

IDA
International
Disability Alliance



From Beijing to the CRPD: the missing keystone



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Introduction

We came here because we are women.

We came here to expose our abilities.

We came here to share our experiences.

*We came here to strengthen networking among women
with disabilities and other women.*

We came here to make ourselves visible.

Now we are leaving with our expectations partly met:

We have made some impact.

We have made people aware of us.

We have socialised and gained contacts all over the world.

*But we are aware that there is a lot more work to be done
before we achieve our basic goal of equality with women
in general in our respective countries.*

Watch out!

Women with disabilities are on the move!¹

¹ SHIA, "Women Walk on Water," quoted in Disability Awareness in Action, "Disabled Women," p. 41.

About this research

2023 marks the 28th anniversary of the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, where the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action² were adopted, setting out commitments for advancing women's rights and gender equality. In parallel to this conference, the First International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities and the NGO Forum on Women were also held.³

In commemoration of this milestone, the International Disability Alliance (IDA) has undertaken this research to explore the participation and contributions of women with disabilities in the Beijing Conference and its surrounding events, and what lasting impacts these activists have made on the gender equality and disability movements in their the journey towards developing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the eventual adoption of the CRPD with Article 6 specifically on women and girls with disabilities.

We conducted a literature review to gather initial information from books, journal articles, news articles, reports, papers, websites and videos. We also conducted interviews via video, phone and email to hear directly from women with disabilities and their allies about their experiences, involvement, and contributions during the Beijing Conference and its surrounding events, along with their continuing work. Many women with disabilities who were a part of this journey are no longer with us, but archival recordings and publications have helped capture the role they played in the process.

In our current times, there is an urgent need to look back as we look forward – to assess and learn from the critical advocacy work undertaken by earlier generations of disabled women, even as we embark on new journeys in the ever-changing present.

For IDA, this research report pays a tribute to these leaders, will contribute to planning ongoing actions to advocate for the rights of women with disabilities at IDA and will also serve to guide IDA members' and allies' works towards more equitable and just societies inclusive of all women with disabilities.

² UN Women, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and Beijing+5 Political Declaration and Outcome.

³ "Disabled Women at the Fourth World Conference on Women – 1995."

Acknowledgments and methodology

The starting point for this paper was the short documentary “Disabled Women: Visions and Voices from the 4th World Conference on Women” by Suzanne Levine and Patricia Chadwick.⁴ From there began a tracing of participants, with initial interviews conducted in 2020, and another round of interviews in 2021. We would like to thank all participants who joined us in the discussions: Susan Sygall and Cindy Lewis, Harilyn Rousso, Kathleen (Kathy) Martinez, Jahda Abou Khalil, Judith Rogers, Lydia La Rivière Zydal (Zijdel), Alicia Contreras, Meenu Sikand, Judith Heumann, Marilyn Golden, Corbett O’Toole, Silvia Quan, Rosangela Berman Bieler, Charlotte Vuyiswa McClain-Nhlapo, Theresia Degener, Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, Miyeon Kim and Kicki Nordström.

The work of the late Laura Hershey in documenting the role of women with disabilities who negotiated the CRPD, who were also present in Beijing, is what truly brought this paper together and narrated the impact of the Beijing Platform for Action in real time. She also left a legacy of the importance of storytelling and capturing histories as they unfolded.

We thank the Association for Persons with Disabilities, Bangalore, for donating the autobiography of the late N.S. Hema, capturing her experiences as a SHIA grantee in Beijing.

We thank Lucy Richardson, who conducted the initial set of interviews and compiled the first draft of the research, and Alagammai Chentilnathan, who supported a comprehensive review.

We acknowledge the many women with disabilities involved in both events that we could not interview, and we hope we still did justice to your experiences.

The images in this report have been shared by interviewees, or collected through sources from the internet including through the Disability History Project⁵, the documentary available on Disabled Women: Visions and Voices from the 4th World Conference on Women⁶ and those published by Laura Hershey in “Pursuing an agenda – Beyond barriers: Women with disabilities”⁷. Inability to credit individual photographs is regretted.

⁴ Levine and Chadwick, “Disabled Women.”

⁵ <https://disabilityhistory.org/2021/12/28/disabled-women-at-the-4th-world-conference-on-women-1995/>

⁶ www.youtube.com/watch?v=adfHKfZdvzI

⁷ Hershey, Laura (1996)

Executive Summary

The story of women with disabilities at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing is one that perhaps is not chronicled often enough. And when it was narrated, many women who continue to experience the impact of the events felt that the linkages between the Beijing Platform for Action and the CRPD were not effectively reflected.

This research was borne out of the need to document this story from the perspective of the women with disabilities who helped shape that narrative.

In fact, it seems quite unimaginable - given the lack of technological advancements in the year 1995- that a group of women with disabilities from across the world, who till that point did not even know of each other's existence, would find themselves in Beijing sharing a common platform with a common strategy. This, at an event which was at best indifferent to their attendance.

Against all odds, as it were, women with disabilities left this event having learnt from and made lasting contributions to one of the watershed moments of the global women rights movement, while gaining allies, building their own advocacy skills and making lifelong friendships.

The legacy of the Beijing Platform for Action, the discussions, the methodologies used in the First International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities and the discussions led during the NGO Forum, inside and outside the Disability Tent, did not end there.

This research paper is based on the contemporaneous documentation of the event and recent interviews with women with disabilities who had attended the event as young activists and now occupy leadership positions at different levels, to capture the impact of the emerging movement of women with disabilities.

