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*Engaging Marginalized Women in Sudan***

**Remarks at Side Event Hosted by the UN Democracy Fund
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Coming to this platform at this critical time, I have to state that women human rights defenders in Sudan are directing a violent battle for their human rights and their dignity. This battle has been going on every single day in the streets of Sudan urban center since the first half of December 2018. The current protest in Sudan is largely led by women regardless of their age or their background. Women are all recognizing despite years of repression that their dignity and rights are at stake, and they cannot any more take or accept the systematic repression that was practiced against them for the past 30 years. Women human rights defenders in Sudan at the moment are playing an extremely complex role in challenging the patriarchal structure of the state, religion and culture, while at the same time struggling to bring their societies in line with universal human rights.

It is critical in this day to remind ourselves that women's participation in and for human rights comes at a very high cost, and that the layers of repression and exclusion of women human rights defenders are informed and sustained by patriarchy and power relations. These extend beyond and over the simplified presumptions of culture, traditions, religion which are constructed and used by power holders and for power holders.

This why it is very important, when we are speaking about challenges that hinder women human rights defenders, to unpack our discourse and conversation on women rights at first, because this conversation often becomes very messy. The rhetoric on women rights becomes a pre-condition for very broad interest groups to engage in our part of world. So that to morally enforce and justify interventions, many international organizations borrow the rhetoric of women rights, while neither their structure nor terms of existence are fully reconciled with women rights. The discourse on women rights becomes communally consumed, to the point that regimes that are openly repressive to women and communities also learn to utilize the discourse of women rights and exploit it.

This situation is very alienating for women human rights defenders, me being one of them. By being political, by being willing to cross boundaries in the struggle for women rights, we are repressed not only by our own repressive regimes and culture but by the broad institutions of international actors who hold the key to recognition. This situation is very damaging. I am aware and constantly living in the tension between women human rights defenders and the terms of engagement that dictate who should be women human rights defenders, according to the gatekeepers.

For decades the human rights movement did not include women rights as an integrated agenda. The dichotomy between the two movements is largely due to the differences in the historical and theoretical development of each movement. The evolvement of the human rights movement is directly connected to the establishment of the United Nations and the growth of the modern nation state, while the women rights movement is deeply rooted in the dynamic of society's development. However, women's rights are human rights and are directly connected to the political environment, social development and stability of societies.

Activism for women rights remains an isolated issue in the Horn of Africa and is often neglected and forgotten by the main stream human rights actors. Those who are advocating against for instance child marriage, abduction of girls, imprisonment of women failing to repay bride price when divorcing, are perceived to be in defiance of traditions and culture. And these harmful practices against girls and

women are not always perceived as human right violations.

It is also important and critical to emphasize that women engaged within the NGO arena are not all women human rights defenders, but part of the global bureaucracy that serves a specific agenda. In the Horn of Africa where I am working, women human rights defenders are mostly invisible, they struggle with lack of recognition. They struggle with lack of protection mechanisms available for their work and the violations committed against them. They have limited knowledge of to connect to avenues of support and solidarity. And finally, grassroots women human rights defenders have limited analytical capacity to anticipate risks. And I think the poor investment on women human rights defenders' capacity is one of the core challenges that contribute to the isolation and exposure risks.