

International Leadership Forum
for Women with Disabilities
Bethesda, Maryland, USA
June 15-20, 1997

DRAFT STATEMENT

We the 614 women from 82 countries around the world at the International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities in Washington on June 15-20, 1997, are deeply encouraged by the emerging strength in the empowerment of women and girls with disabilities. We hereby want to send signals to all our sisters in the disability and women's' movements. This important process is meant to include the possibility of growth of each and every individual woman and girl with disability worldwide. Consequently, we need partnerships with women and men in all walks of life. Our issues are among the top priority concerns of all human development.

We believe that several concrete actions and considerations must occur regarding United Nations conventions and policies. Of specific importance are: the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities and the promises within the Platforms for Action from the United Nations conferences and summit meetings. Especially we note that the positive effects of the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women are still vigorously ongoing. We also demand that our states ratify the conventions, removing any reservations and other barriers to implementation.

The numbers of women and girls with disabilities throughout the world are increasing, simultaneously with increased expectations to take care of family members wounded in wars and civil conflicts, or sick with the illnesses of poverty.

We state the following:

HUMAN RIGHTS & VIOLENCE *JKM*

We demand that the voice of disabled women be heard clearly and substantially in all debates and policies concerning the right to life including: genetic engineering, bioethics, abortion on the ground of disability, assisted suicide, euthanasia and all eugenic practices. All these issues are about disabled persons and violate our fundamental and universal right to life. We demand that this violation stop.

We urgently raise our concern to our governments about the UNESCO draft of a Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights to be finalized in July this year. We question the wisdom of the draft text in respect to the human rights of disabled persons.

We urge that international and national governmental and non-governmental organizations recognize the high rate of violence against disabled women and girls as a critical health and human rights issue in policy and legislation. Legal enforcement of assault and sexual abuse laws should be strengthened, including severe punishment of offenders and support for victims throughout the justice system.

We cannot accept that family members, paid and volunteer care givers, institutional staff, police, and even friends, are humiliating, assaulting, raping, exploiting, neglecting, forcibly isolating, withholding assistance, medical care or supports, abandoning, disposing of, putting out to beg, selling and even killing, women and girls with disabilities at alarming rates. Disabled children of battered mothers are particularly vulnerable to abuse.

We request that the United Nations Special rapporteur on Violence against women address violence against women and girls with disabilities as a pressing issue. We request that disability organizations include the issue of violence among the priority concerns. We request the world's women's movement acknowledge the vicious insults visited upon women and girls with disabilities the world over, and take steps to improve solidarity among all women.

We demand immediate action to: build access to information and services to escape, heal and survive abuse as steps to preventing future cycles of violence.

We protest in solidarity with disabled women in Japan, the introduction of an amendment to the Japanese "maternal protection" law. This law currently allows legal abortion only for the protection of the mother's health, or in the case of pressing economic circumstances. The amendment would allow legal abortion based on a third criteria, the disability of the fetus. We believe that the disability status of the fetus should not be a legal criteria for abortion. We cannot accept any country to have this form of legislation. The only criteria should be the women's right to choose.

EDUCATION

Poverty and disability among women and girls are closely linked. We demand effective access to education and employment as the primary tools for fighting poverty.

We demand that decision makers include the education and skills development of girls and women with disabilities as an integral part of the educational system.

Local culture should be allowed to provide opportunities for girls and women to be recognized as full participants in meaningful social and economic roles.

We urge that both parents and teachers of girl children with special needs receive further training in order that the quality of overall education be raised. We also urge that teacher training curricula include a disability component.

We demand education provide effective opportunities for girls and women with disabilities to become empowered. The need has never been higher for organized women's groups to provide effective role models so that girls and women can take up leadership roles, increasing their self reliance.

EMPLOYMENT

We demand that existing economic inequalities between women and men be equalized, and that the economic contribution to the society by women with disabilities be recognized. They should be afforded full support to pursue their ambitions and skills development regarding the use of their capabilities to support themselves and their families.

We urge that women with disabilities be encouraged to establish micro enterprises, for example, in the development of marketing devices, sales representatives, catalogues, etc, to bring the goods/products of other disabled women to market. Banks should recognize the multiple value of giving loans to women's business enterprises. Governments must recognize the efforts of women engaged in micro enterprise development with tax credits and other appropriate benefits.

HEALTH & FAMILY ISSUES All workshop co-chairwomen and reporters are kindly asked to submit texts, if available.

COMMUNICATION & TECHNOLOGY & ACCESSIBILITY All workshop co-chairwomen and reporters are kindly asked to submit texts, if available.

UN CONVENTIONS ²⁰⁰¹

We further believe that the United Nations and our countries should intensify efforts to implement all existing conventions concerning disabled women and girls. Such actions should be effectively overseen by the United Nations bodies responsible for monitoring of these instruments, together with the non-governmental (NGOs) organizations concerned. Special cooperation should be established between the units responsible for disability, gender, human rights and NGO issues. Such actions should be applied at the local, national, regional and international levels.

We urge the United Nations and other relevant bodies to take immediate action regarding:

- * informing about the existing conventions using easy-to-read language, accessible formats and local languages
- * initiate the building of new knowledge with respect to women and girls with disabilities using surveys, research and case studies
- * encourage the development of dialogue with decision-makers at all levels
- * facilitate the co-sponsorship with NGOs of seminars dedicated to training of women and girls with disabilities about methods to implement policy

AFFIRMATION

**We hereby reaffirm the establishment of a global
sister network among women and girls with disabilities.**

**We affirm our membership in W I L D
Women's International Linkage on Disability.**

Bethesda, Maryland, USA, June 20, 1997