As this paper details, the global movement of women with disabilities came together for first time in Beijing in 1995. While no formal organization of women with disabilities emerged in the aftermath of this event, the relationships and discussions entered into during these events continued to influence the inclusion of women with disabilities both in the mainstream women's movement, and also in the disability movement.

Women with disabilities painstakingly documented their experiences and reflections on the Conference, acknowledging the impact it would have. The opinions expressed by women with disabilities, their aspirations and requirements for participation, were taken forward by many civil society organizations, particularly Mobility International USA, which instituted its Women's Institute on Leadership and Disability (WILD) based on this.

The outcomes of the Conference extended far beyond anyone's imagination, and nearly 30 years later, it continues to influence both the gender and disability agendas. While this can be seen from the inclusion of women with disabilities in humanitarian and development instruments, this paper focuses on tracing a very important and understated outcome of Beijing.

Less than 10 years after the 1995 Conference, it was participants from Beijing that led the advocacy towards the inclusion of a standalone Article on the rights of women with disabilities, to formally enshrine the twin track approach within the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Not only was the Beijing Platform for Action itself influential in this process, but the advocacy tactics and strategies that were piloted in Beijing were replicated by Beijing alumni, and came in handy for the benefit of the entire civil society in negotiating with States for the framing of the CRPD Convention.

The absence of a global movement of women with disabilities, representative of women in all their diversity and intersectional experiences, has meant that the fight for inclusion that women with disabilities fought for in Beijing has had to be repeated time and again, in both online and offline spaces. While recent events have shown, organizations of persons with disabilities and organizations working with women with disabilities come together organically to react to certain situations and events, however, the sustainability and inclusiveness of these processes still comes into question.

At a time where the disability inclusive development agenda offers huge opportunities for impact, the absence of a global movement of women with disabilities is felt quite strongly.

The political commitments of Agenda 2030 and mechanisms like the Global Disability Summit and the Generational Equality Forum require global-level advocacy, which brings the local and diverse experiences of women with disabilities to the forefront.

The International Disability Alliance and its members look to the Beijing learnings and experiences to once again bring women with disabilities together to achieve an intersectional approach to disability inclusion.

Chapter 1: The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing

Beijing begins

The groundwork for the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing was laid by the previous UN World Conferences on Women. The first was held in 1975 in Mexico City, to coincide with International Women's Year.⁸ It defined a World Plan of Action for the next 10 years, to be reviewed at subsequent World Conferences on Women, and it launched the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. The first review was at the 1980 World Conference on Women in Copenhagen,⁹ where a Programme of Action was adopted to ensure progress over the next five years. Women with disabilities were mentioned in the Programme of Action, but there was little detail. The next review took place in 1985 at the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi, with the report of that conference concluding that

The strategies contained in the World Plan of Action [Mexico, 1975] and in the Programme of Action [Copenhagen, 1980] were important contributions toward enlarging the perspective for the future of women. In most areas, however, further action is required.¹⁰

To address this, the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women were adopted, with women with disabilities mentioned under "Areas of Concern" as one of the "special groups" needing particular attention.¹¹ Alongside each World Conference, civil society representatives would hold parallel gatherings, known as NGO Forums or NGO Tribunals, where they would have discussions and events similar to those happening in the Conference, network and build relationships among themselves, and strategize on advocacy approaches to shape the outcomes of the main Conference.

⁸ UN, "World Conference of the International Women's Year."

⁹ UN Women, "World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women."

¹⁰ UN, Report of the World Conference, para. 5.

¹¹ UN, Report of the World Conference.

Review and appraisal of implementation of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies took place over the following years, including in the form of national reports and data collection. These revealed that there was still much work to be done to ensure gender equality across all areas and all parts of the world, and momentum began building towards holding another World Conference, where a more ambitious and far-reaching agenda for women's empowerment and equality could be developed.

Beijing 1995



In 1990, the United Nations General Assembly voted that the next World Conference on Women would be held in 1995, in Beijing, China. Preparatory meetings were held across the regions of the world (in Indonesia, Argentina, Austria, Jordan and Senegal), identifying each region's important issues and major concerns.¹² These fed into the drafting of what would eventually become the Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action.

At the same time, civil society was preparing for its own forum to be held parallel to the Beijing Conference. Preparations were under the auspices of the Conference of Non-Governmental Organizations in Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council (CONGO), with regional preparatory meetings around the world as for the Beijing Conference.¹³

While the international community was preparing in Mexico, Copenhagen and Nairobi, women leaders with disabilities were preparing themselves for the journey.

¹² DPI, "Conference to Set Women's Agenda into Next Century." Other events which influenced Beijing discussions included the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, September 1994).

¹³ UN, Report of the Commission on the Status of Women on its 36th session.

There are four components to the discussion of Beijing 1995 in this paper: The Fourth World Conference on Women (the Conference), the NGO Forum on Women (the NGO Forum), the First International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities (the Symposium) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (the Platform).

1. The First International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities was held on 29 August 1995 in the conference room of the hotel where many of the women with disabilities were lodged. 200 disability rights activists from 22 countries attended.¹⁴

2. The NGO Forum was held in Huairou, China, from 30 August to 8 September. Around 30,000 people attended. Hundreds of workshops on a range of different topics were held, along with thematic tents. Around 200 women with disabilities attended.

3. The Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing from 4 to 15 September 1995. 4 995 official delegates from 189 countries attended, alongside 4 035 representatives from 2602 non-governmental organizations (NGOs), 3 245 members of the press and around 5 000 representatives from United Nations agencies and other intergovernmental organizations.¹⁵

4. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was the outcome document of the Conference, adopted unanimously by all countries present. Advocacy through the Symposium and NGO Forum helped shape the final text. The Platform laid out an ambitious agenda for women's empowerment and gender equality, with strategic objectives outlined across 12 key areas.

