

Gender and freedom of religion or belief highlighted at Geneva seminar

HRWF (22.06.2015) - Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) participated in a training seminar last week on Freedom of Religion or Belief and its interface with gender-related rights. The event was sponsored by Geneva for Human Rights (GHR) on 18th June at the Palais des Nations in Geneva. About 100 people were in attendance, including representatives of several embassies.

GHR president Adrien-Claude Zoller opened the meeting by framing the context of the discussion. Freedom of religion or belief and gender are sometimes perceived as in opposition to one another, he observed, even though they are part of the same human rights regime that is founded on universal principles of equality, human dignity and non-discrimination.

Dr Heiner Bielefeldt, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, insisted on the interrelatedness and indivisibility of human rights, emphasising that "harmful practices inflicted on women and girls can never be justified in the name of religion or belief." Practices such as honour killings, female genital mutilation, forced marriages or the imposition of dress codes are never legitimate expressions of one's religion or convictional belief, he said, regardless of their justification by religious authorities or the selective reading of sacred texts.

HRWF director Willy Fautré addressed the misinformation and cultural stereotypes that have "fossilised" ideas about religion and gender and frustrated much-needed change. "Culture and collective identity in male-dominated and hetero-dominated human communities are frequently interwoven and provide strong resistance to change," said Fautré.

Expert panellists included Italian Ambassador Maurizio Enrico Luigi Serra, Diane Alai of the Baha'i International Community, John Fischer of Human Rights Watch, Ani Zonneveld of Muslims for Progressive Values and André du Plessis of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA).

Mark Barwick, HRWF Policy Advisor, chaired one of the panel discussions, reminding participants that religion is a powerful transmitter of culture. "It should be no surprise to anyone that culturally conservative values are often promoted by religious institutions," said Barwick. "However, religions are also dynamic and interactive with their environment. Historically, they have also been at the forefront of many progressive movements for human dignity, for the rights of women and for sexual minorities."

In his concluding remarks, Willy Fautré issued a call to action to end the suffering inflicted upon women and others affected by gender-based discrimination on the basis of "a false interpretation of carefully selected religious texts and a growing tolerance of violence, some key verses of sacred texts being often omitted or quoted out of context by male religious leaders to exalt the status of men and exclude women." More research is needed by scholars and religious academics, more dialogue and cooperation between defenders of freedom of religion or belief, gender and LGBT rights and more education on tolerance and diversity in schools and in the media.

"This topic affects us all," said Fautré, as he called for "constructive and efficient action" alongside those who "fight for their dignity and equal rights, sometimes at the risk of their lives."