

Speech of Sass Rogando Sasot

Let me begin by expressing my warmest gratitude to the Permanent Missions to the United Nations of Argentina, Brazil, Croatia, France, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden, and to the coalition of non-governmental organizations defending the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. Thank you for making this event possible and for giving us this opportunity to contribute our voice to this ongoing conversation for change. Our esteemed participants, beautiful beings, and profound expressions of this Universe, a warm, vibrant, and dignified afternoon to each and every one of you!

Burned at stake. Strangled and hanged. Raped and shot and stabbed to death. Throats slashed. Left to bleed to death. These are just some of the ways transgender people were killed in different parts of the world, in different times of our history. These are just the tip, the violent tip, of the iceberg of our suffering. I can go on and on, reciting a litany of indignity upon indignity, but my time is not enough to name all the acts of atrocious cruelty that transgender people experience. But what is the point of counting the dead bodies of our fellow human beings, of narrating how we suffer, and of opposing violence against us if we don't challenge the root cause of our oppression? The sincerity of our intention to address the human rights violations against transgender people rests upon the depth of our appreciation of human diversity and the breadth of our understanding of why transgender people suffer these indignities.

The root of our oppression is the belief that there is only one and only one way to be male or female. This starts from birth. Upon a quick look on our genitals, we are assigned into either male or female. This declaration is more than just a statement of what's between our legs. It is a prescription of how we should and must live our lives. It is a dictation of what we should think about ourselves, the roles we should play, the clothes we should wear, the way we should move, and the people with whom we should have romantic or erotic relationships. But the existence of people whose identities, bodies, and experiences do not conform to gender norms is a proof that this belief is wrong.

Nonetheless, even though the truth of human diversity is so evident and clear to us, we choose to hang on to our current beliefs about gender, a belief that rejects reality and forces people to live a lie. This is the belief that leads to attacks on our physical and mental integrity, to different forms of discrimination against us, and to our social marginalization. This is the belief that led to Joan of Arc to be burned at stake because she was cross-dressing. This is the belief that motivated the rape and murder of Brandon Teena on December 31, 1993. This is the belief that led to the stabbing to death of Ebru Soykan, a prominent transgender human rights activist in Turkey, on March 10, 2009. This is the belief that led to the arrest of 67 Filipino workers in Saudi Arabia for cross-dressing in June this year.

This is the belief that keeps the list of transgender people being harassed, killed, and violated growing year after year. And it is very unfortunate that our legal systems, religions, and cultures are being used to glorify, justify, and sanctify the violent expressions of this belief.

So we question: Is human life less precious than this belief? Is our right to life, to dignified existence, to liberty, and pursuit of happiness subservient to gender norms? This doesn't need a complicated answer. You want to be born, to live, and die with dignity – so do we! You want the freedom to express the uniqueness of the life force within you – so do we! You want to live with authenticity – so do we!

Now is the time that we realize that diversity does not diminish our humanity. Respecting diversity does not make us less human. Understanding and accepting our differences do not make us cruel. And in fact, history has shown us that denying and rejecting human variability is the one that has lead us to inflict indignity upon indignity towards each other.

We are human beings of transgender experience. We are your children, your partners, your friends, your siblings, your students, your teachers, your workers, your citizens. Let our lives delight in the same freedom of expression you enjoy as you manifest to the outside world your unique and graceful selves. Let us live together in the fertile ground of our common humanity for this is the ground where religion is not a motivation to hate but a way to appreciate the profound beauty and mysteries of life; for this is the ground where laws are not tools to eliminate those who are different from us but are there to facilitate our harmonious relationship with each other; for this is the ground where culture is not a channel to express the brutality of our limited perception but a means to express the nobility of our souls; for this is the ground where the promise of the universality of human rights can be fulfilled. And we will be in this ground if we let the sanity of our desires, the tenacity of our compassion, and the lucidity of our hearts reign in our lives.

Thank you!