“The personal is the political”

Many of the advocates who became part of the international movement of women with disabilities who attended Beijing started their path to activism early, influenced by family members, schools and the communities in which they were raised, and they had developed inherently intersectional approaches. Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo was raised in a politically conscious family who were involved in the struggle against South Africa's apartheid, prompting her to study human rights law.¹⁶ Kathy Martinez became interested in politics at a young age, joining the United Farmers Workers movement after seeing the mistreatment of farm workers in her local community.¹⁷ Mijoo Kim was a young journalist in South Korea, personally interested in the rights of women with disabilities.¹⁸

¹⁴ Sikand-Taylor, “Beijing ‘95.”

¹⁵ Freeman, “Beijing Report.”

¹⁶ Interview with Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, 7 August 2020.

¹⁷ Interview with Kathy Martinez, 22 June 2020.

¹⁸ Mijoo Kim, interview by Laura Hershey for Radio Feminista.

Some first joined activism in the mainstream women's movement, while others got their start in the mainstream disability movement. Lydia Zijdel became a feminist activist at the age of 17, and upon acquiring her disability made the move into disability activism. She discovered that the feminist movement presented many barriers for women with disabilities, and that the disability movement was dominated by men ("it was guys, guys who made the rules"¹⁹) – she felt that a movement of women with disabilities was needed. Harilyn Rousso was another woman who started out in the feminist movement, where she found commonality with other women over self-image difficulties. She started to embrace her disability, coming to the realization that "It wasn't my, quote, defect, it was society's attitudes."²⁰

Others found rights-based approaches within the disability movement. Meenu Sikand was introduced to the independent living movement by chatting with other people with disabilities on her para-transit service and sharing her frustrations at the charity and medical model approaches being imposed on her by society. Rosangela Berman Bieler started up a patient advocacy organization while in rehabilitation.²¹ N.S. Hema was a leader and woman with disability who had established a cross-disability OPD in Bangalore.²² The perspectives of these women would all come to shape the events to come, moving from individual experiences to a movement.

Gathering momentum, encountering resistance

As the "buzz" towards Beijing began, there was significant interest for women with disabilities from different regions to attend the regional NGO preparatory meetings which were being organized in parallel with the regional consultations leading up to the Conference. At these events, they reported encountering significant resistance from the mainstream women's organizations: they perceived that the women's movement at that time viewed persons with disabilities as requiring caregiving, which clashed with its rejection of stereotypical caregiving roles.²³ In both Europe and the United States, interviewees reported facing immediate pushback from the mainstream women's movement when raising the idea of women with disabilities attending – they were told that the organizers were already overwhelmed by the restrictions from the Chinese government and would not have the resources or capacity to support attendance of women with disabilities.²⁴

Once it was evident that the NGO Forum was not readily offering space to women with disabilities, leaders from Mobility International USA (MIUSA) decided to make that space themselves by creating the First International Symposium on Issues of Women with Disabilities.²⁵

¹⁹ Interview with Lydia Zijdel, 26 June 2020.

²⁰ Interview with Harilyn Rousso, 22 June 2020.

²¹ Interview with Rosangela Berman Bieler, 6 August 2020.

²² Hema, *Wheels of Destiny*.

²³ See for example, Arenas Conejo, "Disabled Women and Transnational Feminisms."

²⁴ Interview with Corbett O'Toole, 30 July 2020.

²⁵ Chadwick and Levine, "Disabled Women."

This was to be a gathering by and for women with disabilities, taking place the day prior to the start of the NGO Forum. Women would work together to develop strategies for engaging with mainstream civil society at the NGO Forum, with the aim of influencing the Conference and the final text of the Platform. It was also envisioned as an opportunity for women with disabilities to come together in solidarity, and to share their experiences and expertise with one another.

With funding for the Symposium secured from the US Department of Education, MIUSA spread the word as far and wide as possible, inviting all women with disabilities to attend. MIUSA was coordinating with other women with disabilities planning to make the trip to Beijing, including activist Corbett O'Toole, who was organizing a delegation of US women.

In parallel, the Swedish Handicapped International Aid Foundation (SHIA) was supporting women grantees to participate in the preparatory events to Beijing. SHIA would support a delegation of nine women from seven developing countries, including Nepal, Uganda, Nicaragua, Ghana, Tanzania, Thailand and India, at both the regional NGO forums and Beijing.²⁶

A critical amount of communication was required to organize the Symposium's venue, as well as for accessibility and inclusion measures at the NGO Forum – such as a wheelchair-accessible bus to transport women from the hotel to the site of the Forum, and a Disability Tent to act as a central meeting point for women with disabilities and a location for presentations and workshops²⁷ – in a situation where organization around the Beijing events was already quite complex.²⁸



Several participants had to raise their own funds for their participation.²⁹ All women were equally convinced that this was going to be a momentous event for the women's movement, and women with disabilities should be equal stakeholders in the outcomes of these discussions.

²⁶ Hema, *Wheels of Destiny*.

²⁷ Interview with Susan Sygall, CEO MIUSA, and Cindy Lewis, MIUSA Director of Programs, 17 June 2020.

²⁸ See Freeman, "Beijing Report."

²⁹ For example, from interviews: Corbett O'Toole's delegation designed T-shirts and bags to sell. Meenu Sikand raised funds from different sources and was supported by her family, who bore the costs of a caregiver to travel with her.

