



Statement of

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For six days during the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, delegates, observers and the international media gathered in one of the main chambers of the conference venue to listen to the testimonies of an extraordinary group of people who spoke in personal terms about racial discrimination. Twenty-one individuals from all parts of the world told stories that gave voice to the toll that racism takes in the lives of real, everyday people. The daily hour and a half of the *Voices Special Forum on Comparative Experiences of Racial Discrimination* quickly became a compelling interlude in the ongoing governmental negotiations that reminded us all of why we had gathered in Durban.

The stories told during the *Voices Special Forum*, while intensely personal, described at the same time, the corrosive effects of racial discrimination on the whole of humanity. The global scope of the problem was made visible: the many manifestations of racism, its causes and effects. The larger picture of racial discrimination in the 21st century emerged.

The stories told, the voices heard, spoke about many familiar manifestations of racism, such as hate crimes and slavery. But there were also stories about more insidious forms of racial discrimination that are otherwise innocuously embedded in the institutions that control all of our lives. Most were stories that illustrated the effects of systemic forms of racial discrimination that plague our societies and limit the lives of millions of people around the world.

The testimonies helped us remember that racial discrimination is not only the use of hateful words or even hate-motivated violence; it is not only individual acts of prejudice. Racism is manifest in the unequal and unfair treatment of entire groups of people, be it in the form of economic marginalization, bias within the criminal justice system, or the denial of cultural rights and ancestral lands.

Several of the testimonies also reminded us that racism often intersects with other forms of oppression, such as gender bias, and this intersection generates unique terrain in which abuses and marginalization are compounded.

However, the lives of the courageous people who spoke at the *Voices Special Forum* have been as affected by the struggle for racial equality as by the injustices that they have endured. They do not consider themselves “victims”— they are survivors, defenders, and activists. Their stories recognize and celebrate the human spirit that allowed each of them to overcome oppression and continue to work for a non-racist society. These are stories of triumph as well as tragedy.