

## HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL – 56th SESSION

### Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the right to education

24-25 June 2024

**Ms Farida Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on the right to education**, started her report by condemning the violence directed at civilians in Gaza and reminded the Council that she sounded the alarm in April 2024 on systemic attacks on schools and universities, suggesting an intentional effort to destroy the Palestinian educational system in scholasticide. In response to the student protests, the special rapporteur visited the US and observed the anti-war demonstrations at universities, calling for a cease-fire and for universities to review investments with Israel. Ms Shaheed noticed that pro-Palestinian protestors received harsher responses for alleged antisemitic views and highlighted that the expression of political opinion is not a legitimate ground to restrict freedom of expression.

Ms Shaheed shared her goal of recognizing and acknowledging academic freedom as an autonomous human right. Ms Shaheed was especially concerned with curtailments of institutional autonomy, increased surveillance of students and staff, new public management techniques, digitalization, and artificial intelligence that all impact academic freedom. She defined academic freedom as the freedom to access, disseminate, and produce information, to think clearly, to develop express apply, and engage with a diversity of knowledge within or related to one's expertise or field of study, regardless of whether it takes inside or outside the academic community. Academic freedom is about creating and disseminating knowledge, and the international community must not politicize its exercise. Academic freedom is a human right, not a professional one, that is essential to the promotion of quality education. Ms Shaheed's report also included the principles by a working group of UN experts, scholars and civil societies, for ensuring academic freedom and calls for their endorsement and implementation by all.

In 2024, Ms Shaheed visited Finland to learn about Finland's public educational system, which she described as excellent. The educational system is designed to support diversities and circumstances, with highly qualified teachers and cascading autonomy. She commended Finland's commitment to SDG4 to narrow the differences in learning outcomes, offer equal opportunities, increase participation of underrepresented groups, and strengthen well-being. The major challenge faced by Finland is a decrease in teachers in early childhood, special needs education, and education in minority languages. Further, whilst school psychologists are excellent and available in Finland, they may not be the students' first choices and may not have time for individual meetings. The Special Rapporteur therefore recommended new initiatives to be put in place, such as youth workers and school coaches. Finally, Finland is also struggling with the new digitalization, which Ms Shaheed said requires a robust discussion to safeguard against negative health implications, protect of privacy of online data, and the risk of accidental privatization of education through platformisation and digital tools.

**Finland (concerned country)** acknowledged the recommendations and will consider them carefully. The realization of the right to education is a priority at a national, regional, and municipal level in Finland, and the system is designed to accommodate various needs and circumstances, support individuals to achieve their full potential, and support lifelong learning. In 2021, the Finish Government extended compulsory education to 18 years of age and made this free of cost universally, including the travel and materials needed. This was to ensure that all people complete secondary education. The government is also investing 200 million euros extra in basic education, with teaching hours increased without adding content to the curriculum, with the aim of increasing the quality of mathematics and literacy in the Finish population. Finally, teachers are the core of education, and the profession is attractive in Finland due to the trusted and respected professionals. To amend the lack of teachers in childhood and special needs, the government has established an alliance with the largest cities in Finland to secure skilled labor needed in childcare and special needs.

## Interactive dialogue

**76 country delegations took the floor during the interactive dialogue**, many of which took note of the recommendations by the Special Rapporteur and supported the goal of recognizing academic freedom as an autonomous human right in international law. **Qatar, on behalf of the Cooperation Council for Arab States**, mentioned that in the past 8 months of occupation in Palestine, 90% of education facilities and all universities have been destroyed, keeping 625 million students from education at this time. **Kuwait** added that the consequences of Israel's violence in Palestine will be felt for generations, with a whole generation lost because it has been denied its right to education. Additionally, **Ukraine** highlighted that occupations seriously undermine academic freedom, demonstrated by the 3428 educational institutions damaged and 365 destroyed in Ukraine due to Russia's war against Ukraine. In general, many countries, such as **Ethiopia and Lithuania** mentioned the need for education for sustainable development in all countries, however, **Eritrea** reminded the Council that the international community is off track from achieving the education targets in the SDGs, with only 1/6 countries expected to achieve universal access to quality education by 2023. **Denmark** demanded that member states invest in social protection to support quality education for all children and youth in all countries. **Gambia, on behalf of the African group**, declared 2024 as the year of education and called on all countries to accelerate moves towards education for all. Aspirations for a prosperous Africa are based on inclusive growth and sustainable development and require significant investment in education, with an additional 77 billion dollars needed annually. Education fell by 23% in the last recorded year, therefore highlighting the importance of international solidarity in the field of education as a crucial element in achieving the African groups' goals.

**NGOs** condemned the genocide and scholasticide by Israel in Gaza and called for an immediate cease-fire. Many agreed with the Special Rapporteur's call to recognize academic autonomy as a human right and not just a professional one and mentioned how crucial academic freedom is to the right of education in all countries. **The European Union of Jewish Students** mentioned concern about the inability of governments to differentiate between the expression of diverse ideas and peaceful protests and the necessary strong condemnation of violent and hate-driven acts. Additionally, on anti-war protests in the United States, **the American Civil Liberties Union** said that the Special rapporteur was troubled by the violent crackdown on peaceful protests in universities. Finally, the **Asian Pacific Resource and Research Centre for Women** strove to bring attention to restrictions imposed on the inclusion and implementation of sex education in schools due to social, cultural, and religious barriers. Most countries in Asia Pacific have some level of sexuality education, but it is health-focused, and students are missing out on accurate information about sexuality due to teachers imposing their own cultural values.

### Delegations that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (76 country delegations):

*Finland, Qatar (on behalf of cooperation council for Arab states), EU, Egypt (on behalf of group of Arab states), Pakistan (on behalf of organization of Islamic cooperation), Cabo Verde (on behalf of Antigua, Cabo Verde and Barbuda), Gambia (on behalf of African group), Bahrein (on behalf of a group of countries), Malaysia (on behalf of a group of countries), Lesotho, Lithuania, Portugal, Islamic republic of Iran, Sierra Leone, Kuwait, Czechia, Ireland, Morocco, Armenia, Luxembourg, Nepal, Israel, Egypt, Rwanda, Palestine, Maldives, Ethiopia, France, Costa Rica, Algeria, Republic of Korea, Honduras, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, Iraq, Djibouti, United States, China, Columbia, Federation of Russia, Bahrein, Malaysia, Pakistan, Georgia, Ivory Coast, Tunisia, Albania, Senegal, Bulgaria, Timor-Leste, Togo, Cuba, Paraguay, Jordan, Yemen, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Romania, Denmark, Libya, Kenya, Venezuela, Zambia, Angola, South Africa, Mali, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Malawi, Vanuatu, South Sudan, Namibia, Cambodia, Suriname, India, Ukraine, Lebanon, Argentina, El Salvador, Azerbaijan, Austria, Belarus, United Arab Emirates.*

### NHRIs and NGOs that took the floor during the Interactive dialogue (10):

Burundi National Human Rights Commission, IDDH, European Union of Jewish Students, American Civil Liberties, Mariam Educational Charity Institute, Helsinki Foundation for human rights, Oeuvre d'Orient, Matt for peace, development and human rights association, Asian pacific resource and research center for women, Rajasthan Samgrah Kalayan Sansthan.

International Organizations: UNESCO.

To watch the full meeting refer to the UN WEB TV: [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#).