

**Closing remarks at the Lisbon Forum organized by the International Campaign for
Women's Right to Safe Abortion**

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Thank you for this incredible honor. I say this from a place of profound respect and affection for the people in this room – many of whom I have known, worked with, laughed with and cried with at different points in the last 18 years and some that I am meeting for the first time.

I noticed that a few days ago when I pulled out the agenda to start preparing for this conference that I have been asked to give an “inspirational” concluding speech.

And my first thought was let me start looking for some inspirational quotes to kick off my remarks – and I did Google “famous feminist quotes” – and what showed up was list after list of quotes by Hollywood celebrities – Emma Watson, Reese Witherspoon, Priyanka Chopra – and I thought to myself, this is not going to work.

And then I decided to take a risk - after all, I'm an abortion rights advocate and that's what we do! – I decided to come here and see what inspired me – because what's really important to me as an activist is to be **honest** and **authentic**.

So, when I arrived here I put my bags in my room, freshened up a bit and headed down for breakfast. And who should I run into but the amazing Rebecca Cook, whose intellectual brilliance, contributions to the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights and humility have always inspired me – so my day started really well.

Then I was introduced to Marge Berer, who I have heard about for years but never met and when she started her presentation with questions like, “How do we normalize abortion?” “Do we demand decriminalization or legalization?” “Are we asking for enough?” – I was inspired again

because depending on how we choose to answer these questions, we put ourselves on a course for change, transformation, or both.

Similarly, the questions regarding time limits were thought provoking and then some of the responses that I heard where people said that the discussions from the first day and the questions asked yesterday had made them **reflect on their own achievements and strategies** revealed a very powerful **dynamic of introspection** and **intellectual fluidity** which I think is really important for us to be open to as activists, especially because, as acknowledged repeatedly, what we as abortion rights advocates are really engaged in is a struggle for power, influence and rightful control over own bodies and lives - and it's very difficult because we are fighting against a globally entrenched system of patriarchy that has been built over centuries – and in the case of abortion, specifically designed to control, punish and shame women. While changes in laws, policies and practices are critical, they may not be enough, so as we think about short term objectives and gains, we have to think about **transforming the systems that exist** – and I don't only mean health and legal systems but also economic, political and social systems, where there is a strong male bias that must be rooted out because all of these systems shape women's lives – their roles in society and agency. Since we can't do this alone, we have to align with other movements to advance our own strategies and shape theirs.

Doing this is going to require a **transformative vision** that must be shaped by local and national struggles and opportunities like this conference where we challenge ourselves by posing hard questions and where we build on our collective knowledge, experience, solidarity, and passion for this work.

It will also require us to examine **where we situate abortion** aside from in the areas of health and criminal justice for instance in the context of labor and the environment.

So, going back to what happened yesterday, before I knew it, the day was over and on two hours of sleep I had sat through session after session of thought provoking conversation and been enriched and inspired. And this continued today with first-hand accounts of activism from Argentina, Ireland, Chile and other parts of the world and perspectives on movement building.

After hearing these accounts and based on what I am seeing in my own country Nepal, what I have experienced in the Philippines – especially with roll-back on post-abortion care – an issue that we probably don't talk about enough in spite of the injuries, trauma, abuses, stigma, and unethical as well as illegal practices and impunity associated with it - and with the situation in the United States right now, where the landmark Supreme Court decision, Roe v Wade is in peril, and whose fall will trigger abortion bans in several states, one of the things that is clear to me is that **as we try to deal with the present and make progress, we must simultaneously lay the foundation for future activism because the process of securing abortion rights, and once they are secured of ensuring the practical realization of these rights, and preventing roll-back is a continuous struggle and a lot of hard work!**

As we talk about what we are doing to secure abortion rights, we must also think about how to prevent the erosion of existing abortion rights or how not to lose an abortion right and build safeguards where possible.

The prospect of having a case study on a fallen right from the United States the next time we meet is troubling for me on many levels not least because when I started out as an abortion rights activist and there was a criminal ban in my country, Nepal, and Roe inspired me to believe in the possibility of a right.

Speaking of rollbacks, I would like to shift my focus to the Working Group on discrimination against women in law and in practice (WGDAW).

When we met earlier this year to develop a vision for our mandate we decided that it would be to assert **gender equality and prevent rollbacks** to maintain a positive and assertive stance and because of the realities of the world that we live in.

The Working Group has taken a very clear position on women's abortion rights that is grounded in autonomy and agency.

We have staunchly opposed the instrumentalization of women's bodies and remain committed to being a strong voice for women's rights at the Human Rights Council where opponents of women's abortion rights, and human rights more generally, are incredibly active and strong and have the ability to sway governments.

They have cleverly appropriated "family values" as their political frame to advance their anti-women agenda which makes our work it very difficult, but we are committed to holding our ground. We are known for our feminist positions despite the fact that opponents nowadays are trying to politically and socially demonize feminism by referring to it as "gender ideology," an approach aimed at destroying family relationships.

For local activists, human rights mechanisms can seem distant and irrelevant but while it might take a while for positive developments in these spaces to trickle down, it takes far less time for setbacks in language and political positions to undermine the human rights framework and accountability processes as a whole, which in turn contribute to impunity for human rights violations and violations of fundamental rights everywhere.

One way in which you can **help us** fulfill our mandate at the Human Right Council is by engaging with the Working Group and being a constant source of information especially with regards to threats as well as good practices.

There will be opportunities for **you to shape** our thematic reports over the next few years which will focus on:

- Deprivation of liberty in 2019
- Women in the world of work in 2020
- Sexual and reproductive health and rights in crisis situations in 2021
- Adolescent girls, possibly with a focus on legal capacity in 2022

You may submit requests for communications and position papers where there are normative gaps on issues of relevance.

Meanwhile, do feel free to use our existing position paper on reproductive health and rights which focuses on abortion and public statements in your advocacy.

The most recent Human Rights Council resolution on discrimination against women which was shaped by the Working Group also has strong language reaffirming women's autonomy and sexual and reproductive rights more generally.

We have recently launched a Facebook page which you are welcome to follow to keep abreast of our work and provide input.

I would now like to **wrap up** my remarks by acknowledging that this year marks the **25th anniversary of the Vienna World Conference on Human Rights**.

As Alda Facio, a well-known feminist and a fellow Working Group member who has always inspired me loves to say, "1993 is the year that we were recognized as human and it's only been 25 years."

I think we've done pretty well in the last couple of decades in terms of securing stronger norms on abortion and challenging existing paradigms as well as offering new ones. It's really important for us to recognize and celebrate these gains and sustain our efforts while we brace ourselves for what lies ahead.

As you move forward, do bear in mind that you have a strong ally in the Working Group in this fight.

Finally, notwithstanding what I said earlier about not finding a suitable quotes, here's one that I did eventually find which I'd like to leave you with because it is both funny and inspiring --

"A woman is like a tea bag—you never know how strong she is until she gets in hot water."
(*Gloria Steinem*)

As abortion rights advocates we are constantly in hot water. Let's march onward so that we may fully realize our own strength and claim our rightful place in this world.

Thank you!