

**Interdependence:
Including Women with Disabilities in
the Agenda of the Women's Movement --
Our Fears, Realities, Hopes, and Dreams**

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The Committee that drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was chaired by a woman, Eleanor Roosevelt. Her husband Franklin Roosevelt, the President of the United States of America, was a man with a mobility disability. In 1948, in the wake of the horrors of World War II, the governments of the world adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, making a commitment to promote the human rights of all human beings. That commitment includes a commitment to promoting our human rights -- the rights of women with disabilities.

The International Network of Women With Disabilities (INWWD) was founded in 2008, following the entry into force of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). INWWD's mission is to enable women with disabilities from all around the world to share our knowledge and experience, enhance our capacity to speak up for our rights, and empower ourselves to bring about positive change and inclusion in our communities.

In March 2011, INWWD produced a significant document on Violence Against Women with Disabilities that was published by the Center for Women Policy Studies. Violence against all people, including violence against women, causes disability of all kinds – mobility disabilities, blindness, deafness, psychosocial disability, pain, and other visible and invisible disabilities. Violence is more likely to happen to women. And violence is more likely to happen to persons with disabilities than to persons without disabilities. The experience of violence affects children whose mothers and fathers experienced such violence, whether or not the children witnessed the violence, and those affects carry on for generation after generation. We are all those children. We have all been touched by violence, in one form or another. We are the 100%.

How can we end violence? Promote human rights for all people all over the world? Those are tall orders, but in the process of implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we have an opportunity to make a difference by addressing violence against women with disabilities. There is an opportunity now, here at the United Nations, to link women with disabilities' issues with efforts to advance women's rights in general. As a colleague Stephanie Ortoleva stated several times as a refrain during her presentation at the UN at a side event at CSW 56, "Women with disabilities are women too!" The general women's movement,

particularly in our work at the UN, must embrace issues we face as women and girls with disabilities in the contexts of CSW, CEDAW, CRC, and the CRPD. Involving UN Women in advocating for the human rights of women and girls with disabilities will be absolutely necessary to accomplish our common goal of the promotion of human rights for all members of the human family. If UN Women takes the lead, the rest of the world will follow.

The world's population is aging. Women of the second wave of the women's movement are aging. I am one of the youngest of that generation and I will be 60 years old this year. The fears, realities, hopes and dreams of women in general are congruent with those that we as older women with disabilities live with everyday. Misogyny and elder abuse lead to the medicalization of disability (particularly psychosocial disability) and poverty, which leads to more misogyny and more abuse and more poverty. This vicious cycle must be interrupted. The process of implementing the new paradigm embodied in the CRPD that sees disability from a social model perspective rather than from a medical model perspective provides us with an opportunity not to be missed. Women with disabilities are no longer considered to be "faulty beings" to be pitied. Now we too are formally recognized as part of the human family.

Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." However, advocacy and activism are sometimes in conflict with self-care, self-empowerment and self-advocacy, especially when psychosocial disability is already a factor. Women with disabilities are often torn about whether to take care of ourselves, take care of our loved ones, advocate for ourselves or advocate for the human rights of people in general, which hopefully include our rights as well. Which is the best way to proceed at any given moment? That is for each one of us to decide, but sorting out our priorities while making those decisions is never easy for women with disabilities. We cannot do all this work all on our own. Our organizations need your financial support and we need your support to enable us as individuals to exercise our right to legal capacity on an equal basis with others, the right to make our own decisions, to make our own choices, with no discrimination on the basis of gender or on the basis of disability. We are here to say that we expect to get that support from all of you because we know that if you did not care about human rights, you would not be here at the UN today.

We women with disabilities of all kinds, particularly older women, women who are alone, widows, women who are called witches, women who are considered to be demented or mentally ill, women who have fled war zones or drought with or without our children, women who have been forced to flee from violence in our own homes with or without our children, women who have had our children taken away from us on the basis of our disability or theirs, women who are afraid of being abandoned, women who are starving, homeless and living in extreme poverty, women who are forced into prostitution in order to support our families, women who are living with AIDS, women who do not have access to adequate medical care,

women who are raped, beaten, force medicated with psychoactive medications and/or addictive painkillers in institutions that are supposedly set up to care for us, women who are institutionalized so others can gain control of us, of our property, our money and/or our children, women who are coerced or forced into undergoing electroshock under the pretense of easing our pain, women who rely on abusive spouses or caretakers for our daily needs, women who go out to find water or firewood for our families and are raped or beaten or killed when we are alone and unprotected and are consequently traumatized and/or physically disabled -- we are among the most traumatized, the most mistreated and the most oppressed. Violence against women with disabilities is sometimes even perpetrated by the States themselves, particularly against women with psychosocial/mental disabilities under the guise of acting "in our best interest" allegedly "for our own good", under the cover of forced psychiatry.

