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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

**Joint written statement* submitted by the Front Line
International Foundation for the Protection of Human Rights
Defenders, the Center for Reproductive Rights, Inc., the
BAOBAB for Women's Human Rights, non-governmental
organizations in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[14 February 2011]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

Regarding the women human rights defenders' report of the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights defenders**

On behalf of the Women Human Rights International Coalition, we welcome the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders' focus on women human rights defenders. Her report contributes significantly to the important role that women human rights defenders play in the defence of human rights and acknowledges them not just as victims, but as agents of social change and transformation. Her report raises the necessity to address the seriousness of the violations against them and the need for gender-specific programmes for support and protection.

The violations, risks, and constraints faced by women human rights defenders need to be understood in terms of their identities and the contexts in which they work. For protection strategies to be responsive they have to be developed in line with the dismantling of gender discrimination and inequality. The Special Rapporteur usefully highlights the frequent complicity of law enforcement officials in sustaining patriarchal views of the community that ultimately deny women human rights defenders access to justice and continue impunity.

Our experience as women human rights defenders and as organizations that work with women human rights defenders shows that sex discrimination and gender inequality is at the heart of continued violations against women's human rights throughout the world. As reflected in the report, women human rights defenders are particularly targeted because of their gender identity or sexual orientation – both as women and lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and transgender (LGBT) people defending the range of human rights. Women human rights defenders, including men who defend women's human rights, are targeted, often through violent means, in order to challenge and deny the universality of the rights for which they advocate.

The report has drawn attention to some of challenges faced by women human rights defenders across thematic areas and around the world. Advocates of sexual and reproductive rights are particularly at risk, as stated in the report. They are often targeted for providing sexual and reproductive health services to women, and subjected to violence as a result. In a context where women can only exercise their sexual and reproductive rights when such individuals provide these services, these service providers have to be recognized – and supported – as defenders of human rights.

The risks for sexual rights advocates are heightened because of the persecution of people based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. Over 70 countries around the world criminalize homosexuality. This state-sanctioned homophobia, along with increasing religious and political rhetoric that demonizes homosexuality, means that threats to LGBT human rights defenders remain high. The recent killing of David Kato in Uganda came just weeks after a local newspaper had named the 'Top 100 homos' and called for them to be hanged, and as the Anti-Homosexuality Bill was before parliament. In Brazil, one LGBT person is killed every 1.5 days, and there were at least 250 killings of LGBT people in 2010 alone. In South Africa, in Cape Town alone, ten lesbians a week are raped because of their sexual orientation.

Also of particular concern is the alarming trend of threats and death threats and subsequent killing of women human rights defenders in Latin America, the highest among the regions comprising more than half of the 292 cases reported to the Special Rapporteur. In Mexico,

** Isis International Manila, an NGO without consultative status, also shares the views expressed in this statement.

two decades of femicide, is a disturbing manifestation of misogyny, accounting for the particular risks to women human rights defenders in the context of escalating violence in the region involving organized crime gangs, drug cartels and Mexican security forces. In December 2010 and January 2011 respectively Marisela Escobedo Ortiz and Susana Chávez were assassinated. These defenders campaigned against this pattern of femicide and demanded accountability for the killings and abductions of women in Ciudad Juárez and Chihuahua.

As these cases show, it is their identity – as women or gay, bisexual or transgender men – that render women human rights defenders targets for attacks.

Women human rights defenders who confront impunity for human rights violations are also at a high risk. Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 11 years in prison in Iran and banned for 20 years from working as a lawyer and from leaving the country. It is considered that these charges were due to her defence of those who confront the Iranian government's blatant disregard of human rights and gender equality. The government in this case did not even heed an appeal from the High Commissioner for Human Rights to respect her rights as a defender. It is imperative for the Human Rights Council to address these continuing human rights violations in Iran.

The human rights violations which women human rights defenders experience are often embedded in the context of their daily lives. For example, in the contexts characterized by religious fundamentalisms and other forms of extremism, those speaking out or dissenting against religious or cultural justifications for violations of women's human rights are frequently not accorded respect of their human rights and protection. When they come under attack, the response is often that they have brought it upon themselves.

The forms of the violations also merit closer scrutiny, such as the worrying trend of confining women defenders to psychiatric institutions in Uzbekistan or the denial of adequate medical care, forced medication and sleep deprivation while in detention in China and other countries. These are forms of cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment prohibited under the UN Convention against Torture.

We commend the Special Rapporteur for bringing attention to the role of non-state actors as perpetrators and making the connection between these actors and state agents. Human rights violations committed by family members or colleagues against women human rights defenders are often viewed as merely part of their 'private lives', and not as serious obstacles to their human rights advocacy or part of the backlash against it. Often, it is challenging for women human rights defenders to get others to acknowledge the connection between such violations and their work. Therefore, it is important to identify the responsibility of non-state perpetrators and develop mechanisms for their accountability.

In renewing the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, it is therefore important to continue to uphold Human Rights Council Resolution 7/8 of 2008 that directs the Special Rapporteur "to integrate a gender perspective throughout the work of his/her mandate, paying particular attention to the situation of women human rights defenders". In doing so, it is important not to compartmentalise women human rights defenders as a separate 'sector' of human rights defenders but, rather, to integrate a gender perspective in the interpretation of the rights of defenders. This includes looking at issues specific to sexual orientation and gender identity, and the targeted persecution of LGBT human rights defenders.

Integrating a gender perspective in the implementation of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders entails developing protection mechanisms responsive to the gender-specific nature of the violations against women human rights defenders and their gendered consequences. Protection measures should address not just immediate threats, but their long-term well-being. To ensure women human rights defenders can carry out their

legitimate activities without hindrance, an enabling environment for claiming and defending rights must be created and sustained. This includes dismantling discriminatory legal and policy frameworks that undermine women's ability to fully participate in society including defending human rights. This is the foundation of ensuring the protection of women human rights defenders.
