

EAST AND HORN OF AFRICA HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS NETWORK

Oral intervention

On the occasion of the 49th ordinary session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, Banjul, The Gambia – Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Women in Africa.

Presented by Rachel Nicholson, East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project

Honorable Chairperson, commissioners, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project, I would like to start by thanking the commissioner for her excellent work on the rights of women in Africa, and to take this opportunity to highlight some of the particular challenges faced by women human rights defenders.

As recognized by the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in her annual report to the Human Rights Council this March, women human rights defenders face specific affronts to their rights. Women human rights defenders can be women who are human rights defenders, and those who defend women's rights and sexual rights. They are targeted and face challenges due both to their work as human rights defenders and for being women or defending women's rights, thus challenging the status quo.

In the East and Horn of Africa sub-region, women human rights defenders have been subjected to stigmatization, community hostility and legal restrictions on their work, as well as threats and physical attacks by both state and non-state actors.

In Sudan, for example, the brutal reaction by the Sudanese National Intelligence and Security Services to the 30th January and subsequent demonstrations has been widely reported. Many demonstrators and activists were detained and tortured, and it appears, often targeted on the basis of their ethnicity or gender. Numerous activists and human rights defenders, male as well as female, were subjected to sexual violence or threatened with rape, but have gone public about their experiences in an attempt to reduce the stigma and intimidation intended by such acts.

In South Sudan, women human rights defenders face similar difficulties and challenges to their human rights work. A female journalist was denied access to the Greater Equatoria Conference in April and arrested for her 'improper dress', which would strongly suggest that gender-specific measures are being used to suppress independent journalism.

Considering the constraints that women human rights defenders face in terms of culture, tradition and patriarchal societies, women face serious obstacles for example in accessing justice for violations of their rights. Echoing the outcomes of the consultative workshop held in Banjul in November last year, we recommend that the special rapporteur on the rights of women and the special rapporteur on human rights defenders conduct a joint study on the social factors behind the specific threats to women human rights defenders.