But in contrast to how governments and people without disabilities often think about us, we who have survived are among the strongest in society, not the weakest. We have had to learn how to survive under the most adverse circumstances. Mahatma Ghandi said, "A nation's greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members." I would like to change that a bit, to say that a nation's greatness is measured by how much it learns from its members who have experienced the most discrimination and oppression, its members who, despite that discrimination and oppression, have figured out how to live and love and work to make the world a better place, in our own homes, in our communities, in our countries, and even at the United Nations.

Yes, women with disabilities are women too. On the average, we live longer than men, and aging contributes to the likelihood of acquiring a disability. We are also even more likely to be victims of violence than women in general. The experience of violence is likely to lead to disability. Almost all of us are people with disabilities, for at least part of our lives. And I suspect that all people, men and women, able and disabled, fear violence and abandonment and the possibility of becoming disabled or more disabled.

Here are our specific recommendations to end violence against women with disabilities, excerpted from our March 2011 INWWD Barbara Faye Waxman Fiduccia paper on Violence Against Women with Disabilities, published by the Center for Women Policy Studies (USA) at <http://www.centerwomenpolicy.org/programs/waxmanfiduccia/2011OnlineSeriesBarbaraWaxmanFiduccia.asp>

When measures are taken to end violence against people with disabilities, targeting "people" with disabilities without recognizing that there are unique issues for women with disabilities, this contributes to a gender-neutral concept of disability that ignores women with disabilities, renders their needs invisible, and

contributes to their isolation. Given that violence against women with disabilities is hidden and ignored already, this “gender-neutral” approach increases their risk of exposure to violence.

Recommendations: Violence against women with disabilities is a pervasive human rights violation that manifests itself in several different forms, resulting in significant physical and emotional harm. Such violence can be perpetrated intentionally as well as through systemic and societal practices thought to be “well-intentioned.” A broad range of stakeholders have important roles to play in ensuring the rights of women with disabilities to be free from violence. These stakeholders include: national and local governments, the United Nations (particularly UN Women and the UN Population Fund), service providers, donors and civil society (including women’s organizations, human rights groups, HIV organizations, and disabled persons’ organizations).

Given the serious and pervasive nature of violence against women with disabilities, these stakeholders can and should undertake a broad range of actions and initiatives to ensure that women with disabilities do not become victims of violence and that provide them with empowering, accessible, and safe means of recourse in the event of violence. This Paper offers important recommendations for a variety of groups of stakeholders. Some of the recommendations cut across all of the above-mentioned stakeholders and should be incorporated within all actions and measures that seek to protect women against abuse and violence. Some recommendations are primarily directed at governmental bodies and some are intended to inform and guide the actions of advocates.

Cross-cutting recommendations: It is essential for any stakeholders providing programs and resources for women with disabilities to recognize the heterogeneity of disability and ensure that women with all types of experiences of disability are included in all measures concerning women with disabilities, and that such measures are of equal value to all women with disabilities. It is critically important that women with disabilities be included in mainstream endeavours initiated by governments, human rights organizations, development partners, and civil society to address violence against all women.

Stakeholders must ensure that women with disabilities can physically access programs and services, by taking measures to provide access to transportation or support, to provide sign language interpretation, and to take any other necessary actions to ensure that such programs do not exclude any woman on the basis of her disability (including psychosocial and intellectual disabilities). Stakeholders at all levels should take measures to fight stigma, discrimination and all forms of violence against women and girls with disabilities, through awareness campaigns and community discussions, for example. It is important for all stakeholders and service providers to be cognizant of the need for multiple formats for communication and they should disseminate information in formats that are accessible to people with

learning and sensory disabilities (through Braille, sign language, and easily understood language, for example).

Recommendations for National and Local Governments:

Adopt laws and policies recognizing that all actions that violate the right to bodily integrity of women with disabilities are illegal, including psychiatric assault and forced institutionalization, and that these should be considered acts of violence.

