

Opening Statements

RONALD MCCALLUM, Committee Member and Outgoing Chairperson of the Committee, in opening remarks said that all countries with which the Committee had dialogued in recent years had noted that violence against women and girls was a major problem. Mr. McCallum said that by the end of the meeting he hoped that concrete solutions would be proposed to tackle the endemic problem of violence against women and girls.

MARIA SOLEDAD CISTERNAS REYES, Incoming Committee Chairperson, in opening remarks said that today was an important day for women and girls with disabilities around the world. The lack of information about women and girls with disabilities had delayed the general debate which was being held today. The Committee had voiced concern about several issues, including the following: the many facets of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities; the restrictions imposed on girls in terms of sexual and reproductive health rights; and the fact that the issue of gender and disability was not given close consideration by States parties to the Convention.

Nevertheless, important steps had been taken in recent years to draw attention to the problem. The High Commissioner for Human Rights, at the request of the Human Rights Council, had prepared a study on violence against girls and women with disabilities, and following its publication, the Council had adopted a second resolution in which States parties were urged to take measures in order to protect women and girls with disabilities from situations of violence. Moreover, the Committee had issued a general comment along similar lines. Several other bodies were working on this issue, including the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In addition to these, the work carried out by all civil society organizations working with women and girls with disabilities was extremely important.

Panel Discussion on Intersectionality of Gender and Disability

THERESIA DEGENER, Vice-Chairperson of the Committee and Panel Discussion Moderator, said that intersectionality meant that several forms of discrimination based on various layers of identity may intersect and produce new forms of discrimination. The term, therefore, was used to describe multiple discrimination. Intersectionality was important because it marked a departure from the one-dimensional approach to discrimination which had been adopted until recently. It was high time to look at the intersection of human rights violations, which would open the door to the development of international human rights law. The Convention was the only human rights treaty which contained an explicit reference to multiple discrimination in Article 6.

DAGMAR SCHUMACHER, Director of the UN Women's Brussels Office, speaking through video conferencing, said that mainstreaming disability into gender-related work was not enough. Rather, all work on disability should include a gender perspective and special attention should be paid to women and girls with disabilities when implementing the Convention. Women and girls with disabilities were more vulnerable to all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse, including in the workplace, at home and other settings. Accurate and disaggregated data was needed in order to establish reporting and monitor activities. It was important to demonstrate through concrete actions that all persons counted, especially in terms of economic empowerment, and to highlight the intersection of gender and disability both at the national level and in terms of policy-making.

KIRSI MADI, Deputy Regional Director of the European Office of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, said that there were an estimated 90 to 150 million persons with disabilities in the world facing discrimination in almost every aspect of their lives. Exclusion was a particularly serious problem for girls with disabilities, who faced

multiple discrimination because of their disability and gender. They were at increased risk of forced marriage, forced sterilization and forced abortion and were more likely to experience physical and sexual violence both within and beyond the household environment. Protecting and promoting the rights of children with disabilities was not a new goal but, thanks to the Convention, it had gained momentum. It was important to identify and address the root causes of inequality so that all children could enjoy their rights.

VICTORIA LEE, International Disability Alliance, said that in developing countries women constituted up to three quarters of all persons with disabilities. Girls faced intersectional discrimination because of their gender, age and disability. As a result, they were subjected to sexual assault because they were perceived as weak, passive, and unable or unlikely to speak. It was encouraging that increased attention was paid to that issue at the international level. Nevertheless, greater attention had to be paid to the marginalization of women and girls with disabilities at the national level. The law should provide effective remedies to women and girls who had been subjected to discrimination. The Committee should adopt a general comment to provide further guidance to States and policy-makers on the protection of the rights of women and girls with disabilities.

PATRICIA SCHULTZ, Member of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, said that disability was implicitly included in all articles of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. Recognizing the intersectional character of discrimination against women with disabilities, the Committee in 1991 had expressed deep concern at the “double discrimination” which women around the world suffered. Women with mental disabilities in particular were especially vulnerable because there was a limited understanding of the broad range of risks to mental health to which women were disproportionately susceptible as a result of gender discrimination, violence, poverty, conflict, dislocation, and various forms of social deprivation.

A Representative of Young Voices, India, speaking through video conferencing, said that women with disabilities were very vulnerable in India, which was a male-dominated society. Areas of particular concern were education, employment and social status. The participation of women and girls with disabilities in education was alarmingly low. In terms of employment opportunities, families were hesitant about sending female members of their family to places far from home for fear that they might be subjected to sexual violence. In terms of social status, girls and young women were often forced to marry men who were much older than them. The media should raise awareness about the serious issues facing women with disabilities. Women themselves should also fight for their rights and needs and should not tolerate ongoing discrimination against them.

