

Statement on behalf of the Coordinating Group of the COVID-19 Disability Rights Monitor at the Opening of the Twenty-Third Session of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
17 August 2020

At the opening of the 23rd session of the CRPD Committee, on 17 August 2020, Validity's Co-Executive Director, Steven Allen spoke on behalf of the [COVID-19 Disability Rights Monitor Coordinating Group](#) and shared some preliminary findings of the global survey, which was translated into 25 languages and received more than 2,100 responses from 134 countries. Please [watch the Statement on UNTV](#) (starting at 1:30:20) and read it here:

Distinguished Chair,

Members of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honour to join you today to provide these initial remarks at the opening of the Committee's 23rd session at a time of great peril for persons with disabilities globally.

Our thoughts go out to all those who have been affected by this horrendous virus, to all those who have friends and family members affected, and to all of those on the frontline around the world who are doing all in their power to mitigate the worst impacts.

I provide these initial remarks as Co-Executive Director of the Validity Foundation and on behalf of a coalition of seven disability rights organisations which include the European Network on Independent Living, Disability Rights International, the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria, the International Disability Alliance, the International Disability and Development Consortium, and the sister organisations Disability Rights Fund and Disability Rights Advocacy Fund.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As the virus began to have a global impact earlier this year, Validity and our partners quickly began receiving reports that persons with disabilities all around the world were immediately experiencing severe consequences. Ad hoc reports from our partners suggested that residential institutions were being locked down, the courts were being suspended, and problems were emerging in terms of continuity of community-based support and social security programmes.

Governments began taking unprecedented steps to lockdown whole cities and eventually entire nations in a desperate attempt at halting the spread of the virus, simultaneously rushing through emergency declarations to restrict people's movement, passing urgent measures within national health systems and closing off large sectors of our economies.

As human rights-based organisations and advocates, it quickly became clear to us that few governments were taking a disability-inclusive response to the crisis. In April, we joined together and collectively developed the COVID-19 Disability Rights Monitor, a global survey to try to gain a picture of what was really happening. The survey had three components, the first aiming to collect the testimonies of persons with disabilities themselves, the second seeking information from

governments, and the third requesting information from independent human rights bodies and inspectorates.

The survey was translated into a total of 25 languages and remained open for a period of three months. During this time, we have received over 2,100 responses from 135 countries spanning from Argentina to Zimbabwe and covering every continent. The vast majority of responses were received from persons with disabilities themselves, as well as their representative organisations.

But I'm sorry to inform you that very few governments or national human rights institutions responded. While we can all understand the immense pressures caused by handling this human catastrophe, the lack of responsiveness from the majority of governments confirms, perhaps, the low level of priority placed on ensuring a response that is genuinely inclusive of persons with disabilities.

And it also saddens us to inform you that the testimonies we have received confirm many of our worst fears. While we are in the process of analysing the mass of information which has been collected over these last months, we can already provide you with the following emerging themes prevalent across countries, regardless of their level of development:

People with disabilities in institutions

We have received over 300 testimonies from 50 countries raising critical concerns about failure to protect the lives, health and safety of persons with disabilities in residential facilities.

- In Canada, one institution was left dangerously understaffed and according to one account *"people were left dead in their beds, others laying on the floor dehydrated"*
- In another institution in Nigeria, a respondent with disabilities told us that people were *"effectively imprisoned"* due to a total lockdown of the institution: *"A lot of people died because of this,"* they said.
- An organisation of persons with disabilities in Nepal said that no hygiene facilities, regular medicines or other necessary equipment were provided to people in rehabilitation centres.
- And there is now emerging evidence in Europe and North America that a large number of the fatalities from the virus came among people with disabilities in residential facilities, which are inherently dangerous due to their congregate nature.

Right to health

Another theme that has emerged is a crisis in terms of accessing basic, specialist and emergency healthcare, both in respect of the virus as well as other health needs.

