**Alda Facio´s remarks at the 10-year anniversary event**

This Working Group means a lot to me for many reasons one of which is the fact that I was part of those civil society organisations who pushed for its creation since even before the Human Rights Conference in Vienna 1993. So, when I was appointed by the Human Rights Council, I was excited and grateful for this new challenging task ahead of me. An immense task. The mandate of the Working Group is so vast: covering the human rights situation of half of the world population with only five members and an even smaller support team. But I was extremely lucky to join a WG with four members who were experienced international experts and to have joined at the same time as a new support team composed of two human rights experts in their own right who are truly committed to gender equality and without whom we could never have achieved so much in such a short time. My immense appreciation to our fantastic Hannah Wu and Bernadette Arditi.

The mandate of the WG covers all women and yet women are not a uniform group. As you all know, there are multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against us that reinforce and sustain each other. All women, in our diversity and varied circumstances, are affected differently by discriminatory laws and practices and yet there are important shared aspects of discrimination against women that persist in all cultures, although with differing levels of intensity and differing impacts. And yet this commonality is precisely what many try to erase or ignore, especially by those who do not or do not want to understand how sex and gender play out in all human groups. In fact, throughout the first years of the mandate (and even today), we have constantly had to explain, even within the human rights system, that women are not just another vulnerable group within an ever increasing list of vulnerable groups, as we are often treated by some. We are half of the world population and often the majority within most vulnerable groups. Therefore, eliminating the persistent discrimination against women must be addressed both as a stand-alone goal and as a mainstreaming issue.

Joining a Group which had already been established three years before was challenging but at the same time, the four founding experts immediately made me feel part of the team. Despite our differences, we shared the same ideals, the same goals: improving women’s rights on the ground and ensuring that the system would give due visibility to issues related to women`s inequality. The five of us knew we could not take up this huge task without supporting each other in our different efforts to bring this about or without trusting that the five of us were committed to ending discrimination against all women even if we had different ideas on how to bring this about. We also tried to value our different histories and abilities. For example, each one of us did her part to bring other SPs mandates on board. Frances will certainly give more details on our gender mainstreaming efforts at that time.

The beginnings were not easy. The Working Group faced considerable resistance from certain stakeholders (including States). Some resisted because they did not want an additional mechanism monitoring and denouncing women’s rights violations around the world. But others resisted simply because they did not understand and still do not understand that women are half of humanity and therefore a second mechanism devoted exclusively to ending discrimination against women can never be considered a duplication. In fact, I am convinced there will never be enough mechanisms to address sex and gender-based discrimination and the patriarchal oppression which pervades all societies across the globe. I lobbied for many years for this mechanism because I knew we needed this very independent and valiant voice within the UN system. The founding members did an incredible job setting the agenda for the coming years and today I want to congratulate the four of them as we celebrate this anniversary.

When I joined the Group, there was still little knowledge of its existence and work modalities and a certain lack of cooperation from key actors which made our work more difficult. We also had to work amidst misunderstandings of both the concept of gender and of feminism two concepts without which it is impossible to eliminate the varying forms of discrimination all women face. (I recall that in one joint press release, a mandate holder insisted we delete the term “feminist” when referring to a WHRD from my region who was assassinated and who I personally knew identified as a feminist. I was so disappointed that the stigma linked to the concept of feminism had permeated the UN system and even those experts who defend human rights. That is why one of my goals within the WG was to clarify the concept of gender and destigmatize feminism. I hope that our recent position paper on “Gender Equality and Gender Backlash” will serve as a useful tool to clarify this conceptual framework.

In recent years, as reflected in the 2018 report on “Reasserting equality and countering rollbacks” which I had the privilege to lead, the Working Group documented the significant backlash against women’s rights and even against the use of the term gender itself which has been so misused, sometimes out of ignorance but many times to further undermine the struggle towards sex and gender equality. The hostilities against the so-called “gender ideology”, particularly vehement in Latin America and Eastern Europe, exemplify the growing challenges in the quest this equality. Conservative lobbies advocating against the “gender ideology”, wrongly see efforts to advance women´s rights in all spheres of life as the imposition of ideas and beliefs that seek to destroy institutions such as the family, marriage, and religious freedom. This movement has been particularly vocal in opposing policies or even debates on issues of scientifically based comprehensive sexuality education in schools, women’s sexual and reproductive rights, marriage equality and even gender-based violence.

These conservative and fundamentalist movements across the globe are very organised and clear about their opposition to women´s rights. On top of the considerable financial means they have and their access to the high spheres of power, they are united in ways we are not. I think that one of the weaknesses of the UN system, but also of the feminist movement, is the lack of coordination and cooperation. Kamala will certainly share with us her sharp systemic approach and provide her analysis of the achievements and weaknesses of the women’s rights machinery.

As a WHRD myself, I wanted to make sure that our Group gave voice to women human rights defenders and increased the visibility of our struggles. Not only has the WG engaged with women human rights defenders on a regular basis, in particular during its country visits, but it has used its convening capacity to bring WHRD to UN spaces with the aim of amplifying their voices and addressing the human rights abuse they face. In the current context of shrinking civic space, this is particularly valuable. I am also glad that the WG could issue various public statements on the topic and that it has chosen this day to celebrate its 10th anniversary which to me symbolizes its commitment to work with WHRD and amplify our voices in dealing with the COVID-19 crisis and so many other crisis women face around the world..

I am particularly glad that each year the Working Group has gained visibility but won´t go into that as I am sure the current WG members will say more about this. So, in ending my intervention today, I would like to emphasize, as I just said, that today’s event is highly symbolic, but that I hope it will also have concrete outcomes. I would encourage key partners, including UN entities and States, to translate the key messages we will hear today into transformative actions.

Thank you for your attention and of course I remain open to any questions which may arise from the chat.

-----