

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Peer-to-Peer Webinar

Speaking Truth to Power: Religious or Belief Minority Artists, Voice and Protest

26 May 2021

I. Background

On 26 May 2021, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) jointly with the civil society organisation Freemuse and a network of alumni of OHCHR's Minority Fellowship Programme (IPMS), convened an online event of artists from religious or belief minorities worldwide to examine the nexus among art, activism, and the freedom of expression.

This webinar was the second in a series of events supporting minority artists, voice, and protest. The first such event convened earlier in 2021 and focused on artists from across a range of minority communities in the United States of America, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. **This second event focused on exploring several individual artistic journeys that are shaped by narratives of defiance, trauma, and healing, including in circumstances where artists may be threatened by anti-blasphemy or anti-apostasy laws.** It also aimed to deepen OHCHR and the UN system's engagement with art and artists as a powerful player in discourse and action on human rights.

The event gathered over 60 participants, featuring four panellists who shared their artwork through video and/or slideshow presentations: **Yuliya Lanina**, a multimedia artist of Russian-Jewish background, living in New York City, who explores intergenerational trauma; **Mazen Khaddaj**, a Lebanese-born Druze artist who uses art as a way to bridge alternative ways of believing; **Órion Lalli**, an openly gay, HIV positive artist from Brazil who celebrates marginalized bodies; and **Rita Dewan**, a Baul singer from Bangladesh who draws on the ability of music to transcend specific belief systems.

The UN Special Rapporteur on Cultural Rights, **Karima Bennoune**, also took part. During her keynote speech, she highlighted that international human rights law guarantees the right of everyone to take part in cultural life without discrimination, including enjoying artistic freedom. She also pointed out the role of cultural rights and artistic freedom in human rights protection, noting that cultural and artistic expression has transformative power which influences societies and is used to resist oppression, uphold values of diversity, human rights, and inclusion. Minority artists play a key role in realizing the cultural rights for everyone. She expressed worry over the continuing spread of discourses of exclusion and extremist ideologies targeting minorities and minority artists and

reiterated her call for States to reform or abrogate laws that perpetuate discrimination, including anti-blasphemy laws.

II. Highlights of themes and methodologies

Overarching themes. The panellists' presentations highlighted art as a reflection of personal truth and a form of protest. In doing so, they showed how artists from religious, spiritual, or belief minorities have challenged prevailing discourse, questioned dominant social and religious norms, and confronted censorship or other policies limiting artistic freedom. The discussions raised issues of rights protection for artists who face threats as a result of their work. The #Faith4Rights toolkit was examined in relation to the use of anti-blasphemy and anti-apostasy laws in hindering the freedom of expression.

Specific themes. The four artists dealt with themes that were unique to their identities and which addressed their roles and relations in their respective communities. The central themes each artist highlighted include the following:

- Yuliya Lanina addressed displacement, trauma, loss, and the freedom of belief in her art. Her works convey stories about brokenness suffered as a result of experiences with violence and abandonment and the challenges involved in healing from intergenerational trauma (i.e. the Holocaust).
- Mazen Khaddaj discussed the relationship between his artwork and issues of spirituality, belief, sexuality, and family. His work speaks to what it means to be a minority within a minority and the importance of having a safe space for people to be themselves. He emphasized that his art deals with trauma through self-expression, humour, and celebration.
- Órion Lalli described his artwork as a representation of what it means to live as an openly gay man with HIV. As a performer and visual artist, he uses his body and physical movement to make important statements about pleasure, sex, resistance, and the right to *not* believe.
- Rita Dewan highlighted that she searches for self-enlightenment and truth through performance and song. Her music calls attention to the power of thought and mind and questions the authority of entrenched beliefs and standards.

Preparatory meetings with artists. The organisers held several rounds of meetings with each artist prior to the event in order to identify the topics each artist planned to discuss and to ensure that the artists felt they were working within a safe space.

