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Powerful stories calling for support of women's human rights defenders at regional forum on Beijing+25

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**IN WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN AGENDA2030, POLICY PROCESSES, GENDER EQUALITY, INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY, ADVOCACY, WOMEN'S MAJOR GROUP, BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION, WHRDS, NEWS, CSW & CEDAW, RUSSIA, UKRAINE
BY LATEST NEWS**

Over the past years, records show that Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are increasingly under attack. Shrinking civic space coupled with far-right mobilisation and Neo-conservatism has led to women's rights and environmental activists and their organizations being persecuted, their funding stopped and their lives endangered.

As member states gathered in Geneva, 29-30 October, for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe's (UNECE) regional review meeting on Beijing25, the Women's Major Group jointly with WECF, WO=MEN and WIDE+, with support of the Government of the Netherlands, organised an official event to listen to testimonies and analyses on the issue.

We had the honor to welcome Human Rights Ambassador of the Kingdom of the Netherlands Ms. Bahia Tahzib-Lie as an opening speaker. She delivered a strong message of support to achieving gender equality and the role of WHRDs: "Women's voices can no longer be silenced, they are at the heart of any form of progress. We must treasure and support women human rights defenders: individually and collectively they make a powerful difference for reaching gender equality".



Analysis of anti-gender equality trends

Increasing anti-gender equality movements present a challenge to WHRDs across the European and North American region. There is a misconception in our region that we are already doing enough for achieving gender equality. At the same time, anti-gender movements are gaining more popularity and pushing for a roll-back of women's rights. They promote traditional gender ideologies, under the name of family values, that have found support from some policy makers. This is problematic according to political analyst Elena Zacharenko, because it vindicates the anti-gender movements' perspectives and brings them into the mainstream. It's key to understand the reasoning behind the anti-gender movements if we want to be successful in fighting them. We need to reclaim the terms 'family' and 'gender equality' as positive values of diversity, inclusion and human rights for all, and strengthen them through our European constitutional foundations.

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Three testimonies

What then are the needs of WHRDs themselves? And which challenges do they face in their work? Olena, Cora and Marina shared their personal experiences fighting for the human rights of women in their own communities.

Olena Shevchenko has been persecuted by far-right para-military groups in Ukraine, after her organization Insight organized the International Women's Rights Day march. The banner they used included a symbol used by the far-right resembling a spear featured in the Ukrainian national flag. The far-right brought a court-case against Olena, for “abusing the national symbol”. During our event she presented photos and documents of the court case, illustrating the tactics used by the far-right against women and LGBTQI activists, and how this has put herself as well as her family's lives in danger.

As a consequence of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine, the far-right is presenting themselves as the patriots defending the country against all “enemies” including women's rights activists. The far-right groups are using gender ideology arguments and spreading abuse through social media and mainstream TV. She presented the role of a TV channel, that poured oil on the fire by using a biased yes-no online poll seeming to indicate strong support (79,2%) for the leader of the far-right organizations against her person and the broader women's rights and LGBTQI movement. Olena called upon governments to



strengthen legislation against violence in mainstream and social media, as well as juridical protection of women's rights and LGBTQI activists.



Cora McGuire-Cyrette presented the work of the indigenous women's organizations in Canada, who are impacted by multiple intersecting forms of discrimination rooted in colonialism. Indigenous women experience extreme levels of violence and suffer the highest rates of femicide compared to any other ethnic groups. The crisis of 'missing and murdered Indigenous women of Canada' is well known. Indigenous women in Canada also suffer the highest level of domestic violence, unemployment and life in poverty. Indigenous children in Canada are overrepresented in foster homes, taken away from their mothers and placed into non-Indigenous

foster homes. This is a continuation of colonial practices and the institutionalization of sexism and racism.

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Research by the Indigenous women's organizations has shown a correlation between children placed in foster homes and then ending up trafficked for sexual exploitation in the mining areas, often at very young ages. At the root of many of these problems is discrimination and imposition of hetero-patriarchal structures from colonization. This is why "an intersectional analysis must recognize racism, colonialism, and extreme levels of violence that Indigenous women face". The Ontario Native Women's Association has worked for decades to have Indigenous women's rights recognized within their communities and by the state, as they face both sex discrimination and racism in Canada. ONWA also provides essential services to Indigenous women in the sex industry, including Indigenous women who want to exit and those that do not. They also provide many other services around child and youth support, economic empowerment, policy advocacy and awareness raising.

They call on governments to recognize the key role Indigenous women's organizations play in society, and to listen to their knowledge and demands. Cora emphasized that it is important that Indigenous women have their own governance structures and leadership positions. Creating this equal basis is essential to have successful, equal cooperation.

Marina Avramenko supported this message. She represents "someone who you might think does not exist: a sex worker who does her job out of her own will". She is not ashamed of her work, and is convinced she is bringing a needed service. However, she and her colleagues face discrimination and repression in many countries, and often do not have equal rights to public health services and juridical support. She called specifically for stronger connections between sex workers organizations and feminist organizations. When it comes to writing



legislation, policy makers need to reach out to those who the legislation is about. In Marina's experience, laws on sex work are often created by people who know nothing about sex work. She stressed that, of course, children are sacred and laws need to protect youth under the age of consent.



Building a more intersectional feminist movement

It is essential to build a more intersectional feminist movement. In the words of Olena: "we have to understand the intersectionality of our inequalities". These intersectional problems also show how important it is that we work together. We need to strengthen cooperation and solidarity for women's human rights defenders in all their diversity.