The Beijing experience



But, in a funny way, it was like summer camp again. The kids who could walk would go and do the walking jobs, and the Deaf people would go and scout out other things... You were sharing the experience of what does it mean to be in a community with each other³⁰

The beginning

The beginning of the Beijing experience seemed to set the tone. Several participants narrated immediate conflict with airport and customs authorities.³¹ Eventually, many women with disabilities ended up staying in the same hotel, which was a former American Military “rest and relaxation” spot quite far removed.³² There were endless opportunities for informal networking, strategizing and discussion. Chatting in the hallways, sharing coffee and eating meals together in the large cafeteria – to many, it seemed like the first time so many women with disabilities got together in one spot.

The women with disabilities attending the NGO Forum were provided “accessible” transportation to the venue, which ended up being a bus without windows, with all seats removed to accommodate wheelchairs. There were no safety tiedowns, and a very steep ramp that wheelchair users needed assistance to get up. The long time spent waiting for the bus to arrive or to leave, plus the journey itself, was yet another opportunity for women with disabilities to connect with one another.³³

Symposium



My strongest image is of this large, diverse group of women with disabilities from all over the world gathering and working together as a community³⁴

³⁰ Interview with Corbett O’Toole, 30 July 2020.

³¹ From interviews: Marilyn Golden, a representative from the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, recalled that a group of participants had flown together from California to Beijing and faced immediate barriers upon disembarking the plane. Local officials told the group to use stairs to get to Customs, refusing access to an elevator that was in view but on the other side of Customs. Marilyn recalled the group doing everything they could to convince the staff otherwise, from talking, to insisting, and even refusing to move from the hallway at all. The group had flown in on an American airline, and the airline’s representative explained to them emotionally “You don’t understand what it’s like here, you don’t have rights and they could throw you in jail.” Corbett recalls everyone was very upset at being treated this way, but then became scared about what would happen. Alicia Contreras remembered local officials telling them to follow the rules or risk being sent home. Eventually the group agreed to let local staff carry those in the group who could not use stairs themselves, such as Laura Hershey, a well-known activist who was planning to carry out interviews and other research at Beijing.

³² Interview with Corbett O’Toole, 30 July 2020.

³³ Interview with Kathy Martinez, 22 June 2020.

³⁴ Interview with Harilyn Rousso, 22 June 2020.

The Symposium had 200 participants. The facilitators (Susan Sygall, Cindy Lewis, Corbett O'Toole and Kathy Martinez) put a variety of accessibility measures in place in the small space – tables were pushed out of the way to make space for wheelchair users to maneuver, chairs were made available for people who needed to sit, sign language interpreters moved between different groups, assistants took notes.³⁵ Participants volunteered where needed to ensure everyone could participate, even to act as impromptu language interpreters.³⁶

The Symposium's purpose was to gain a better understanding of what the women with disabilities were going to do, how to work cross-disability, and how all the differing experiences and viewpoints would come together.³⁷ There was no scope for prior preparations and strategizing between women with disabilities across the world in a time where internet access was so new, so the Symposium was designed with this outcome in mind. It was designed so that all participants had a chance to share their own expertise, and to make suggestions on how to influence the NGO Forum and the Conference.

As the women began arriving, a sudden downpour made a raucous noise on the tin roof of the building. This made conversation very difficult inside the room, but the participants simply adapted, employing patience and teamwork as they split into smaller groups and huddled close together to hold their discussions.

Women from all different parts of the world shared their experiences and knowledge – talking about the barriers they faced, what strategies they used in their advocacy, what issues were most important to them and what women and girls with disabilities were dealing with in their communities. Many women from the United States were surprised at the positive experiences for women from countries with universal healthcare.³⁸ A lot of common ground was found as well, with many women discovering that many issues and barriers were universal “no matter if you were from USA or Tanzania.”³⁹



³⁵ Interviews of facilitators.

³⁶ Interview with Alicia Contreras, 27 June 2020.

³⁷ Interview with Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, 25 January 2022.

³⁸ Interview with Corbett O'Toole, 30 July 2020.

³⁹ Cindy Lewis in interview with MIUSA, 17 June 2020.

The participants broke into groups and each focused on a topic like education or health and worked on developing a few key points to share with the wider group. These key points contributed to an overall advocacy strategy for the women with disabilities, equipping them with agreed positions and talking points on a range of issues. They were ready to “infiltrate” the forthcoming NGO Forum workshops and panels, determined to show how disability was part of every feminist issue, from low-wage work to reproductive health.⁴⁰

They were also ready to push for substantive language in the Platform itself, which at that point was a draft containing only passing references to disabled women.⁴¹ The SHIA grantees supported with their secretariat to sustain any advocacy efforts.

The other topic of discussion was access. The NGO Forum’s program book was not promising on accessibility, listing workshops relating to women with disabilities as taking place on the third floor of a building without an elevator. The Symposium participants strategized and came up with creative workarounds and fallback plans, including asking for workshops to be moved to the Disability Tent, treating it as a “home base.” Another strategy referred to by interviewees was the “twin-track approach” of hosting disability-related events and discussions in the tent, but also engaging in the mainstream discussions.

NGO Forum

Those passionate feminists absolutely wanted to support disabled women, they just hadn’t thought about it yet and didn’t really know how to do it in a meaningful way⁴²



⁴⁰ Levenstein, *They Didn't See Us Coming*.

⁴¹ Hershey, “Pursuing an Agenda Beyond Barriers.”

⁴² Cindy Lewis in interview with MIUSA, 17 June 2020.

The NGO Forum's primary purpose was for activists and advocates, the majority of whom were not part of the formal Conference, to support and shape the Conference and its outcomes. It also provided a space for a range of purposes.⁴³ The program listing all of these ran to 200 pages.⁴⁴

As the Forum's venue was a hastily converted small town, activities and workshops took place in locations like schools and recreation facilities. Thematic tents were set up on slabs of concrete in various locations, including the Disability Tent, which had inexplicably been placed furthest away from the main entrance. Maps were provided in the program, but they were difficult to read and often inaccurate, and many attendees found themselves endlessly wandering about. Paths had been created throughout the space, but they had been constructed of individual bricks that had not been mortared together. Rain persisted throughout the week, creating mud and puddles.

It was a very challenging environment for many of the women with disabilities. Advance preparations were helpful in some cases, with the US contingent bringing sign language interpreters along,⁴⁵ and many of the women bringing assistants or guides with them. The Swedish Government delegation carried the braille embosser of a participant, which ultimately benefited all braille users, as the daily updates were made available in braille as well.⁴⁶ Due to the inaccessibility of the space, blind participants needed assistance at all times. Some wheelchair users had other participants who used canes or crutches sitting on their laps and moving from place to place,⁴⁷ and others tried to scrounge up materials to make ramps and better pathways.⁴⁸ For some cases, like the workshop for women with disabilities held on the third floor of a building without elevators, creativity wasn't enough.



⁴³ Including raising awareness of the challenges for different groups of women (e.g., oppression of women in Iran), workshops to share knowledge or brainstorm ideas (e.g., approaches to microcredit), speeches from high-profile women (e.g., Hillary Clinton), group activities (e.g., contributing to a quilt), gathering support for causes (e.g., independence for Tibet), exhibitors to showcase their wares (e.g., feminist magazine publishers), distribution of publications (e.g., reports from individual NGOs on topics relating to women) and an opportunity for groups to host their own Congress or Symposium (as the women with disabilities did). Examples taken from Freeman, "Beijing Report."

⁴⁴ Nathan, "Perspective on the NGO Forum on Women."

⁴⁵ Interview with Corbett O'Toole, 30 July 2020.

⁴⁶ Interview with Kicki Nordström, 10 August 2021.

⁴⁷ Interview with Alicia Contreras, 27 June 2020.

⁴⁸ Interview with Judith Rogers, 25 June 2020.

On the third day of the Forum, disabled women convened a spontaneous demonstration on the steps of an inaccessible workshop building, capturing international press coverage and drawing the attention of the global community to women with disabilities as a vocal and visible force at the UN World Conference on Women.⁴⁹ Some of the protesting women climbed out of their wheelchairs and crawled along the pavement, drawing immediate attention from the international media and from other Forum participants, who cheered them on. When other women saw this highly visible protest, “they seemed to finally get that disabled women were women.”⁵⁰ There had already been some discussion in the Disability Tent about staging a protest against the overwhelming inaccessibility (of not only the physical environment but also the communications), and the spur-of-the-moment protest encompassed those grievances.

The protests seemed to galvanize other groups into having their own protests and demonstrations throughout the remainder of the Forum, which was risky given the express ban on protests in the official guidelines of the event.⁵¹ The women had feared being arrested, but repercussions appeared in a different way with the sudden “unavailability” of their bus, which although not fully accessible was the only option for travel to the Forum.⁵² MIUSA representatives advocated with great emotion at the NGO Forum organizers’ meeting, eventually resulting in the return of their transport.⁵³ There were positive results as well.⁵⁴

The Disability Community Tent was moved to a location closer to the main gate and the accessible washroom facilities. COC also provided us with more buses with ramps, as well as approximately 80 Chinese volunteers to assist participants with disabilities. The incident raised awareness of the needs and concerns of the participants with disabilities and created an ongoing dialogue between other workshop organizers and women with disabilities. It was an empowering experience for everyone.

Although the Disability Tent was now in a more physically accessible location, there were still many barriers to other parts of the Forum, in particular many of the workshops. Some participants, who could “get up the stairs [and] speak the dominant language,”⁵⁵ had the opportunity to experience more of the Forum. Women became acutely aware of privileges they may have held and more conscious of the barriers for women who had disabilities different to their own, or had less access to resources and equipment than they did.

⁴⁹ MIUSA, “MIUSA CEO Susan Sygall Selected as Official U.S. Delegate to CSW UN Conference.”

⁵⁰ Written inputs from Harilyn Rousso to notes of interview carried out 22 June 2020.

⁵¹ Interview with Corbett O’Toole, 30 July 2020.

⁵² Interview with Corbett O’Toole, 30 July 2020.

⁵³ Cindy Lewis in interview with MIUSA, 17 June 2020.

⁵⁴ Sikand-Taylor, “Beijing ‘95.”

⁵⁵ Interview with Kathy Martinez, 22 June 2020.

This gave them a responsibility that they did not take lightly – “when they were going to the meeting up the stairs, they had to carry the agenda not just for themselves, but for all the women that weren’t able to go to that meeting,”⁵⁶ promoting growth of cross-disability awareness, communication and networks of support.

