



# EVERY WOMAN TREATY

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Amina Mohammed, UN Deputy Secretary-General  
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## Re: **Ending the crisis of violence against women and girls with disabilities**

3 December 2023

Dear UN Leaders,

Women and girls with disabilities face a particular kind of violence. We are targets of violence because we are women and because we are disabled. Due to this, levels of violence against us are exceedingly high. Global data is hard to come by, but UNFPA estimated that 40 to 68 percent of young women with disabilities experience sexual violence before the age of eighteen.<sup>1</sup> A study in Australia found that 62 percent of women with disabilities under 50 had experienced violence since the age of 15.<sup>2</sup> In Nepal, 31 percent of women with disabilities responding to a survey reported experiencing violence.

Because of our disabilities, perpetrators have the advantage. A blind woman cannot see who is harming her or where she is being taken. A woman in a wheelchair has no choice but to go where the person pushing her insists. Perpetrators know that a woman with an intellectual disability or a woman with multiple disabilities will not be able to report what happens to them, making rape and other forms of violence easier to do.

Perpetrators know they can get away with it because they do. Every day. Recently a child in a village where one of us works was raped. Her mother discovered the violation when she bathed the girl. But the girl has an intellectual disability and a speech impairment. There was no way the child could share who had done this to her.

More often than not, violence against us is perpetrated by people who are supposed to care for us – family members, teachers and caregivers. This dependence on others makes it very

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Media Center, Statement, "Panel 1: Violence against women and girls with disabilities," 05 July 2021, accessed June 23, 2023.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2021/07/panel-1-violence-against-women-and-girls-disabilities>

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Population Fund, *Young Persons with Disabilities: Global study on ending gender-based violence and realising sexual and reproductive health and rights*, (New York, July 2018), page 116.

[https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final\\_Global\\_Study\\_English\\_3\\_Oct.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Final_Global_Study_English_3_Oct.pdf)

difficult for women with disabilities to leave an abusive situation, seek help and report violence. A deaf person cannot share their story without an interpreter. A woman with an intellectual disability might not have the language to explain what happened to them. A woman with a physical disability often needs transportation assistance. Imagine wanting to report violence, but you cannot because the person you rely on for interpretation, transportation, or for your meals and medication *is* the perpetrator.

Social stigma contributes to the problem. Some cultures do not see the point in educating girls with disabilities, contributing to the fact that some young women and girls are not aware that what they are experiencing is violence. This is particularly true of sexual violence. And it extends to the children of parents with intellectual disabilities. Because of stigmas, perpetrators think they can do whatever they want to a child of parents with disabilities.

It pains us so much that so many incidents of violence occur around the world, that so much of this violence goes unreported, that so many families receive no justice and so many women and girls suffer.

As UN leaders, you are aware of the data and the problem. **We are writing to urge you to support a solution we believe in: a treaty in the form of a new Optional Protocol to CEDAW dedicated to ending violence against women and girls.**

Is such an instrument truly necessary? It is. We as a global community have been trying to address the crisis of violence against women and girls for decades. The human rights emergency needs something to get the world's attention, to get every nation to prioritize the problem. A new global instrument has the power to do that. With violence against women and girls in the spotlight, the specific and unique needs of violence against women and girls with disabilities has a chance to be seen and addressed in a larger and more comprehensive way.

The scope and complexity of the problem is one reason a treaty is essential. The other reason is the legal gaps. An Optional Protocol to CEDAW will be binding on states, closing a normative gap in the framework on violence against women and girls.

An Optional Protocol would also close the geographic gap left by the regional instruments on violence against women and girls – the Convention of Belém do Pará in the Americas, the Maputo Protocol in Africa, and the Istanbul Convention in Europe. Collectively, these only cover about 25 percent of women, leaving nearly 75 percent of the world's women without protection from a binding instrument specific to ending violence against women and girls.<sup>3</sup>

When analyzed from an intersectional point of view, treaty text can recognize the double oppression we experience as both women and people with disabilities, or multiple oppression, if

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<sup>3</sup> Every Woman Treaty, *Safer Now: Rapid rise in violence against women and girls demands highest level of global commitment*, (Seattle, February 2023), page 19.

a woman with a disability is also a migrant or refugee, indigenous, a person of color, a gay woman or other marginalized group. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) acknowledges that women and girls are subject to multiple discriminations (Preamble (q); Article 6)<sup>4</sup> and that all people have a right to live free from violence (Articles 15 and 16).<sup>5</sup> However, its mention of gender-based violence is not specific enough, nor comprehensive enough, to address the crisis of violence perpetrated on women and girls with disabilities, including sexual violence.

An Optional Protocol would provide that specificity, and address barriers to justice. It would send a message to the entire globe that certain behaviors are unacceptable and will be treated with zero tolerance. We envision a new instrument's implementation system as metrics-based, modeled after the Tobacco Treaty's MPOWER framework. A metrics-based scorecard would track State party's efforts to eradicate violence against women and girls against a set of standard benchmarks, providing clear and actionable monitoring and accountability.

An Optional Protocol would also further the UN's work on women's rights, including progress on Sustainable Development Goals Nos. 5.2 and 5.3, progress on gender equality set out by CEDAW, progress on alleviating poverty, progress on upholding the rights of persons with disabilities, and more.<sup>6</sup>

For us, a new binding framework would support the work we do every day on the ground in nations around the world to stop the violence against us, support survivors, educate families, and seek justice.

We have it within us to change the course of human history to one where every woman and girl lives a life free of violence. This is our common goal and shared vision. As leaders of the United Nations, your voices and leadership can help create the political will necessary to spur action. As a community of people – at the UN, in civil society, in the private sector and in governments – united against this scourge, we have the power to better the lives of every community in the world.

**We urge you to make a public statement in support of an Optional Protocol to CEDAW dedicated to ending violence against women and girls.**

Thank you for your consideration and for your leadership.

Sincerely,

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<sup>4</sup> *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, Adopted 13 December 2006.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities>

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> "Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls," UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 5, Targets and Indicators, accessed May 31, 2023. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal5>

## AFRICA

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## ARAB REGION

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