Actively include diverse women with disabilities in developing and implementing programs, policies and protocols for service providers, law enforcement officers, and other personnel who work with women with disabilities.

Recommendations for Governmental Bodies, International Donors, and Development Practitioners:

Ensure that all research, actions, and advocacy related to violence against women with disabilities incorporates the forms of violence identified by women with psychosocial disabilities, including psychiatric assault, and fully investigates their experiences.

Ensure that women with disabilities can retain their legal capacity and freedom.

In partnership with disabled persons' organizations and other community based organizations, educate parents, partners, nurses, caregivers and other health care service providers to deal respectfully with women with disabilities and offer quality care when their help is required.

Train communities on how to include and communicate with people with different types of disabilities to avoid isolation of women and girls with disabilities.

Recommendations for Local Authorities, National Human Rights Commissions and Bodies, Humanitarian Aid Workers, UN Bodies, Direct Service Providers, and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs):

Create accessible channels for distributing information, consulting, and reporting about all forms of violence against women and girls with disabilities.

Collect data on the number of women with disabilities who access services and programs for preventing violence against women and serving victims of such violence and use this data to develop more inclusive initiatives.

Investigate the causes of all forms of violence against women with disabilities and specifically the needs of girls, elderly women, single women, indigenous women and women who live in rural areas with regard to the isolation and victimization that can contribute to violence in such circumstances.

Educate women and girls with disabilities about their human rights.

Provide women and girls with disabilities with information and counselling on sexual and reproductive health issues.

Recommendations for Disabled Persons' Organizations, Community Based Organizations and other Members of Civil Society:

Develop advocacy, information, and support services for women and girls with disabilities who are survivors of all forms of violence.

Train women with disabilities to organize and manage support services efficiently, to develop skills and abilities for economic self-sufficiency, and to use technological aids that that lead to greater independence.

The CRPD created an opportunity that women with disabilities and allied women seized to form the International Network of Women with Disabilities. We the members of INWWD -- across cultures, across oceans, across national borders, across all disabilities including mental, intellectual, sensory, and mobility disabilities, women with disabilities and women without disabilities, old and young, heterosexual, lesbian and transgender women, rich and poor, employed and unemployed, indigenous and non-indigenous – we are learning to work together and to do so effectively. We are human beings first and we are women. We are your mothers, sisters and daughters. We are also often caretakers of your fathers, brothers and sons. We have to prioritize our actions on a daily basis to survive. We realize that we cannot rely solely on our own strengths and our fierce desires for independence. We have become interdependent. We are changing the world with our individual and collective efforts every day.

If you are willing to walk in our shoes, see the world through our eyes and fingers, hear with our ears and hands, ride on our wheels -- you will find that it is possible to create a world where people support each other, care for each other, care about each other, accommodate ourselves to our own disabilities and accommodate other people, some of whom have disabilities and some of whom do not. And very interestingly, we do all this with very little money. In the face of so much discrimination, with so many cards stacked against us -- if we can do all this, we know that the Member States of the United Nations and the UN entities charged with promoting human rights, including UN women, can too. We challenge you, to ask us and ask our organizations in your countries how we do it. We will be happy to tell you.

I close in solidarity with all people with disabilities, over a billion worldwide, and in honor of all who did not survive their experience of disability, with the motto of the International Disability Alliance:

Nothing About Us Without Us

Resources and contact information for the International Network of Women with Disabilities:

INWWD Website: <http://inwwd.wordpress.com>

INWWD Social Networking site on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/InternationalNetworkOfWomenWithDisabilities>

Contact information for INWWD: inwwd@yahoo.com

Resources on our websites include our INWWD Barbara Faye Waxman Fiduccia Paper (published by the Center for Women Policy Studies) on Violence Against Women with Disabilities, INWWD Beijing +15 Review, WomenEnabled papers, as well as other INWWD documents

INWWD March 2011 Barbara Faye Waxman Fiduccia Paper on Violence Against Women with Disabilities:

<http://www.centerwomenpolicy.org/programs/waxmanfiduccia/2011OnlineSeriesBarbaraWaxmanFiduccia.asp>

INWWD on the International Disability Alliance website:

<http://www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/en/international-network-women-disabilities>

Ortoleva, Stephanie and Lewis, Hope , Forgotten Sisters- A Report on Violence Against Women with Disabilities: An Overview of its Nature, Scope, Causes and Consequences (August 21, 2012). Northeastern University School of Law Research Paper No. 104-2012. Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=2133332>