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**Current challenges and opportunities for women human rights defenders: How can the international community better support their work?**

**Wednesday 13 March 2017, 6.30-8.00 p.m  
Conference Room 4, UN Headquarters, New York**

Background:

Women human rights defenders make essential contributions to the effective promotion, protection and realization of international human rights law and play an important role in raising awareness and mobilizing civil society in identifying human rights violations and in contributing to the development of genuine solutions that incorporate a gender perspective.

Women human rights defenders lead movements that have swept the globe calling for gender equality and an end to gender-based violence against women, but also struggling for peace, social justice against corruption and protecting the environment. They have filled the streets, the airwaves, and the internet with their vigour and experiences, bringing to light facts truths that are too often veiled. They are raising their voices, frequently at great personal risk, to stand up for human rights and justice for all. Often these women are at the forefront of challenging social and cultural norms that limit women's human rights.

The current global context of unchecked authoritarianism as well as the rise of populism, the power of corporate greed and the influence of fundamentalist groups has accelerated closing the space for civil society to operate freely. This happens in a variety of ways, including through the enactment of laws and establishment of practices that effectively impede human rights work, including the misapplication of certain laws such as counter-terrorism and public assembly laws. In such a restricted space, women human rights defenders face additional barriers of economic and structural discrimination and unique challenges driven by deep-rooted discrimination against women and stereotypes entrenched in patriarchal societies related to gender and sexuality.

In addition to the risks of threats, attacks and violence often faced by all human rights defenders, women human rights defenders are exposed to specific risks such as sexual violence, defamation, intimidation, including against their family members, in order to deter them from continuing their valuable work. Women human rights defenders often face abuses perpetrated by non-State actors including members of their own family, community and faith-based groups, non-State armed groups, private security agencies, corporations, and organised crimes.

Women human rights defenders also face particular threats in conflict and post-conflict situations. Situations of armed conflicts, and the subsequent break down of the rule of law, create a particularly dangerous environment for women and girls. Women human rights defenders are pivotal in promoting sustainable peace, yet they are constantly excluded from peace processes and politics, often criminalised. They experience gender-based violence, which hampers their participation in decision-making processes.

Within this context, women human rights defenders have been organizing themselves around the world to develop their own protection strategies based on the elaboration of measures that take into account their specific needs, and the creation of safety and self-care networks. These efforts have not only been conducive to the participation and security of women working for human rights, but have also led to a change in the approaches and strategies that were traditionally used in terms of protection, both by States and civil society organizations. States must also live up to their commitments to protect women human rights defenders, who are increasingly under attack and inadequately protected.

### Event

In the framework of the sixty-third session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the UN Working Group on discrimination against women in law and in practice organizes this event together with networks of women human rights defenders from different regions of the world, with the presence of other civil society representatives, UN entities and Member States. One of the main purposes is to recognise the challenges and progress made to advance an integral understanding of gender-based discrimination affecting women defenders and, in general, impeding the realisation of human rights, and generate a series of concrete recommendations for States and different UN entities to ensure an enabling environment and more adapted protection measures protection for WHRDs.

### Objectives:

- Highlight the main challenges faced by women human rights defenders in different regions of the world, in a global context of rising fundamentalisms, discrimination and closure of civic space.
- Exchange good practices, experiences and lessons learned from networks created to ensure safety and self-care with respect to approaches and strategies to achieve an inclusive environment and gender-sensitive protection that contributes to the elimination of discrimination.
- Encourage State commitment to protection and non-discrimination of women human rights defenders.
- Formulate concrete recommendations to States and United Nations entities to promote an environment of protection and equality for the participation of women.

### Panellists:

- H. E. Ambassador Mr. Kai Sauer, Permanent Representative of Finland to the United Nations
- Assistant Secretary General for Human Rights, Andrew Gilmore
- Ivana Radačić, Chair of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women in law and in practice
- Rasha Jarhum (Peace Track Initiatives), Yemen
- Weaam Youssef (Gulf Centre for Human Rights), Syria
- Haydee Castillo (Las Segovias), Nicaragua
- Shereen Essof (Jass Southern Africa), Zimbabwe
- Hala al-Karib (Strategic Initiative for Women in the Horn of Africa (SIHA), Sudan
- Wai Wai Nu (Justice for Women), Myanmar
- Michel Forst, UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders
- Ms. Nina Nordström, Director of the Unit for Human Rights Policy, Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland