

Remarks by Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, Anita Bhatia, at the UN-Women Executive Board Informal briefing on UN Women's work for women and girls with disabilities in the joint response to COVID-19 crisis (as delivered)

Thursday, 17 September 2020

Thank you, Mister President, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates & UN Colleagues. I am very pleased to be able to join you today on this very important topic of the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the lives of women and girls with disabilities. I will keep my remarks brief to allow time for the team to hear about the status of the work. To reflect on a few things, as you mentioned, Mister President, women and girls with disabilities do experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and exclusion. I was surprised to hear this data, but when you think about it, it is not that surprising – women and girls are three times more likely to have unmet healthcare needs, three times more likely to be illiterate, two times less likely to be employed, and at least two to three times more likely than other women to experience violence.

As you have mentioned, Mister President, the crisis has shown that social, economic, political and health systems actually do not work for people with disabilities. In fact, the pandemic has exacerbated systemic discrimination experienced by populations made vulnerable as a result of existing structures of oppression such as ableism, the patriarchy, racism, and classism.

We know from surveys conducted, that there is a real issue here. For example, a recent survey of women, trans and gender non-conforming people with disabilities conducted by Women Enabled International showed that during lockdowns, these individuals are less able to escape violence. With a decrease in access to formal support services, this population is more reliant on informal methods of support, which can further expose them to violence, exploitation, and abuse. The compounded impact of health care related risks, inaccessible environments, inadequate social protection, constitute a real constraint to the enjoyment of full human rights by this population. These women are not only at higher risk of contracting the virus, their needs are often excluded from public health policy measures that do not accurately reflect the complexity of identities, including based on factors such as gender, disability, class, among others. This impedes peoples' abilities to make informed decisions about their lives and exercise agency in the true sense of the word.

We know that we can change this with good public policy interventions, and we can work together to "build back better." Through enhanced coordination within the UN System, we are committed to integrating gender-responsive approaches to response and recovery efforts, especially for women and girls with disabilities. This can be seen in the make-up of participants today, which is not only composed of UN Women but also UNFPA as well other parts of the UN System.

As you will hear later, UN Women is engaged in a joint programme funded by the UN Partnership on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The focus of this global initiative is to support country level responses and broader UN response to COVID-19 and recovery through technical support, evidence, knowledge-based learning and guidance. Another key inter-agency mechanism we will focus our attention on is the implementation of the UN Disability

Inclusion Strategy to ensure that our organization and others meets the standards of ensuring inclusion of women with disabilities as we respond to the pandemic.

I would like to share two examples to conclude, our office in Moldova has provided psycho-social support to women with disabilities through online thematic sessions. Our Regional Office in East and Southern Africa has integrated disability inclusion awareness in the context of programs aiming to address violence against women during COVID-19.

Mister President, we really appreciate Finland's leadership on this issue. We are also delighted that Ecuador is demonstrating strong commitment to this initiative. I would like to assure you on behalf of UN Women's management that this is something we take very seriously and hope you will see the depth of that during the presentations that will follow.