

Response to the Inquiry of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights:

‘Implementation of Human Rights with Regard to Young People’

I welcome this inquiry of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights into the implementation of human rights with regard to young people, as requested in the Human Rights Council Resolution 34/14 on youth and human rights.

I welcome this opportunity to address some challenges faced by minority youth and children, especially those living as refugees or Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

Apart from the failure to address the needs of refugee minority groups in general, minority youth and children face yet another obstacle that will have a significant effect on their future lives – they are deprived the access to education.

The right to education is protected under international law. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) says:

(1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

The right to education is also protected under Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR).

As it is clear from the above provision, education, as understood under international law is more than merely to teach reading, writing, mathematics, history or biology. Education is understood as a means of ‘strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.’ Education aspires to aid the ‘full development of the human personality.’ Education aims to ‘promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups.’ Ultimately, education strives to maintain international peace.

Indeed, education is a means to understand the world we live in and to create a better world for those that will follow the legacy we leave behind. The knowledge we convey at schools shapes the future generations of leaders and ultimately decides what the world would look like in years to come.

While in the western society, we often do not appreciate the great opportunities that come with the fact that we have good access to education, others are not as fortunate.

During my trips to Jordan, I met with many Iraqi Christian families living there. They all fled Iraq after Daesh invaded the Nineveh Plains in August 2014. They have been in Jordan for over three years and they remain 'stuck' there as they do not want to return to Iraq and they are struggling to be resettled in other countries.

While the dire situation of Iraqi Christians in Jordan has received some attention, the needs of Iraqi Christian youth and children have not. Those needs go beyond the necessities as food and shelter. And education is one of those needs that is yet to be addressed.

Iraqi Christian children and especially youth in Jordan do not have access to free education. While, for example, in Amman, there is a school providing primary education to some Iraqi Christian children, there is no free school that would provide secondary education to Iraqi Christian youth. Youth and young adults that were forced out of Nineveh Plains by Daesh, and hence forced to leave their secondary education or early University years, are now unable to continue their education.

From my trips to Jordan, there are a few stories that I would like to share.

A story of a teenager who left secondary school and has zero opportunities to continue any semblance of an education in Jordan. When asked about his plans or aspirations for the future, the young man had no answer. Blankly he stared at the wall, while his mother sobbed uncontrollably.

A story of a young aspiring doctor who was forced to abandon the life-saving pursuit of medicine at the hands of the life-robbing force that is Daesh. His life may not have been cut short, but his education was. He tried to resettle in Canada or Australia to continue his studies but to no avail. He said that no country wanted him because he was neither skilled nor educated.

Without this education, the opportunities and chances of the refugee minority youth and children are severely limited if not non-existent. They cannot find a job now as they do not have the knowledge or skills that are necessary to do so (apart from the fact that to be able to work in Jordan they would need work permits that are very expensive). Also, without the knowledge or skills, they will not be able to find a job in the future.

What are their options?

They have none. They are frozen in time. If they return to Iraq, they will have to catch up on the lost over three years' worth of education, and that's even if they will be able to return to school in the first place. If their refugee status is clarified and they are able to resettle in a different country, they will also have a lot of catching up to do. Catching up that financially may not be feasible.

Additionally, the example of the Christian Iraqi youth in Jordan is representative of many refugee minority youth in other countries. UNHCR reports suggest that only 50% of refugee children are enrolled in primary school, while 22% of refugee youth are enrolled in secondary school and only 1% of refugees attend universities.

In the western world, we often do not appreciate the chances and opportunities we have. These chances and opportunities allow us to become who we are now, and shape our future. However,

as in the case of Iraqi Christians living in Jordan, and many other minority youth or minority refugee youth around the world, these chances and opportunities do not exist (or exist only for a few). Without the chances and opportunities that education provides, they will not be able to build a better future for themselves and their children. They will become a lost generation.

Refugee and minority young people need advocates to stand up for them and place their concerns on the international community's agenda. Children are the future, but they will not fulfil this promise if they are not given the chances and opportunities that they need to be masters of their own destinies.

Refugee and minority young people need heroes like Malala who would rather risk their lives than give up on the chances and opportunities that education can provide.

Refugee and minority young people need pioneers like Muzoon Almellehan who after seeing the scope of the problem while living in a refugee camp in Jordan, advocate internationally to change the situation.

Refugee and minority young people need the United Nations and other international institutions to be those Malalas and Muzoons for all of them; to fight for them where no one else can or will.

At a recent conference in Hungary, I've learned of an incredible project run by the Hungarian Government known as 'Hungary Helps'. The Hungarian Government established a new department to assist the persecuted Christians around the world. The spectrum of the assistance offered is very broad and also includes aid for persecuted adolescents. In September 2017, 72 Christian scholars arriving from persecuted Christian communities have been awarded a scholarship by the Government of Hungary via the Deputy State Secretariat for the Aid of Persecuted Christians to start their studies at various universities in Hungary. I met students from Iraq and Nigeria who are taking this opportunity at having a better future. However, the 72 students are only the tip of the iceberg. There are thousands of children and young people that need such a chance. When talking about bringing a positive change in the areas of conflicts, we need to remember the crucial element of taking care of these forgotten populations and their educational needs. Many of them do not know anything other than war, persecution and discrimination. However, to bring about a change, a sustainable change, we need to start with their education. Education promoting understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, whether ethnic or religious. Education assisting in the miniating of international peace. Education for children and youth to become the future.

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