**Statement of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Ms. Reem Alsalem \***

**Side event on**

**Upholding Safety and Fairness in Female Sports**

**New York, 16 October 2024**

Your excellency, Ambassador Scapinni Ricciardi

Your Excellency, Madame Deputy Ambassador Mucco,

My fellow panelists

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen

I wish to thank the Permanent Missions of Paraguay; Cameroon, the Kingdom of Morocco, Malaysia and ADF International for organizing this important side event and for inviting me to be part of it.

As was mentioned, on the 8th of October, I presented my report on violence against women and girls in sports which also centered on the issues of fairness and safety.

In fact, the lack of fairness and safety can largely be attributed to the structural discrimination that women and girls in sports experience – primarily on account of their sex, which should be understood in its ordinary meaning, namely, as referring to “biological sex”.

This discrimination underpins the structure of the world of sports and its consequences.

This should not come as a surprise.

The world of sports, as a microcosm of wider society, continues to seriously discriminate against half of its members - often in all aspects of life, and often very violently.

This is no accident.

Sports mirror the sexist cultures and institutions present in society, elevating male hegemony, which aims to subordinate females, to new levels that are both sanctioned and celebrated.

It is also no accident that the world of sports is dominated by men, and therefore an overwhelming majority of those exercising the hegemony, control, and perpetuating violence against women and girls in sport are men. These men are either coaches, family members, managers, spectators, or physical education teachers and peers – amongst others.

Sadly, the experience of women and girls in sport is therefore a reflection of this wider reality in society. In some contexts, women and girls are categorically excluded from playing in sport on account of their sex – as is the case in Afghanistan.

In other contexts, society’s gendered expectation of their roles and behaviors limits their ability to play sports, for example: because of the disproportionate burden of care responsibilities; concerns for “damages” to the female’s chastity and reputation if she were to play; or because female athletes do not have the same access to resources, visibility (including by the media), investment, remuneration, support, or opportunities.

More recently, as patriarchal structures continue to evolve, women and girls in sport are experiencing new forms of discrimination based on their sex.

One glaring example is opening the female category of sports to males, further undermining their access to equal opportunities and the right to participate in safety, dignity and fairness.

 In fact, I do not hesitate to say that the failure to protect the female category is one of the most egregious forms of violence against women and girls as the essence of being “female” is willfully pushed aside and ignored resulting in distress, pain, humiliation, frustration, and anger at the loss of dignity, safety, and sheer injustice confronted.

This discrimination based on sex also intersects with other causes of discrimination against women – as is often the case.

We see this in online violence where black female athletes and those belonging to other racial minorities may experience vilification, harassment, and racism.

In view of all the, the fact that we have women and girls that play sports at amateur or elite level - despite all the barriers- is at times nothing short of miraculous, and a testament to the female athletes’ determination, perseverance and stamina.

Every day in sport becomes a form of resistance, and a pushback against the many barriers, disappointments, risks and dangers - a true snapshot of the realities and experiences that women and girls confront daily, both in and out of sports.

At the same time, it is profoundly troubling that girls in sport experience very early on that being female is treated as a “disadvantage”, and a “risk factor” that exposes them to different forms of violence, whether sexual, physical or psychological.

The reasons such violence, discrimination, and unfairness thrive in sport are many. Chief amongst them, however, is the very high level of impunity reinforced by the regulatory autonomy of sports organisations and bodies, which often prioritise reputation and winning over justice for victims.

I realize that this paints a bleak picture. However, the fact that we are here today, at the United Nations, discussing these issues and acknowledging the injustices and the discrimination that women and girls in sport experience gives me hope. It is a testament to its importance that these issues have made it on the radar screen of the international community.

In this sense, I wish to also pay tribute to the many female athletes that have spared no effort to make their voices heard, often at great personal cost and in the face of even greater adversity and hostility. The patriarchy does not like it when women dare to speak, and patriarchy in the world of sport is no different than patriarchy everywhere else.

My report to the United Nations General Assembly and this event should be seen as another milestone in understanding the experiences of women and girls in sports.

It should also be seen as part of a renewed collective commitment to addressing the root causes of discrimination and violence and to courageously and boldly do so.

This requires first and foremost recognizing the rights of women and girls in sport as a human rights issue, and a renewed commitment to protect women and girls against discrimination based on their sex.

Similarly, the mistreatment and violence they face as females must be treated as human rights violations.

Such an approach requires a recognition of the responsibility of State and non-State actors when they directly perpetuate discrimination and violence or fail to act when it comes to their attention. All relevant actors, including sports bodies, States and institutions must deal with them as such and must be adequately resourced and equipped.

We owe this to our women and girls and to our societies.

Like many women here today, I have personally known the immense benefits of sport in my youth but also as an adult, not only to my physical and mental health but also to my self-confidence and self-esteem. I am grateful to have had access to and opportunities to practice the sport I was interested in, even when they challenged sex and gender stereotypes and social expectations about what was appropriate for a girl like me. Moreover, and through my work with refugees, migrants and the communities that host them, I have seen for myself the transformative impact that sports can have, including for women and girls.

In terms of the way forward, I wish to focus on some of the actions that can be adopted at the international level, since this was one of the questions I had received during my interactive dialogue with States when presenting my report, but which due to time constraints, I was unable to address.

First, State and non-State actors must recommit to strengthening the incorporation of women and girls in sport. In 1994, 280 delegates of 82 countries representing government and non-governmental organizations had stated they would do so in the declaration of Brighton. It is time to walk that talk.

Second, they must continue to gather and analyze relevant and disaggregated data on the impediments and barriers to the equal and effective participation of women and girls in sport. The time may have come to implement the Kazan Action Plan on establishing a global observatory for women, sport, physical education and physical activity for that purpose. The observatory could also document the many good practices that are being adopted around the World and which I also tried to highlight in the report.

Third, the pervasive impunity for human rights violations committed against women and girls in sport must be addressed, in part through addressing the harmful culture that dominates the world of sport. A human rights-centered approach must also recognize the right of female athletes to equality and non-discrimination base on their sex, which requires the preservation of the female category in sport, while ensuring that everyone irrespective of their sex, gender identity or other considerations.

Finally, every actor with influence in sport can already increase the representation of women in sport management bodies and center the voices of female athletes. Listening to them, consulting them, involving them in the design and implementation of solutions is essential. In 2024, there is no reason why should continue to sideline the opinions and voices of women and girls, including in sport.

Thank you.