Police make a conscious effort to recruit cultural minorities to the force and to ensure that they have a trained pool of interpreters to assist with communication.

We support efforts to strengthen human rights commissions in Canada and to ensure that they have adequate funding to process complaints in a reasonable period of time. Canada's provincial human rights commissions must assume a higher profile in our communities and do more to network with local agencies such as Global Gathering Place in promoting minority rights.

Change is slow, but we do not work alone. There is a well-established network of non-governmental organizations including ethno-cultural organizations, settlement agencies, employment agencies, and educational institutions committed to furthering the goals of the Declaration. With quality outcome measurements, NGOs are managed efficiently, carrying out their duties at a fraction of what it would cost government to provide the same services. Together, we celebrate diversity by educating the general public on immigrant and refugee issues. We try to reach through to the hearts and minds of the public by sharing some of the heartwarming successes and heartbreaking struggles of our minorities and by emphasizing how we are all part of the human family, how difference can breed strength.

As important as this work is, there is more that needs to be done to fully implement the Declaration. Housing, social programs, education, and health and wellness programming are still lagging behind for many newcomers. Global Gathering Place can act as a bridge to spread awareness, information, and training related to the Declaration. Our experience here this week will go a long way to providing a knowledge base and establishing important contacts to continue this work. We can bring your message back to Western Canada and can assist in ensuring that minorities' rights are respected at the very basic levels. To our funding agencies and all levels of government: more funding and stable funding is needed to help us meet our objectives on a daily basis and to ensure that the goals of the Declaration are conveyed to the public and fulfilled. We have an excellent relationship with our funding agents and do not mean this as a criticism. It is just that so much more could be done if we had adequate, long-term funding. Even in light of the current difficult global economic situation, governments should ensure that sufficient funding is dedicated to improving the situation of disadvantaged minority communities.

In conclusion, I want to again thank the Independent Expert and her staff for inviting me to network with this distinguished group. We would like to carry on your important work in our region and pledge to do what we can to continue to promote the goals of the Declaration so that they are given full meaning and practice in our region. **Thank you also to my Board of Directors for supporting me in coming to Geneva.**

Thank you.

Belma Podrug, Executive Director
Global Gathering Place
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
globalgatheringplace.com