- In Italy, Canada, the UK, the USA, Austria, Ireland and France, numerous respondents reported that governments have adopted triage policies which directly discriminate against people on the basis of disability, including in accessing ventilators and other life-saving treatments – a clear violation of the Convention which in many cases have led to preventable deaths.
- In South Africa, a person with disabilities reported that their continuing specialist healthcare had stopped, causing immense pain and suffering: *"I cannot see my consulting specialist physician, he won't see his normal patients for fear of spreading virus... I can't see my pain specialist."*
- In Mexico and Zimbabwe, we received reports that critical medicines had become unavailable or simply too expensive for persons with disabilities to access, further heightening the pre-existing bidirectional link between disability and poverty. According to one person with disabilities from Zimbabwe: *"To get medicine is not easy in my community, pharmacies demand United States Dollars which the majority don't have and the medicines are very expensive beyond the reach of many persons with disabilities."*

Access to Food

Almost one third of respondents from 81 countries around the world reported serious problems in accessing food and nutrition. Such reports not only came from low- and middle-income countries, but also from the most highly-developed countries, with numerous respondents pointing out that governments gave this issue low priority and mainly relied on NGOs and volunteers.

- In Nigeria, one organisation of persons with disabilities reported that the mother of a child with disabilities was harassed by policemen on her way to collect food relief at one of the distribution centres.
- In Switzerland, a respondent with disabilities said *“I find it difficult that I cannot go alone to the bank any more, or to the food shop. I always have to do with my assistance.”*
- We received a report from Honduras that food orders for elderly persons have been allegedly prioritised by the government, but orders had not been met or maintained.

Children with disabilities

Many family members of children with disabilities reported that they had been completely abandoned by their governments. A shocking 86% of respondents said their government had taken little or no action to prevent serious harm to children with disabilities.

- Family members of girls with disabilities felt abandoned by governments and support services during the pandemic. There were reports that girls with disabilities were not receiving supports for mental health issues.
- In Uganda, another OPD raised specific concerns about street children who are allegedly being *“quarantined in some boarding school facilities.”*
- And echoing a widespread concern about the denial of any sort of education to children with disabilities during the pandemic, one Moldovan organisation of persons with disabilities reported that *“children with disabilities did not have access to online education due to a lack of information technologies and internet access.”*

Police Brutality against Persons with Disabilities

The survey received disturbing reports of police brutality from around the world. Without accessible information or access to food and healthcare, persons with disabilities are leaving their homes and are then particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse by police or military forces tasked with enforcing lockdowns.

- A retired soldier with post-traumatic disorder was [shot and killed in the Philippines](#).
- In Kenya, police forces [killed a man with a physical disability for not wearing a face mask](#).
- [A young man with autism was beaten by police](#) in Serbia on the evening of a protest.
- In Uganda, a woman with a disability looking for food was beaten by police for being out after curfew time.

Freedom from Violence, Neglect, Exploitation and Abuse for Women and Girls with Disabilities

Women and girls are disproportionately being affected by the pandemic as access to police protection, women’s shelters, social workers, trauma counseling, or participation in the informal economy is significantly diminished. Testimonies from the survey detail grave instances of sexual assault, domestic violence, and exploitation from family members and members of the community. Respondents from around the world noted their governments did not take measures to safeguard the rights of women and girls with disabilities and the absence of government provisions for accessible complaint mechanisms and supports.

- Respondents in Kazakhstan, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Zimbabwe noted significant increases in cases of gender-based violence – including the rape of a girl with disabilities by

multiple men in Nigeria, the rape of a 10-year old girl with disabilities in Nepal, and the rape of an adolescent girl with psychosocial disability in Uganda.

- DPOs in Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Nigeria reported that sexual and gender-based violence is particularly severe for women with disabilities in remote, rural and slum areas, as well as for women and girls with disabilities confined to institutions.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The testimonies we have received from persons with disabilities around the world are overwhelming, and point at a shocking disregard for protecting the most fundamental rights of people with disabilities. For all the talk of ensuring that governments adopt disability-inclusive response and recovery plans, the picture on the ground is that persons with disabilities have been and are being left behind. What started as a survey to gain a real-time picture of the impact of the virus now serves as a testament to the failure of many of our governments to act.

If this pandemic shows us one thing, it is that we in the disability community – persons with disabilities and allies – must stand together more strongly than ever. This honourable committee has now a crucial role to play in sounding the alarm.

The disproportionate impact of this virus on persons with disabilities has less to do with the virus itself, and ever so much more to do with the choices that our governments make in the days, weeks and months ahead.

I thank you.

[Disability Rights Monitor,](#)

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