Protection and due diligence. If done properly, publicity can be a form of protection. Before the event, participants were made aware of possible risks and mitigation factors and were asked to provide informed consent for participation. Audiences were told that a recording of the event and a report may be made public. Information on who to contact about any alleged acts of reprisal or intimidation was also provided. After the event, the organisers contacted the panellists to determine whether they received any positive or negative responses, or have suffered any form of reprisals or negative consequences.

Peer-to-peer approach. The webinar was formulated as a forum for peer-to-peer conversation based on the #Faith4Rights toolkit and as such it heavily emphasized an approach based on "speaking with guests, not just about them". The event adopted a "show and tell" format.

III. The role of the arts in human rights

As demonstrated by the panellists, art can be a powerful medium through which individuals and communities can express grievances and hopes as well as send public messages about social and political issues. In doing so, art can help to confront divisive discourse, spotlight shortcomings in established systems, and call attention to victims of discrimination, marginalization, violence and repression. This means art has the power to illuminate human rights abuses, uphold accountability, and ultimately advance human rights protection. In turn, human rights provide the space and protection needed for art to prosper, for artists to be openly creative, to challenge the establishment and received dogma, and to foster new thinking. Cultural rights and freedom of expression, including artistic freedom, is thus key to a diverse, inclusive and robust society and cannot be neglected as art and culture are indispensable to the development and survival of humanity, as also demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

The ability of art to transcend barriers of politics and language gives art universal power to alter perceptions and convey the human rights message in a way that resonates with an audience that may otherwise be unlikely to engage with the human rights agenda. Establishing such an alternative medium for understanding and cooperation means the United Nations and global human rights framework can reach more people with whom to advance the protection and promotion of human rights.

IV. Recommendations

Role of minority artists in human rights. Minority artists are often activists, trailblazers, visionaries, whistle-blowers, social catalysts, and human rights defenders. They can use their creations as an expression of protest against various forms of injustice, discrimination, violence, and lack of freedoms. In doing so, they raise awareness about important human rights issues, inspire new supporters, provide hope and galvanize victims of human rights abuses to act. Their artwork and unique platforms capture the complexities and nuances of the challenges their communities face in ways that other forms of communication cannot. Minority artists convey particular messages and articulate symbolic values that can shed light on ways a dominant culture has failed to protect or is actively involved in violating the human rights of specific groups. By engaging a wide audience through an artistic medium, minority artists play an important role in opening up space for diverse communities to increase cross-cultural interactions, reflect on their perception of one another, and develop mutual understanding, which ultimately facilitates the development of right-respecting societies.

Role of minority artists in development. The protection and advancement of minority artists and artistic freedom is integral to the successful implementation of the SDGs. Artists and other cultural workers together constitute an essential resource for achieving rights-based, inclusive, and equitable development. This is because art, as a form of cultural participation and expression, contributes to consolidating communities, preventing leaving no one behind, creating collective narratives, and fostering diversity, which are all crucial to social sustainability. In particular, minority artists have the ability to facilitate personal and group empowerment, social recognition and inclusion of disadvantaged communities, and intercultural literacy and cooperation through their artwork.

Threats to minority artists and the freedom of expression. Efforts to help strengthen minority protection policies that are based on a strategy of amplifying voices and allowing diverse communities

to speak for themselves should be defended and magnified and therefore access to free and unlimited space for artistic expression is essential. Restrictions on artistic freedoms in the form of blasphemy laws or other measures limiting civic space reflect a desire to promote one narrative to the exclusion of others; minority artists are especially targeted because they use their creations to resist and offer alternatives to fundamentalist and extremist agendas. Art often attracts controversy, a quality that should be embraced and defended and which cannot be allowed to lead to censorship, harassment and suppression. Freedom of artistic expression is essential to the realization of all other human rights as it intersects with other fundamental human rights concerns including freedom of opinion, women's rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and the rights of minorities. In this light, networks between artists and other human rights defenders need to be strengthened.

Continued attention to artists protection and risk mitigation. It is crucial that those involved in convening events for minority artists be mindful of – and continue to enhance tools for addressing – protection issues and the possibility of reprisals. Publicity is in principle both a form of protection, and it also opens real risks to people, risks which require mitigation.