

Statement to the IFSW Special General Meeting

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I wish to address one dimension of the present discussion that falls directly within my mandate as Education Commissioner: the documented destruction of educational institutions in Gaza and the West Bank; the impact on schools, universities and United Nations-affiliated educational infrastructure; and the ethical implications that arise where higher education institutions operate within, or maintain formal relationships with, military or settlement-linked structures.

This Special General Meeting concerns governance, professional ethics and adherence to international legal norms. It is also a moment of **historical consequence** for the Federation. Decisions concerning suspension or expulsion are rare and grave. They engage not only procedural authority but the **moral architecture** of the organisation itself. They are not unprecedented though. The Federation, like many international professional bodies, has previously confronted situations (including during the era of **apartheid in South Africa**) in which membership questions were assessed against systemic violations of international law and human rights. Such decisions were understood as determinations about compatibility with foundational ethical commitments.

The question before us is whether the Federation's Constitution and By-Laws, together with the Global Statement of Ethical Principles and the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training to which all members subscribe, carry **institutional consequence** when serious and sustained incompatibilities are formally identified.

The motion is brought under Article 9.3 of the Constitution and By-Laws, which provides for suspension or expulsion where conduct is incompatible with the Federation's constitutional commitments and ethical framework. At stake is the integrity of those commitments: respect for international humanitarian law, the protection of civilian life, and the safeguarding of education as a foundational human right and as a condition of peace. The Federation's long-term credibility depends on whether these standards operate as binding principles rather than aspirational declarations.

1. The destruction of education: schools, universities and “scholasticide”

The International Court of Justice is currently seized of proceedings under the Genocide Convention (South Africa v. Israel). In its Order of 26 January 2024, the Court indicated provisional measures requiring, *inter alia*, the prevention of acts within the scope of Article II of the Convention, the enabling of humanitarian assistance, and the preservation of evidence. The widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure (**including schools and universities**) forms part of the publicly documented context within which those proceedings are taking place. The existence of provisional measures underscores that the situation has reached a threshold of legal gravity recognised within international law.

Within that broader legal context, United Nations agencies have documented what they describe as a near-total collapse of the education system in Gaza. UNICEF reports that more than 90% of school buildings have been damaged or destroyed, leaving the majority of Gaza’s approximately 658,000 school-aged children without sustained access to education (UNICEF, 2025). For many children, schooling has not simply been interrupted, it has ceased to function as a stable social institution.

In April 2024, UN Special Procedures experts reported that at least 5,000 students, hundreds of teachers and dozens of university professors had been killed in the first six months of hostilities. They warned of what they termed possible “scholasticide”, a phrase used by those experts to describe the systematic destruction of education through the killing of educators and the demolition of infrastructure (OHCHR, 18 April 2024). The term is cited here as part of the official UN record. UNESCO’s satellite-based assessments further indicate that **all** higher education institutions in Gaza have been heavily damaged and rendered non-functional (UNESCO, 2026). Universities, ordinarily spaces of critical inquiry, professional formation and civic engagement, are reported to have ceased operating in any conventional sense. UNICEF humanitarian updates further report **that more than 20,000 children have been killed** in Gaza since 7 October 2023, with many more injured, displaced or repeatedly uprooted from what remains of the school environment (UNICEF, 2026). The educational consequences are therefore inseparable from the wider humanitarian crisis. Education is not peripheral to that crisis; it is one of its central casualties.

Taken together, these UN-verified findings describe **not isolated incidents but the dismantling of an entire educational ecosystem** that refers to schools as places of childhood development, universities as sites of professional and intellectual life, and educational infrastructure as a pillar of civilian society.

2. The United Nations framework and IFSW's institutional positioning

As membership is already aware, IFSW holds Special Consultative Status with the United Nations (via ECOSOC), **situating it formally within the UN's** multilateral human rights and humanitarian framework. This status is not symbolic. It reflects institutional alignment with the principles and structures of international law, including those concerned with the protection of civilians and the safeguarding of education.

Within that framework, UN agencies such as UNESCO and UNRWA carry explicit mandates relating to education, cultural protection and civilian welfare. Their assessments therefore carry particular relevance for a Federation whose Constitution, By-Laws and global policies emphasise human rights, peace-building and the protection of vulnerable populations.

UNRWA has repeatedly reported that a substantial proportion of its own school buildings in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed since October 2023, including while serving as designated shelters for displaced civilians (UNRWA Situation Reports, 2024–2025). UN human rights experts have publicly condemned strikes on UNRWA schools sheltering displaced families (OHCHR, May 2025). The UN Secretary-General has further stated that the Gaza conflict has become the deadliest in United Nations history for its personnel, with more than 280 UN staff members killed since 7 October 2023, the majority of them UNRWA employees (UN News, 2025). These reported losses include educators and staff working within the UN's educational and humanitarian infrastructure.

