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**HAUT COMMISSARIAT DES NATIONS UNIES**  
**AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME**

**PROCEDURES SPECIALES DU**  
**CONSEIL DES DROITS DE L'HOMME**

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**OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS**  
**HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**

**SPECIAL PROCEDURES OF THE**  
**HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

**Mandates of the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice; the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; and the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences.**

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Excellency,

We have the honour to address you in our capacity as Chairperson-Rapporteur of the Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice; Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression; Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association; Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders; and Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 23/7, 16/4, 15/21, 16/5, and 23/25.

In this connection, we would like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to information we have received regarding **allegations of threats and harassment of women's non-governmental organizations and women's human rights defenders in Armenia.**

According to the information received:

Upon the adoption of the draft Law No. 57 on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women by the Armenian Parliament in May 2013, there has reportedly been intense public discussion on the concepts of gender and equality, including debates on social network sites.

It has been alleged that extremist groups have disseminated misleading information targeting women's non-governmental organizations and women's human rights defenders in Armenia on social networks sites, describing them as "traitors of the nation", "destroyers of families", a "threat to Armenian values" and "promoters of sexual abuse towards children and minors." These same groups are reportedly manipulating the wording of the provisions in the above-mentioned

law. It has further been alleged that individuals who speak out on gender issues or women's human rights are being publicly ridiculed, both online and in broadcast media, and their photographs circulated so that they can be identified and attacked.

It has also been reported that the Women's Resource Centre, a grass-roots non-governmental organization combatting discrimination based on sex and providing psychological and legal support to survivors of gender-based violence in Armenia, has been the subject of online threats and calls for violence against it. These have allegedly included calls to bomb the Centre and burn women's rights defenders for speaking out on gender issues and challenging gender stereotypes in Armenian society. The Chairperson of the Women's Resource Centre has reportedly raised the issue of threats and calls for violence against the Centre with the Armenian police but, as yet, the authorities have allegedly taken no action.

Furthermore, it has been reported that the Armenian Parliament has largely remained silent on this issue. Notwithstanding, one female Parliamentarian has reportedly called for amendments to the above-mentioned law, while one male Parliamentarian has allegedly registered an official complaint with the Office of the Prosecutor-General, against the Women's Resource Centre, requesting an investigation into the organization and its activities. It has been further reported that this latter Parliamentarian had, on previous occasions, verbally attacked the Women's Resource Centre, including on one of his on-line magazines, criticizing it for working on domestic violence issues and calling for its closure. According to the information received, this Parliamentarian was successfully sued by the Women's Resource Centre for defamation in 2012; however, the on-line magazine in question has yet allegedly to publish an official apology. It has further been alleged that the on-line verbal attacks against the Women's Resource Centre are the direct consequence of the court case relating to the above-mentioned defamation suit and that journalists working for the on-line magazine involved in the suit continue to harass members of the Centre, including circulating misinformation regarding its work.

While we do not wish to prejudge the accuracy of these allegations, serious concern is expressed for the physical and psychological integrity of women's human rights defenders in Armenia, particularly members of the Women's Resource Centre. Grave concern is expressed that allegations of threats, harassment and calls for violence to be perpetrated against them could be related to their activities in the defence of human rights.

We would like to draw the attention of your Excellency's Government to its obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (hereinafter "CEDAW"), which was acceded to by Armenia on 13 September 1993. Article 2 (f) requires States Parties to "take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women." Article 5 (a) calls on States

Parties to “take all appropriate measures to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.” Furthermore, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, in paragraph 3 of its General Recommendation No. 3, has urged all States parties to “adopt education and public information programmes, which will help eliminate prejudices and current practices that hinder the full operation of the principle of the social equality of women.”

In this connection, we wish to recall the Committee’s 2009 Concluding Observations on Armenia’s Periodic Report (CEDAW/C/ARM/CO/4), paragraph 13, in which it called upon Armenia “to accelerate the adoption of the proposed law on gender equality and to embody the principle of equality of women and men in the proposed law on gender equality, in line with article 2 (a).” While we would like to take this opportunity to congratulate your Excellency’s Government on the adoption of Law No. 57 on Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, which is a positive step towards realizing the elimination of discrimination against women in Armenia and full enjoyment of human rights on an equal basis with men, we would also wish to highlight an additional recommendation from the same paragraph of the above-mentioned Concluding Observations, namely to “raise awareness with respect to the nature of indirect discrimination and the concept of substantive equality among Government officials, the judiciary and the public” and importantly, to also “adopt a gender specific approach in policies and programmes.”

The Committee also expressed concerns in paragraph 20 of the above-mentioned Concluding Observations in relation to “the deeply rooted patriarchal attitudes subordinating women and the strong stereotypes regarding their roles and responsibilities in the family and society”, which “...present a significant impediment to the implementation of the Convention and are a root cause of women’s disadvantaged position in political life, the labour market, education and other areas.” As such, the Committee called upon Armenia in paragraph 21 “to take urgent measures, in particular in rural areas, to initiate change in the widely accepted subordination of women and the stereotypical roles applied to both sexes. Such measures should include awareness-raising and educational campaigns targeting, inter alia, community leaders, parents, teachers, officials and young girls and boys, in accordance with the obligations under articles 2 (f) and 5 (a) of the Convention.” The Committee also recommended that Armenia “...elaborate the role of the media in eradication of such stereotypes including by promoting non-stereotypical and positive images of women and the value of gender equality for society as a whole.”

The Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences would like to bring to your Excellency’s attention article 4 (c & d) of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, which notes the responsibility of States to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and, in accordance with national legislation, punish acts of violence against women, whether

those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons. To this end, States should develop penal, civil, labour and administrative sanctions in domestic legislation to punish and redress the wrongs caused to women who are subjected to violence. Women who are subjected to violence should be provided with access to the mechanisms of justice and, as provided for by national legislation, to just and effective remedies for the harm that they have suffered. States should, moreover, also inform women of their rights in seeking redress through such mechanisms.

The Special Rapporteur would further wish to highlight article 7 (c) of CEDAW which requires States Parties to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the political and public life of the country and, in particular, to ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country.

Moreover, she notes that article 4 (o & p) of the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women states that States should recognize the important role of the women's movement and non-governmental organizations worldwide in raising awareness and alleviating the problem of violence against women, and should, moreover, facilitate and enhance the work of the women's movement and non-governmental organizations and cooperate with them at local, national and regional levels.

We would like to appeal to your Excellency's Government to take all necessary steps to secure the right to freedom of opinion and expression in accordance with fundamental principles as set forth in article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which provides that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice."

We would also like to appeal to your Excellency's Government to take all necessary steps to ensure the right to freedom of association, as recognized in article 22 of the ICCPR, which provides that "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests".

We would further like to refer to Human Rights Council resolution 21/16, and in particular operative paragraph 1 that "reminds States of their obligation to respect and fully protect the rights of all individuals to assemble peacefully and associate freely, online as well as offline, including in the context of elections, and including persons espousing minority or dissenting views or beliefs, human rights defenders, trade unionists and others, including migrants, seeking to exercise or to promote these rights, and to take all necessary measures to ensure that any restrictions on the free exercise of the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are in accordance with their obligations under international human rights law."

In this respect, the Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association also refers to paragraph 84 (c) of his thematic report A/HRC/20/27, in which he calls upon States to “ensure that no one is criminalized for exercising the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, nor is subject to threats or use of violence, harassment, persecution, intimidation or reprisals.”

In this connection, we would like to refer your Excellency's Government to the fundamental principles set forth in the Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, and in particular articles 1 and 2 which state that “everyone has the right individually or in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels” and that “each State has a prime responsibility and duty to protect, promote and implement all human rights and fundamental freedoms, inter alia, by adopting such steps as may be necessary to create all conditions necessary in the social, economic, political and other fields, as well as the legal guarantees required to ensure that all persons under its jurisdiction, individually and in association with others, are able to enjoy all those rights and freedoms in practice”.

Furthermore, article 12, paragraphs 2 and 3 of the Declaration provide that the State shall take all necessary measures to ensure the protection by the competent authorities of everyone, individually and in association with others, against any violence, threats, retaliation, de facto or de jure adverse discrimination, pressure or any other arbitrary action as a consequence of his or her legitimate exercise of the rights referred to in the Declaration. In this connection, everyone is entitled, individually and in association with others, to be protected effectively under national law in reacting against or opposing, through peaceful means, activities and acts, including those by omission, attributable to States that result in violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as acts of violence perpetrated by groups or individuals that affect the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Lastly, in paragraph (z) of its Agreed Conclusions adopted in March 2013 (E/2013/27- E/CN.6/2013/11), the Commission on the Status of Women has also recommended that States “support and protect those who are committed to eliminating violence against women, including women human rights defenders in this regard, who face particular risks of violence.”

In view of the urgency of the matter, we would appreciate a response on the initial steps taken by your Excellency's Government to safeguard the rights of the above-mentioned persons in compliance with the provisions of the stated international instruments.

Moreover, it is our responsibility under the mandates provided to us by the Human Rights Council, to seek to clarify all cases brought to our attention. Since we are expected to report on these cases to the Human Rights Council, we would be grateful for

your cooperation and your observations on the following matters, when relevant to the case under consideration:

1. Are the facts alleged in the above summary accurate?
2. Please provide the full details of any measures put in place to ensure the physical and psychological integrity of human rights defenders working at the Women's Resource Centre.
3. Please indicate what measures have been taken to ensure that human rights defenders, including civil society actors and other activists, can operate in an enabling environment and can carry out their legitimate activities without fear of threats, harassment or criminalization of any kind.

We undertake to ensure that your Excellency's Government's response to each of these questions is accurately reflected in the report we will submit to the Human Rights Council for its consideration.

While waiting for your response, we urge your Excellency's Government to take all necessary measures to guarantee that the rights and freedoms of the above-mentioned persons are respected and, in the event that your investigations support or suggest the above allegations to be correct, the accountability of any person responsible of the alleged violations should be ensured. We also request that your Excellency's Government adopt effective measures to prevent the recurrence of these acts.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of our highest consideration.

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against women in law and in practice

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Maina Kiai  
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