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| **Strengthening protection networks for women human rights defenders to combat discrimination:** Challenges and opportunities in the current context  **Thursday 18 May 2017, 3.00-5.00 p.m**  **Room XVII , Palais des Nations** |

Distinguished delegates,

Dear partners,

First of all, I would like to thank all of you for attending this meeting which is a very important one for our Working Group in view of all our work and commitment regarding the cause of women human rights defenders. A constant commitment reflected in our thematic and country visits reports, communications and public actions. I also would like to thank our partners who co-organized this event as well as the Special Rapporteur for his precious support. In line with our mandate, we have been trying to develop innovative ways to maximise the convening capacity offered by our sessions, in particular in view of the limited space for civil society within the UN.

There are numerous reasons why we consider it essential to address at this time the very specific challenges faced by women human rights defenders and the ways in which their protection can be strengthened.

* First, there seems to be a general confusion about what constitutes discrimination against women and about gender issues. The very concept of gender is widely misunderstood as is the concept of feminism which continues to be denigrated and discredited, even by some in the human rights community.
* Second, women human rights defenders face unique challenges around the world, driven by deep-rooted discrimination against women and stereotypes about our appropriate role in society. In addition to the risks of threats, attacks and violence faced by all human rights defenders, women human rights defenders are exposed to specific risks. Women human rights defenders are targets of misogynistic attacks and gender-based violence. They lack protection and due access to justice. And their organizations lack resources.
* Third, today’s rising fundamentalisms of all kinds and political populism, as well as unchecked authoritarian rule and uncontrolled greed for profit-making further fuel discrimination against women, intensifying the obstacles defenders face. For instance, those working on rights contested by fundamentalist groups such as women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights and those denouncing the actions of extractive industries and businesses are at heightened risk to attacks and violence.

As established in the CEDAW Convention, “discrimination against women" refers to any “distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality between men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field”.

The impacts of discrimination against women on the life and public participation of women human rights defenders are also multiple: increasing the risks they face in carrying out their work; affecting their health, their life, their relationships with their families and communities; diminishing their ability to contribute, thus affecting the work of the organizations in which they participate and the causes for which they struggle. This discrimination also inhibits and discourages women who are feminists, social activist or agents of change who, out of fear of reprisals, do not even dare to identify as human rights defenders.

The political and public participation of women in society and the historic work of women's organizations and feminist groups have been one of the major expressions of democracy and an indispensable engine for the recognition of women as subjects with full rights and agency, benefitting millions of women and girls, , their families and communities. However women’s participation in the public space has been curtailed by the discriminatory practices and gender stereotypes experienced by women throughout the world.

Despite these challenges and despite a hostile context, the international community was able to make a milestone achievement, when in 2013 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the "Promotion of the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms: protecting women human rights defenders" , which requires Member States to take concrete measures to eliminate discrimination against women.

States must stop criminalizing women for their work as human rights defenders and develop measures to attack the root causes of discrimination against women and ensure the protection of human rights defenders in a manner that systematically integrates a gender perspective.

Before giving the floor to the Special Rapporteur and to the admirable activists present with us today, I would like to pay tribute to all these women throughout the world who work tirelessly and with courage to defend women’s human rights as well as all those who work for substantive equality in every sphere of society.

For conclusion at the end of the event:

I would like to wholeheartedly thank all panellists for their precious insights and all other participants for their valuable intervention.

We hope that we will be able to build on today’s event and to deepen the dialogue with all concerned stakeholders and ensure that words are translated into actions.

The historic resolution of the UN General Assembly recognized in 2013 the indispensable role played by women human rights defenders in society and their need for support, protection and empowerment. Given the particularly hostile current context, in which the term of human rights defenders itself is questioned and crushed in international fora, this resolution was a considerable achievement, but it is time to go even further. We urge Member States, the United Nations and society as a whole to combat discrimination, to recognize publicly and make visible all efforts that women human rights defenders deploy individually and collectively to preserve peace and to achieve equality. We also urge States to resolutely support initiatives which are defined by women defenders themselves and their organizations and to ensure an enabling environment for their work. In the face of rising populism and fundamentalisms and deplorable setbacks on the women’s human rights agenda, we need more than ever to unite our forces to preserve the democratic space in which women human rights defenders represent an essential counter-power and a colossal force of action.