**Annual discussion on the integration of a gender perspective throughout the work of the Human Rights Council and that of its mechanisms**

**Theme: Overcoming gender-based barriers to freedom of opinion and expression**

**Monday, 26 September 2022, 4 to 6 p.m. (UTC+2)**

**Room XX, Palais des Nations, Geneva, and online platform (Zoom)**

**(will be broadcast live and archived on https://media.un.org/en/webtv)**

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to contribute to this important discussion (on gender-based barriers to freedom of opinion and expression) and I regret that I cannot participate in person as I am in Bangladesh.

About a year ago I presented my first thematic report to the General Assembly. It was the first report in the 27-year history of this mandate to be exclusively devoted to examining freedom of expression with a gender lens.

The report found that while there have been many impressive achievements on gender equality, the sad truth is that expression is not free for many women and girls.

The Internet has become the new battleground in the struggle for women’s rights, amplifying the opportunities for women to access information and express themselves but also creating new risks of repression and inequality.

Let me highlight three key challenges that women face (and when I say “women” I include women and girls in all their diversity and intersectionality).

 **Firstly, gendered censorship is pervasive.**

Women’s voices are suppressed, controlled or punished online and offline, explicitly by laws, policies and discriminatory practices of States and implicitly by social attitudes, cultural and religious norms, and patriarchal values. State and society are complicit in promoting gendered censorship.

I am particularly concerned about the monitoring, censoring and criminalization of women’s social behaviour by States and society under the guise of protecting “public morals”. As we have seen recently in the case of Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman in Iran, it can lead to serious violations of human rights with tragic consequences.

**Secondly, women pay a disproportionate price for speaking out.**

Sexual and gender-based violence has long been used as a weapon to silence women. Today, as women increasingly use digital spaces to discuss, debate and build support networks, they are being attacked with online gender-based violence, hate speech and disinformation. While all women face such threats, female politicians, journalists, human rights defenders and feminist activists, especially those with intersecting and marginalized identities, are particularly targeted by State and non-State actors. The aim is to intimidate and drive them off the platforms and out of public life, undermining human rights, diversity, and ultimately, democracy and inclusive development.

**Thirdly, unequal access to information and the Internet are major impediments to women’s empowerment.**

Only about half of all women worldwide have access to the internet, and that figure falls dramatically in the poorer and more remote areas of the world. Even where women have digital access, poverty, low literacy and lack of digital skills can make that access meaningless.

Right to information is at the core of freedom of expression. Yet information of particular interest to women such as data on workplace inequalities or on sexual and reproductive health, are often unavailable, outdated, difficult to find or blocked.

Now let me turn briefly to what must be done and underline three points.

Firstly, there is a clear and explicit link between the root causes of gender inequality, including patriarchal and gender stereotypes, negative social norms and systemic racism, on the one hand, and the persistence of gendered censorship on the other. Governments must not only abolish laws, policies and practices of gendered censorship, but also be more proactive in dismantling the structural and systemic roots of gender discrimination that underlie gendered censorship.

Secondly, freedom of opinion and expression plays a vital role in the realization not only of women’s civil and political rights, but also their economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. The coronavirus pandemic, now followed by the global economic crises, food insecurity and climate catastrophes, has exacerbated gender inequalities across the spectrum of development. If women are to regain lost ground and participate fully in the recovery, their right to freedom of opinion and expression must be placed front and centre in international and national development plans and policies.

Thirdly, social media platforms play a vital role in women’s empowerment by enabling them to communicate, advocate, organize and access information. It is incumbent on both companies and States to make these digital spaces safe and accessible for all women. But States must not use efforts to eradicate online gender-based violence, gendered hate speech and disinformation as a pretext to restrict freedom of expression beyond what is permitted under international law.

There must be no trade-off between women’s right to be free from violence and the right to freedom of opinion and expression. In my report I have recommended a three-fold approach to avoid this trade-off: firstly, a gender-sensitive interpretation of the right to freedom of expression and opinion; secondly, clear internationally accepted standards on what constitutes online gender-based violence, hate speech and disinformation; and thirdly, a calibrated approach to ensure that responses by States and companies are aligned with the level of harm or threat to women. I encourage the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to explore these issues further through multistakeholder consultations and develop some clear guidelines.

Let me end by recalling that next year will be a decade since the Human Rights Council adopted the ground-breaking resolution A/HRC/RES/23/2 on the role of freedom of opinion and expression in women’s empowerment. I call on the Council to mark the anniversary with another momentous resolution in 2023, to assess progress, acknowledge challenges and set out a clear road map for eliminating the barriers to women’s equal right to freedom of opinion and expression in the digital age.

Thank you.