The overwhelming inaccessibility showed that the organizers and the mainstream women’s organizations had not expected or planned for the participation of women with disabilities. An unexpected result of the barriers and inaccessibility was the solidarity and a sense of camaraderie it created among the women, who came together to help one another in whatever way they could – “we were each other’s accommodations.”⁵⁷ For some, it was also an opportunity to improve their own advocacy by learning about the experiences and access needs of women who had disabilities different to her own, “so when I am fighting for access for wheelchairs, I am also fighting for access for someone who is blind and someone who is deaf.”⁵⁸

The inaccessibility caused many women to spend a lot of time in the Disability Tent, creating further opportunities for shared learning, forming friendships and building a sense of community. The Tent became a hotbed of activity, with workshops, panels, activities and talks held on a wide variety of topics, drawing from the strategizing that had taken place at the Symposium. There was a specific presentation made by women with disabilities from Ghana.⁵⁹ With the increased visibility from their demonstration, women with disabilities were also able to attract more visitors and attention from mainstream feminists. Bella Abzug, who had founded the International Women’s Caucus at the UN (and was also a wheelchair user at this point) and Madeleine Albright, who was then the United States permanent representative to the UN, delivered speeches in the Disability Tent, bringing even more awareness of the women with disabilities and their causes.⁶⁰

The impact of the women with disabilities was described as “kitchen table activism” – the feminist idea of people creating change by coming together and over informal discussions, rather than formal meetings.⁶¹ Many of the women who came through the Disability Tent were interviewed to learn about their experiences and ambitions for the future, which in turn led to lasting legacies.

⁵⁶ Interview with Corbett O’Toole, 30 July 2020.

⁵⁷ Interview with Kathy Martinez, 22 June 2020.

⁵⁸ Interview with Alicia Contreras, 27 June 2020.

⁵⁹ Interview with Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, 25 January 2022.

⁶⁰ Levenstein, *They Didn’t See Us Coming*.

⁶¹ Interview with Corbett O’Toole, 30 July 2020.

Fourth World Conference on Women



The Fourth World Conference on Women (the Beijing Conference) was the formal United Nations event around which everything else was built. The two weeks were an opportunity to share experiences, consider best practices and lessons learned and engage in debate and discussion. Most significantly, it would produce the Beijing Declaration and finalize the ambitious Platform for Action, with the vision of empowering women globally.

Attendance at the Conference was by invitation only, and only a small proportion of the NGO Forum participants were invited. Representatives came from United Nations Member States, United Nations observer states, regional economic integration organizations, associate members and secretariats of regional commissions, United Nations bodies and programs, specialized agencies and related organizations, intergovernmental organizations and accredited nongovernmental organizations.

Many of the representatives had the opportunity to make formal statements. Only 23⁶² Member State representatives and five⁶³ United Nations representatives mentioned disability in their statements, generally as a brief reference in the context of a list of marginalized groups, and often using charity or medical model language.

⁶² 188 Government statements were listed on the Conference website, but 7 were unavailable for download; see www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/govstatements.html

⁶³ 64 UN statements were listed on the Conference website, but 1 was unavailable for download; see www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/unstatements.html

Of the 49 NGOs who made statements, nine mentioned disability and one of those was substantial – the statement delivered by Maria Rantho on behalf of Disabled People International (DPI):

*Madame chairperson, We, women with disabilities, have come here to contribute and to share this conference with all other women. Like all other women we struggle for equal rights and opportunities. Like all other women we can contribute to achieve the goals of equality, development and peace. Women and girls with disabilities have both unique obstacles to overcome and unique strength to provide and to contribute to our societies nationally and internationally.*⁶⁴

The key task for the women with disabilities representatives was to negotiate the final version of the Beijing Declaration and the Platform for Action. Much of the text for these documents had been drafted in advance of the Conference, through extensive consultations with a range of stakeholders. However, there was still opportunity to influence the final language.

From their strategizing and discussions at the Symposium, women with disabilities were ready to push for their inclusion in these landmark documents. The key points and statements developed by each of the thematic groups in that crowded hotel conference room just one week earlier were turned into suggested phrases and paragraphs ready to be added critical areas of the documents. They knew that the Platform for Action would guide and influence work on gender inequality and empowerment for years to come, and it was essential for women and girls with disabilities to be recognized.

Two of the women with disabilities managed to get to the building where the Conference was being held. They recalled that they weren't able to actually enter the room where negotiations were taking place, so they positioned themselves at the doorway with pieces of paper that listed their recommendations and language suggestions and tried to hand these out to as many of the Member State representatives as possible. They approached delegations to emphasize the need for inclusion and asked them "Will you include women with disabilities?" and "Please put these few words in,"⁶⁵ even becoming emotional at times knowing just how important this opportunity was for women with disabilities: "that was our way to make a change in the world because the Platform for Action was going to be this amazing blueprint."⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Rantho, "Statement presented by Maria Rantho."

⁶⁵ Susan Sygall in interview with MIUSA, 17 June 2020.

⁶⁶ Susan Sygall in interview with MIUSA, 17 June 2020.

Other women carried out targeted advocacy towards the delegations of their own countries. Participants from Lebanon were disappointed that the head of the state's official delegation was a man, but still pushed for him and the rest of the delegation to promote women with disabilities in their official statements and interactions, though this was apparently not successful.⁶⁷

Judith Heumann was in a unique position as – to her knowledge – the only woman with a disability who was part of an official delegation to Beijing. At the Conference itself, Judith was cognizant of her status as the only woman with a disability in the US delegation and of the need to consider how and when was best to make her points, as she had learned from much of her previous work and advocacy, given the delegation's wide range of priorities. In the end, Judith felt that the US delegation gained an understanding of what the important issues were for women and girls with disabilities, and she was happy to play a part in getting women with disabilities on the agenda at the Conference and into the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.⁶⁸

Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was adopted unanimously by 189 countries. It set strategic objectives and actions for the advancement of women and the achievement of gender equality in 12 critical areas of concern:

- Women and poverty
- Education and training of women
- Women and health
- Violence against women
- Women and armed conflict
- Women and the economy
- Women in power and decision-making
- Institutional mechanism for the advancement of women
- Human rights of women
- Women and the media
- Women and the environment
- The girl-child

Under each area, strategic objectives were identified, alongside related actions to be taken by governments and other stakeholders, at national, regional and international levels.

