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Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights

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Submission in relation to Treaty Body Strengthening

I refer to the letter of Ambassadors Jurg Lauber and Omar Hilale dated 17 June 2020 calling for submissions in relation to the UN human rights treaty body system. I make this short submission to raise my concern in relation to civil society participation and its vulnerability to manipulation.

I attended Geneva for Australia's report back to CEDAW in July 2018 and was concerned to observe that the system is one which is readily influenced by monied interests. Women's organisations are chronically under-funded and under-resourced and as a result do not typically have the means to attend a session reporting to the treaty body in Geneva. Indeed, it is my experience that even in a developed country like Australia, there is a general lack of awareness of the treaty reporting system.

However, some of the civil society delegates in attendance had funding from a large international body with a specific agenda that is not necessarily compatible with advancing the human rights of women and girls. During training I learnt that for some smaller countries there was just one delegate in attendance who therefore had an entire 10 minutes to address the committee and advance the agenda for which they had been funded. There did not appear to be any requirement that delegates should disclose their source of funding or any conflict of interest.

Since men have control of the world's wealth and resources, any system that is going to advance the human rights of women must guard against manipulation of this sort. The current system is undermined by funding and manipulation of civil society participants to ensure they are advancing the interests of men rather than women. As a result, civil society is failing to call out the harm done to women by prostitution and surrogacy trades and are instead advancing spurious claims for recognition of sex on the basis of self-declaration, which is likely to have a catastrophic impact on the ability to protect the rights of women into the future.

Anna Kerr
Principal Solicitor