A Deputy Permanent Representative of the Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations Office at Geneva, said that there were several challenges arising from the provisions of the Convention. Intersectionality was one of those challenges. Tailor-made solutions were needed for specific situations but what was generally required was a change of mentality and culture to allow for the enjoyment of human rights by all on an equal footing. The harmonization of national and State legislation with the Convention would be an important step in that direction. Mexico wished to broaden the scope of dealing with disability issues and bring them into the sphere of development. In order to achieve that, it had recently taken steps to include disability issues into the country’s national development plan.

Panel Discussion on Violence against Women and Girls with Disabilities

MARIA SOLEDAD CISTERNAS REYES, Committee Chairperson and Moderator of the Panel Discussion, said that, as the United Nations Secretary-General had pointed out in the past, there should be zero tolerance for violence against women and girls with disabilities

and that all should speak out and act on the matter. Women and girls not only were subjected to attacks on their physical and psychological integrity but also suffered from “structural maltreatment”. For example, women with disabilities faced serious difficulties when it came to having a gynecological examination. Violations of human rights and cruel or degrading treatment also affected women with psycho-social problems who were in prison. In addition, women faced problems of access to justice and to fair complaints procedures. An all-embracing approach to these problems was needed so as to ensure a fair treatment of women and girls with disabilities through dialogue and debate.

GABRIELA GUZMAN, Human Rights Officer at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights dealing with violence against women, said that the mandate of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women had been created almost 20 years ago through a resolution adopted by the then Commission on Human Rights. The four broad categories of violence identified, which were not mutually exclusive, were domestic violence, community violence, violence in the transnational arena and violence perpetrated or condoned by the State. In 2012 the Special Rapporteur presented a report to the General Assembly which focused specifically on violence against women with disabilities. According to that report, the inter-connection between violence against women and discrimination on the basis of gender and disability remained largely unaddressed. The report showed that other factors such as race, ethnicity, poverty, religion and identity status increased the chances that vulnerable women might be subjected to multiple discrimination and various forms of violence, including physical, psychological, sexual and financial violence.

IMMA GUERRAS DELGADO, Advisor on Child Rights at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, said that a 2006 study which had been presented to the General Assembly analyzed violence against children in a variety of settings, such as the family environment, school, and the wider community. Relevant data on violence against children with disabilities, especially girls, was very difficult to gather. Violence against children was not justifiable and all such violence was preventable. Some children, especially children with disabilities, were more vulnerable to violence than others. Disability increased the risk of neglect, including failure to meet children’s physical and emotional needs and to protect them from danger. The study in question had found that children with disabilities and learning difficulties were often targeted for exclusion, discrimination and bullying at school. The study also found that especially vulnerable to violence were children kept in institutions who were there because of disability, violence in the home environment, and social and economic conditions such as poverty.

VICTORIA LEE, International Disability Alliance, said that the justice system did not deal properly with complaints lodged by women with disabilities, who were often considered unreliable or non-credible witnesses. The lack of accessibility and denial of reasonable accommodation remained major issues in that respect. It was therefore important to eliminate laws which obstructed justice and introduced requirements for the physical, communicational and informational aspects of the administration of justice.

A Representative of the Paraguayan Association for the Blind said that the authorities in Paraguay did not have any facility to deal with women with disabilities and that women had complained about being subjected to various types of violence. Violence included not only incidents of domestic physical violence but also psychological violence, which sometimes resulted from overprotection. Women with disabilities acting as witnesses were often not believed by the police. As a result, the perpetrators of violence against women lied because they knew that women with disabilities were not regarded as credible witnesses. Moreover, girls with disabilities who suffered violence in the family environment rarely had the freedom to speak openly about such issues. More efforts should be made to strengthen international instruments aiming to eradicate violence against women with disabilities.

A Representative of the Christian Blind Mission said that women and girls with disabilities living in poor areas were particularly vulnerable to discrimination and violence. The Committee should provide guidance to States parties on how to collect data and evidence pertaining to human rights violations against women and girls with disabilities; increase its cooperation with other Committees with a view to strengthening monitoring; and mainstream the overall goals of the post-2015 development programme to ensure that they included issues concerning discrimination suffered by women and girls with disabilities.

A Representative of the Global Initiative to Eliminate Violence said that children with disabilities were four times more likely to experience physical violence, including corporal punishment, than children without disabilities. All corporal punishment was a human rights violation and therefore should be prohibited by all States. No consideration of the violation of the rights of girls was complete without addressing issues of discrimination on the basis of gender.

A Representative from a non-governmental organization in Paraguay said that every woman with disabilities who had been a victim of violence required additional psychological support in order to regain her dignity and self-respect.

A Representative of the Spanish Association for Persons with Disabilities said that the lack of studies and statistics made it more difficult to understand the full extent of the problems facing women and girls with disabilities who suffered violence. Several gaps had been identified in Spanish legislation which allowed the forced sterilization and abortion of women with disabilities without their consent.

A Representative of the World Federation of the Deaf said that a survey conducted in over 90 developing countries had found that there was very little gender-specific data which would enable the international community to move forward.

