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Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network**

Oral Intervention by Ms. Susana Fried
Agenda Item 12: Violence Against Women

Mr. Chair,

One night, not long ago, a mother was beating her daughter. She was placed in a sack, hung from the ceiling, and beaten by a broom again and again. The daughter was made to kneel on painful rocks or dry mung beans, arms stretched out, both hands holding glasses of water, and told to hold that position for hours unless she wanted to be beaten again. She was also forced to do manual labor, often “traditional” male chores like fixing broken pipes or standing near the front door all night long. All this, simply because she is a lesbian.

I speak today on behalf of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission. This story comes from a report on violence against lesbians in the Philippines. It could have taken place in nearly any country of the world where countless women are discriminated against at work, tortured by the police and other state officials, raped by male family members, and subject to other forms of violence and inhumane treatment because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender expression.

While the rape of any woman puts her at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS, discrimination against women whose sexual and gender expression do not conform to social and cultural norms puts them in an especially compromised position. All too often, women who have sex with women, whether or not they define themselves as lesbian or bisexual, find it impossible to receive appropriate and accessible HIV/AIDS support, treatment and care because they fear hatred or dismissal by health care providers.

This points to the ways state-sponsored and supported violence is inflicted against women who transgress societal gender prescriptions. Any divergence from cultural norms that require that the expression of gender neatly correspond to biological sex, causes fear and hatred leading to actual violence, threats of violence, and psychic harm. Rooted in stereotypes stemming from rigid conceptions of masculinity and femininity, this violence occurs on many levels ranging from daily torment and harassment in schools to hate-driven murder. It is precisely the eradication of these cultural stereotypes that is required by Article 5 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

And yet, despite violence perpetrated against women who have sex with other women, and HIV-positive women, individuals and groups throughout the world are mobilizing to demand their human rights. We are these women, and they are also our colleagues, our friends, and human rights activists for whom national and international systems that promote and protect their human rights remain a distant dream.