

## Statement at 22nd session of the Human Rights Council

18 March 2013

### Item 8: Follow up to the Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action

#### TRADITIONAL VALUES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Mr President,

The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action marked a strong reaffirmation by the global community of the principles of universality and indivisibility of human rights, and of equality and non-discrimination in the implementation of human rights standards. The VDPA recognises that in achieving these goals traditional values can pose an obstacle. It calls in particular for ‘the eradication of any conflicts which may arise between the rights of women and the harmful effects of certain traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and religious extremism’. (VDPA para.38)

The work of the Council’s own Advisory Committee, tasked with examining the relationship between traditional values and human rights, has reaffirmed these principles, making clear that States have a responsibility and legal obligation not only to promote and protect all human rights but also, in the words of the Advisory Committee, to ‘take sustained and systematic action to modify or eliminate stereotypes and negative, harmful and discriminatory practices justified by traditional values’.

It is only through the universal implementation of international human rights standards, and the eradication of negative traditional practices and values, that the space and protection will be created for minorities and other marginalised groups to flourish in society, without discrimination on any basis, be it race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, or any other ground.

The traditional values agenda is often promoted as one of inclusivity – it is far from being so. The Advisory Committee has noted that far from protecting minorities, ‘it is those who benefit most from the status quo [who] are more likely to appeal to tradition to maintain power and privilege ... while those most marginalised and disenfranchised have the most to lose from a traditional values approach to human rights’. (A/HRC/22/71, para.40)

In many societies traditional values impose patriarchal, mono-cultural norms that discriminate against anyone who does not fit neatly with those norms, whether it be someone from an indigenous community, with a disability, with a non-conforming gender identity, or from a minority religious

group. For example, the Special Rapporteur on indigenous peoples has noted that ‘historical patterns of social, economic, cultural, and political discrimination’ limit the ability of indigenous people to enjoy basic human rights and contribute to undermining their cultural identities. (A/HRC/18/35/add.5, para.67)

There are of course so-called ‘traditional values’ that are in line with international human rights standards, unsurprisingly as the UDHR was developed by drawing on a range of cultural traditions to ensure that it was indeed fully inclusive. Promoting human rights standards ensures that these values common to all humankind are implemented. Promoting the concept of traditional values, on the other hand, threatens to undermine these universal standards through the promotion of negative traditional values.

The traditional values agenda is one of the biggest threats to the progress made over the past 20 years in the implementation of the VDPA. The Human Rights Council must not buy into this agenda. We call on all Council members to send a signal to marginalised and minority groups that the Council stands for the human rights of all individuals by taking an unequivocal stand against the notion of ‘traditional values’.