For a Federation institutionally embedded within the UN system, these developments are not external political events. They concern the integrity of the multilateral architecture within which the Federation is recognised and participates. Where UN-mandated educational infrastructure is extensively damaged and UN personnel are killed at unprecedented levels, questions of ethical positioning are not abstract. **They directly engage the constitutional commitments of an organisation that operates under the UN umbrella.**

3. Higher education, institutional responsibility and international law

This consideration does not attribute collective responsibility to individual practitioners or academics, many of whom may hold diverse and even critical perspectives. It concerns institutional positioning and whether formal organisational relationships remain compatible with articulated ethical commitments.

Over the past year, several international universities have concluded that collaboration with Israeli universities in the current context cannot be treated as administratively neutral. Through formal governance processes (boards, senates, rectoral committees and human rights screening

mechanisms), institutions have examined whether continued cooperation aligns with their statutory commitments to human rights and international law.

In Spain, the Conference of Rectors of Spanish Universities (CRUE) publicly committed its member institutions to review cooperation agreements in light of developments in Gaza and to ensure that partnerships are consistent with international humanitarian law (CRUE, 9 May 2024). In Italy, the University of Pisa suspended framework agreements with Israeli universities following deliberation by its Academic Senate and Board of Directors, grounding its decision in institutional statutes and values (Università di Pisa, 2025). In Ireland, Trinity College Dublin established a governance review of its international partnerships in the context of humanitarian law concerns (Trinity College Dublin, 2025). In Belgium, Ghent University screened its collaborations under its Human Rights Policy and announced the discontinuation of certain partnerships (Ghent University, 31 May 2024).

These measures differ in scope and national context. However, a common rationale can be identified. University leadership has treated institutional collaboration as **ethically consequential** where credible concerns arise that partnerships may intersect with structures subject to sustained international legal scrutiny. This includes, in some cases, publicly documented research relationships with state defence bodies and research with dual-use applications (that is, technologies or knowledge capable of both civilian and military deployment). Where research may contribute, directly or indirectly, to military or security operations, institutions have considered whether such collaboration remains compatible with their human rights obligations. Activities within occupied territory have raised related concerns regarding institutional alignment with international law.

This latter issue is particularly relevant in relation to **Ariel University**, an institution located within the Israeli settlement of Ariel in the occupied West Bank, which the United Nations Security Council has determined has no legal validity under international law. The United Nations Security Council has stated that Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory have “no legal validity” (Resolution 2334, 2016). In its Advisory Opinion of 19 July 2024, the International Court of Justice reaffirmed that Israel’s continued presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territory is unlawful. *Where an academic institution operates within such a settlement framework, external institutional partners are confronted with a question of structural alignment.*

The reviews cited above demonstrate that several international universities have not treated these structural considerations as peripheral. They have regarded them as directly relevant to institutional compatibility with their own human rights commitments. Membership within the Federation is likewise an institutional relationship, not a symbolic affiliation. Where structural incompatibility arises, constitutional review is not exceptional; it is inherent to governance. The deliberation before this Meeting therefore concerns whether continued institutional alignment remains consistent with the Federation’s constitutional and ethical standards.

4. Membership, ethics and constitutional consequence

This statement does not rehearse the broader arguments already before this Meeting. It addresses the institutional implications of a situation that is under active examination within international law and that has resulted in the documented **destruction of educational life on a vast scale**. As mentioned above, the International Court of Justice has indicated provisional measures in the proceedings under the **Genocide Convention** (Order of 26 January 2024). The destruction of schools, universities and civilian infrastructure forms part of the publicly recorded context within which these proceedings are unfolding.

The Federation has not remained silent in relation to its member body. The IFSW Executive issued **formal censures** of the Israeli Union of Social Workers in 2018 and again in January 2025. The latter referenced breaches of the Global Statement of Ethical Principles, including Principle 9.3 on peace, non-violence and the refusal to allow professional knowledge to be used for inhumane purposes. According to the Secretariat's report, the IUSW **declined** to call publicly for peace and declined to seek non-combat exemptions for social workers serving in active military roles. These matters were assessed as incompatible with the ethical expectations of membership. The Federation has therefore already applied lesser and proportional measures. **Article 9.3 exists precisely for circumstances in which such measures do not resolve sustained incompatibility.** The Meeting must consider not only whether incompatibility exists, but whether continued membership remains proportionate in light of that incompatibility.

Membership within IFSW is an **institutional commitment. It is not symbolic affiliation, nor is it unconditional recognition.** Article 9.3 of the Constitution and By-Laws exists to address precisely those circumstances in which incompatibility with the Federation's constitutional commitments becomes sustained and formally recognised. The issue before this Special General Meeting is whether the cumulative weight of these factors now meets the constitutional threshold contemplated by Article 9.3. The integrity of the Federation depends on whether its ethical commitments operate as binding standards, particularly in moments of profound humanitarian consequence.

The responsibility before this Meeting is constitutional and institutional: *to decide whether our Constitution guides us in moments of crisis, or whether it is disregarded when it matters most.*

List of Acronyms

ECOSOC: United Nations Economic and Social Council

Genocide Convention: Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948)

ICJ: International Court of Justice
IFSW: International Federation of Social Workers
IUSW: Israeli Union of Social Workers
OHCHR: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
UN: United Nations
UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF: United Nations Children's Fund
UNRWA: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNSC: United Nations Security Council

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