⁶⁷ Interview with Jahda Abou Khalil, 23 June 2020.

⁶⁸ Interview with Judith Heumann, 29 June 2020.

The final text had 32 mentions of disability, women with disabilities and girls with disabilities. Many of these mentions were as examples of particularly vulnerable or marginalized groups; for example, under the Platform's strategic objective on eradicating illiteracy, one of the recommended actions was "Reduce the female illiteracy rate to at least half its 1990 level, with emphasis on rural women, migrant, refugee and internally displaced women and women with disabilities."⁶⁹

Interviewees recalled that it felt like a big accomplishment even to have so many mentions of women with disabilities across the different areas the document.

There were also some substantial paragraphs, such as:

Ensure access to and develop special programmes to enable women with disabilities to obtain and retain employment, and ensure access to education and training at all proper levels, in accordance with the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities; adjust working conditions, to the extent possible, in order to suit the needs of women with disabilities, who should be assured legal protection against unfounded job loss on account of their disabilities⁷⁰

And

The girl child with disabilities faces additional barriers and needs to be ensured non-discrimination and equal enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms in accordance with the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities.⁷¹

These more substantial mentions were remarkable, considering that in the past women with disabilities were only included in the "laundry list" parts of documents. Even if not all of the mentions were substantial, it was a victory to have women with disabilities in there. It was also noted that the language itself had improved, with no more outdated terms like "handicapped" or other stigmatizing language.

⁶⁹ UN Women, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 81A.

⁷⁰ UN Women, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 178J.

⁷¹ UN Women, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 270.

Reflections

It was at the NGO Forum in Huairou and at the UN Conference in Beijing, that we – women with disabilities – broke through and became visible. I do not think anyone returned from either the Forum or the Conference without noticing our presence and the fact that we had been speaking for ourselves. We became a group to count on within the women movement. A group with the capacity to act, to participate and stand up for our rights.⁷²

Beijing 1995 was envisioned to be bigger and better than anything that had come before it, and it fulfilled this with a combined total of over 50,000 people attending both the Conference and the NGO Forum, making it the largest event in the UN's history up to that point.⁷³

While the mentions in the Platform were welcome, there were mixed perceptions on the impact of the Platform itself by those interviewed. Parts of the Platform were quite vague, making it difficult to measure and assess progress over time. The absence of built-in accountability and framework was a setback as well. How to use the Platform was a question, and one participant was later involved in explaining thematic aspects of the Platform for use in organizations or projects.⁷⁴

Even 25 years later, the women with disabilities remember the feeling of this momentous occasion. While it was the “worst of times” because of the lack of accessibility and planning, it was the “best of times” because of the camaraderie of disabled women and allies from throughout the world.⁷⁵ Many of the friendships, networks, and connections formed at Beijing are still going strong today.

For some, the mainstream women's encouraging responses to their protest helped the Forum feel like more of a sisterhood. While some were skeptical as to whether this lasted beyond the Conference,⁷⁶ one such allyship that developed in Korea would prove to be extremely influential on the disability movement.⁷⁷ Some leveraged the relationships they developed to raise the voices of their peers who had less privilege or were considered “more significantly disabled.”⁷⁸ LGBT women were notably among the allies to the women with disabilities.

⁷² SHIA, “Women Walk on Water,” quoted in International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities, Final Report, pp. 24–25.

⁷³ Freeman, “Beijing Report.”

⁷⁴ Interview with Meenu Sikand, 27 June 2020.

⁷⁵ Written inputs from Susan Sygall to notes from interview with MIUSA, 17 June 2020.

⁷⁶ Written inputs from Susan Sygall to notes from interview with MIUSA, 17 June 2020; interview with Harilyn Rousso, 22 June 2020.

⁷⁷ Korean delegation was instrumental during the CRPD negotiation. More details will come under the correspondent section.

⁷⁸ Interview with Kathleen Martinez, 22 June 2020.

For many of the women, particularly those from the United States, exposure to women with disabilities from all over the world was a highlight because it broadened their perspectives and expanded their knowledge. Women were excited to learn about the innovations and advances in different countries, particularly relating to accessibility and equipment – Japanese women had the latest in cutting-edge technology, and the organization Whirlwind Women demonstrated how to build wheelchairs suited to rugged environments and low resource settings. When Judith Rogers shared her expertise on baby care and parenting, women who had never been encouraged to have children saw that this was possible for them. Her presentations were so influential that one attendee remembered and recognized Judith when they crossed paths 20 years later.⁷⁹

Documentation of stories was a strong outcome of the meeting. Several participants took this opportunity to begin documentation of the experiences of women with disabilities.⁸⁰ For many of the women with disabilities who were part of Beijing, it was not only the start of the women with disabilities movement but also a launchpad for their own activism, careers and organizations of women with disabilities within both disability and women's rights movements.

Outcomes beyond the Platform

The meeting of women with disabilities in Beijing from all across the world and across impairment groups was the start of the movement of women with disabilities.⁸¹ One of the most direct results was the development of MIUSA's Women's Institute on Leadership and Disability (WILD) program, an innovative leadership training program for women with disabilities from around the world. MIUSA interviewed many of the women with disabilities who attended Beijing, asking what had brought them there, what their ambitions were for the future and how they thought change could happen. They learned that women wanted a place to come together to support one another, share their stories and strategies and learn how to continue to make change. This sparked the idea of a leadership program for women with disabilities, and WILD was born as a direct consequence of the Beijing Conference.⁸² The first WILD program was held in 1997, and MIUSA believes that it would not have happened without the Beijing conference. As of 2020, more than 200 diverse women from 89 countries have graduated from the program equipped with the skills and confidence to make an impact in their own communities.

