My name is mona silavi, I am from Ahwazi Arab minority in Iran.

professionally I am social and clinical psychologist.

 And today, I would like to use my personal and professional experiences in my speech.

As a person belonging to minority group, growing up in Iran, I rarely felt sense of belonging to the country,

 I knew,  I , my family and  my community are different.

 We spoke different language, celebrate different festivities, we even interpreted the same historical events differently,

 the poets that were celebrated greatly by the nationalist Persians were not appreciated by my community on the contrary we saw their writings as fuel that bursts the fire of racism and chauvinism in the country.

 All these facts reduces the sense of belongings among minority members and enhance the sense of exclusion.

But why the sense of belonging is important ?

According to Maslow’s Pyramid theory, we as human have 5 needs to achieve our  full potential.

 the need to belong comes after physiological need and need for security. These needs are build on top of each other,  we can not reach sense of security if we are  struggling to fulfil our physiological needs.

And we  can not be active citizens and fulfil our potentials,  if we  do not belong to the country we are  living in. These effect all aspect of our lives.

According to American Pychiatric Association Racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities often suffer from poor mental health outcomes due to multiple factors including inaccessibility of high quality mental health care services, cultural stigma surrounding mental health care, and discrimination.

 And “ the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities asserts that the protection and promotion of minority rights significantly contribute to the political and social stability of states in which minorities reside, and also encourage cooperation across states and peoples.Most of the world’s violence and conflict target minorities on the basis of their religious, linguistic, cultural, racialised and ethnic identities.”

Therefore it is important for all citizens of a country to feel they belong to it. homogenous’ societies is hardy exist today.

But how we enforced and fulfill this need?

The true democracy is achieved when the subjects of any law are involved in making it, and are included in the decision making process.

And in regard to minorities it is not the case. Most of the time the minority communities are effected negatively with the laws and regulations that they did not have any choice or chance in making or even reforming. They are not involve,  and in some cases they are deliberately excluded.

There are attempts to separate the democratic citizenships from minority equity. I can not oppose the idea of citizenship but we should be careful in its definition because it can be exclusive and prevent minorities in participating truly and effectively in decision making in general or over decisions in  their region in particular.

While we witness progress in minority rights in some regions such as Europe, we still hear the objection from scholars or policy makers in MENA region, claiming that talking of minority rights is like opening the pandora box.

However these policy makers fail to acknowledge how excluding minorities from decision making and othering minorities will not only effect the minority communities, but the whole society.

I will present you with an example. In Iran environmental situation and more specifically the water shortages have become a real challenge for the whole country.

Many of the water related problems we witness is due to discriminatory water policies of the central government.

Water distribution and management in the country is problematic and discriminatory, One region which is populated by ethnic Arabs  is losing its agriculture, the marshlands are denied their water rights, people do not have access to drinkable water, meanwhile water is systematically diverted to the central Iranian plateau for industries un sustainable development, such as steel.

In no stage the traditional life style of the Arab population of Ahwaz was taken into consideration, no locals were involved in the decision making process, nobody asked their opinion or input about how they will be effected if the natural course of water is diverted out of their region. The marshlands that more than that ten thounds of ahwazi arabs livelihood was depended on for people sitting in Tehran was a waste water and has not importance.

These water policies resulted in water scarcity and today the whole country is suffering from the result of such discriminatory policies. Such as sand storms, reduced the production of food, forced immgration of people from their village to cities and constant uprising.

The fact that the local minority population were not involved in any stages of decision making goes out to show, the consequences that will follow, if they are excluded and pushed into the margins.

This was only one example, now imagine all the decisions on large scale that will effect religious minorities and ethnic minorities and other minority groups and how their exclusion will effect the society.

Therefore involving minorities in process of making laws and implementing it not only enforces the stability in the country, but in the region. It reduce extreme nationalism, strength the sense of belonging to the country and decrease the chance of  falling victims to geopolitical interest of regional or international powers.

We have to remember that it is not important how far we came but how farther we can go.