**68th Commission on the Status of Women**

New York, USA – The 68th Commission on the Status of Women held from 11th to 22nd March 2024 provided an invaluable platform for global dialogue and advocacy. For me, it was a privilege to represent and shed light on the status of women with disabilities in Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka, women with disabilities constitute 9% of the female population. While women at large contribute significantly to the country's economic development and engage in foreign employment, the narrative changes for women with disabilities. They face unique challenges that impede their access to education, health, rehabilitation, employment, sports, sexual reproductive health (SRH), and other essential services.

A striking issue I highlighted was the limited access to sexual reproductive health education for women and girls with disabilities. In Sri Lanka, SRH education is integrated into the curriculum only at grade 9, typically after the age of 13. Alarmingly, many girls and women with disabilities discontinue their education after grade 8 (around 12 years old) due to familial poverty, transportation barriers, inaccessible school environments, and prevailing negative parental attitudes.

The challenges are even more pronounced for women with hearing impairments. The absence of training materials in sign language leads to communication breakdowns, particularly post-marriage, exacerbating their social isolation and vulnerability.

Despite these challenges, the Commission also provided a platform to learn from the best practices and alternative mechanisms adopted by other countries. These insights are invaluable as they offer potential solutions and strategies that can be adapted and implemented in Sri Lanka.

In my capacity as a member of the National Council for Persons with Disabilities, President of the Disability Organisations Joint Front in Sri Lanka, and Founder President of the Nation Forum of Women with Disabilities, I am committed to introducing inclusive methods, systems, trainings, and training modules tailored for women with disabilities in Sri Lanka.

The 68th Commission on the Status of Women was not just an event but a catalyst for change. It reinforced the importance of collective action, knowledge-sharing, and collaborative efforts in advancing the rights and well-being of women with disabilities globally. As we move forward, it is crucial to harness the momentum generated at such forums to drive tangible improvements and create an inclusive society where every woman, regardless of her abilities, can thrive.

**19th Pre-Sessional Working Group of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in UNHRC at Geneva**

Date: 25th March 2024

The 19th Pre-Sessional Working Group of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) convened on 25th March 2024, marking a pivotal moment for advocacy and accountability in Sri Lanka's disability rights landscape.

In 2023, the Government of Sri Lanka submitted its state party report to the CRPD committee detailing the country's progress on the rights of persons with disabilities. However, the report predominantly highlighted governmental initiatives and activities of non-governmental organizations, sidestepping the significant challenges faced by persons with disabilities in accessing their rights.

Recognizing the gaps and the need for a more comprehensive perspective, the CRPD committee invited civil society organizations to submit alternative reports by January 2024. Seizing this opportunity, the Disability Organisations Joint Front, with the support of the International Disability Alliance (IDA), submitted an alternative report. Our report critically examined the current status of each right of persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka, provided recommendations, and posed pertinent questions for the state parties.

During the 19th Pre-Sessional Working Group meeting, I had the privilege to present our findings and concerns regarding the rights of persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka. Emphasizing the importance of an independent monitoring commission for persons with disabilities, I shed light on the ground realities and challenges faced by this marginalized community.

The CRPD committee, in its quest for clarity and accountability, posed several questions seeking a deeper understanding of the current situation. I endeavored to provide clear and concise responses, ensuring the committee was well-informed about the discrepancies between the state party report and our alternative report.

As we continue our advocacy journey, it is imperative to learn from global best practices on disability rights. I am eager to explore and adapt successful strategies and approaches from other countries to further strengthen and advance the rights of persons with disabilities in Sri Lanka.

The 19th Pre-Sessional Working Group was not just a platform for dialogue but a testament to the power of collective advocacy, transparency, and commitment to upholding the rights of persons with disabilities. Moving forward, we remain steadfast in our pursuit of a more inclusive and equitable society where every individual, regardless of their abilities, enjoys their fundamental rights and freedoms.

Rasanjali Pathirage

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President – Disability Organisations Joint Front

Member – National Council for Persons with Disabilities in Sri Lanka

Founder President – Nation Forum of Women with Disabilities