A Representative of the Chilean Association for Women and Children with Disabilities said that the lack of statistics and data about children with disabilities in certain countries was a serious problem. Studies showed that 10 per cent of children had been affected by child sexual abuse and that victims were often girls with disabilities.

One Committee Expert said that panelists could have spoken more about girls with disabilities in particular, not children with disabilities in general, especially in relation to sexual violence. The Expert wanted to know whether the World Federation for the Deaf, which included a section devoted to the youth, had a separate section and officer dealing with women who had a hearing impairment.

Another Committee Expert said that too much emphasis had been placed on the victims, and stressed that structural gaps and issues in society, which were the root of many problems facing persons with disabilities, should have been paid closer attention.

Violence against women and girls should be reduced to a minimum, said another Committee Expert. There were four areas where further work was needed: girls and women should be provided with appropriate education, which could be used as a tool of empowerment; awareness-raising activities in the community should be undertaken; legislative tools should be developed on the basis of international instruments; and the work carried out by non-governmental organizations should be supported and strengthened.

Panel Discussion on Sexual and Reproductive Rights of Women and Girls with Disabilities

SUZANNE REIER, Department of Reproductive Health and Research of the World Health Organization, introducing the topic, said that disability was an important part of the general issue of universal access to reproductive health. Persons with disabilities should be included in discussions on the topic, which unfortunately was not always the case around the world. It was encouraging that there was a new window of opportunity to inform the world about the problems facing persons with disabilities. The World Report on Disability, which was published in 2012, covered a number of issues including reproductive health and also poverty, work and development. It was alarming that persons with disabilities showed evidence of poor levels of health and that they had unequal access to healthcare.

A Representative of International Disability Alliance said that in many parts of the world various laws and policies unfortunately justified sterilization. Appropriate education, information and training should be provided to women and girls with disabilities on how to protect themselves against sexual abuse and unwanted pregnancy.

A Representative of CONAPRODIS Paraguay said that in the health sector there was a major lack of information on women and girls with a hearing impairment, as a result of which no measures were taken in Paraguay to protect those persons from being exposed to HIV infection.

Another Representative of a CONAPRODIS Paraguay said that many women with a hearing impairment living in the country's interior engaged in prostitution and were also drug addicts, which meant that the rate of sexually transmitted diseases in those areas was very high.

A Representative of Women with Disabilities of Australia said that the denial of sexual and reproductive rights of women and girls with disability was a violation of human rights. That denial was the result of violent and forced intervention on the female body.

A Representative of the Centre for Reproductive Rights said that individual autonomy and the right to make important decisions about one's own body was a legal obligation. Therefore, access to reproductive and sexual health services was a fundamental right of women and girls with disabilities.

A Representative of Human Rights Watch said that in many countries women and girls with disabilities faced ignorance, discrimination and verbal abuse from healthcare personnel, and were less likely to receive information about HIV prevention and safe sex practices.

A Representative of the Spanish Association for Persons with Disabilities said that it was unacceptable that women were denied the right to become mothers if they had a disability. Also, women and girls with disabilities were often denied their right to have a sexual life. Awareness-raising campaigns should be undertaken in relation to those issues.

One Committee Expert said that forced sterilization and forced abortion were often addressed, as opposed to issues such as the sexual needs of persons with disabilities which were rarely talked about. Two seminars on that issue had been organized in Tunisia, during which many cultural problems and taboos were identified.

Another Committee Expert said that women with disabilities unfortunately were often seen as unfit mothers and were denied their right to have and raise children.

A Committee Expert said that girls with severe intellectual disabilities were sometimes subjected to unacceptable medical treatment designed to keep them in a malleable physical and physiological state. As a result, those girls never developed physically or psychologically but became "human dolls". There were at least 200 girls who had been reportedly subjected to that practice.

Closing Remarks

ANA PELAEZ NARVAEZ, Committee Member and Focal Point on General Discussion on Women and Girls with Disabilities, in closing remarks thanked all the speakers and everyone who had been involved in the organization of the half-day general discussion, and said that important progress had been made in terms of better understanding certain aspects of the issues discussed. She also thanked the non-governmental organization representatives for their valuable contribution to the discussion. Ms. Pelaez Narvaez said that she would compile and prepare for publication a volume with all the contributions made during the discussion. Concerning the work which remained to be carried out, she said that the Committee would have to strengthen its cooperation with other relevant Committees and should also establish specific and clear guidelines to be implemented by all States parties to the Convention. The direct involvement of women and girls with disabilities in all those efforts was of the utmost importance.

MARIA SOLEDAD CISTERNAS REYES, Committee Chairperson, in concluding remarks said that more than 100 million persons in the world had some form of disability and so it was important to improve the situation of all of them. The Committee and the Convention were making an ongoing contribution to that. The three panels of today's general discussion had covered a wide variety of issues concerning the problems facing a vulnerable group of the population, women and girls with disabilities.