⁷⁹ Interview with Judith Rogers, 25 June 2020.

⁸⁰ Jahda Abou Khalil met many women with disabilities from across the Arab region and became motivated to write a book highlighting their successful stories and experiences. Laura Hershey published an article on the experience of the women with disabilities who gathered for the Symposium and attended the NGO Forum, writing that "an international movement of women with disabilities takes root and grows. It is a long struggle ahead."

⁸¹ Interview with Kicki Nordström, 11 August 2021.

⁸² Interview with MIUSA, 17 June 2020.

The program creates a ripple effect, as WILD alumni have gone on to secure grants for their own organizations, empower other women with disabilities, create networks, support closer mentorship of future generations of activists and influence both their own and donor governments.⁸³

Immediately following the inaugural session of WILD, there was another large gathering of women with disabilities: the International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities (1997 Forum), held in Washington, DC, on 15–20 June 1997. It attracted over 600 women from 20 countries, including most of the women who had just completed the WILD program. It was a fulfillment of the most common request from the interviews carried out by MIUSA and colleagues in the Disability Tent at the NGO Forum: to have an international conference for women with disabilities. The 1997 Forum and Beijing were so closely linked that Beijing was described as being like the summer camp, and the 1997 Forum like the class reunion.⁸⁴

In June 2000, the United Nations General Assembly held a special session to review the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Member state governments agreed on further actions to accelerate the Platform's implementation and commemorated the five-year milestone (known as Beijing +5).

Women with disabilities once again came together to host their own Beijing +5 event parallel to the mainstream one, which brought the movement to a new generation of women with disabilities who were looking for such a movement, such as advocates in Guatemala.⁸⁵ Ironically, participants, including wheelchair users, arrived for event and a last-minute announcement was made that it would be on the second floor, but there were no elevators, so screens were organized on the first floor for those who could not access second floor to just watch.⁸⁶

Some women found that their work in Beijing, and the work of the wider group of women with disabilities, created opportunities in their home countries. In Korea, the Beijing participation led to a strong boost to the movement of organizations of women with disabilities.⁸⁷ Canadian Beijing alumni with disabilities took the opportunity to “crash” some of the Canadian meetings in Beijing and push for attention to the exclusion of women with disabilities. They made their way into a meeting of the National Action Committee on the Status of Women and pointed out that women with disabilities were not fully included in post-Beijing activities.⁸⁸

⁸³ MIUSA, “Our Alumni Are Changing the World.”

⁸⁴ Interview with Corbett O’Toole, 30 July 2020.


⁸⁵ Silvia Quan described this event as a personal and professional milestone. In Guatemala, she had been advocating for women with disabilities but did not have a community of peers doing the same kind of work – until she came to the Beijing +5 event and connected with other women with disabilities there. Silvia recalled learning a lot about how to advocate at the UN and forming lasting connections in the international movement of women with disabilities.

⁸⁶ Interview with Alicia Contreras, 27 June 2020.

⁸⁷ Mijoo Kim, interview by Laura Hershey for Radio Feminista.

⁸⁸ Interview with Meenu Sikand, 27 June 2020.

After Beijing, the United States Department of Education had grants available for projects involving women and girls with disabilities. This related to the United States Government's interagency working group Empowering Disabled Women and Girls, which was launched after the 1997 Forum and was co-chaired by Judith Heumann, and intended to address employment and leadership development.



Chapter 2: The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

The inclusion of gender under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Building the CRPD

As this paper will explain, the journey towards the inclusion of women with disabilities in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities began in Beijing, but this journey was not straightforward. But neither was that of the CRPD Convention.

In the late 1990s to early 2000s, there were a number of technical meetings and associated papers exploring the existing international norms and standards, and considering the next steps to promote the rights of persons with disabilities. In March 2000, at the World NGO Summit on Disability in Beijing, six major international organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) and leaders from 20 national and regional disability organizations met and adopted the Beijing Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the New Century, a call to action for the UN to start considering a treaty.⁸⁹ In 2001, at the 56th session of the UN General Assembly, Mexico proposed that the General Assembly consider an international convention on disability. By resolution 56/168, an Ad Hoc Committee (AHC) was established “to consider proposals for a comprehensive and integral international convention to promote and protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities.”⁹⁰ Sessions of the AHC began in 2002, and eight sessions were held, finishing in 2006.

⁸⁹ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, The United Nations and Disability.

⁹⁰ UN General Assembly, “Comprehensive and Integral International Convention to Promote and Protect the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities.”

The first two sessions produced and presented extensive inputs for the proposed convention, in the form of documents, formal statements, panel discussions, and general debate.⁹¹ Submitted documents included references to women with disabilities as a particularly marginalized group, emphasizing the need to incorporate a gender perspective, and mentions of existing legislation or frameworks relevant to women with disabilities, for example the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

Of note is the Secretary-General's report Overview of Issues and Trends Related to Advancement of Persons with Disabilities, which specifically mentions the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and its items relating to women with disabilities.⁹² Likewise, the panel discussion on "Critical Issues Concerning Special Measures and Disability" not only noted the need for women with disabilities to be included in the convention text but also for women with disabilities to participate in the development of the text.⁹³

Of the speakers, several stated the need to consider gender dimensions, such as the representative of Fiji noting that "Women, children and the aged with disabilities are doubly disadvantaged and deserve to be recognized as a particularly vulnerable group"⁹⁴ and the representative of Uganda stating "Gender responsiveness is also important and must be integrated in the Convention."⁹⁵ The International Labour Organization also contributed the view that the convention "should cater to people with all types of disability, ensuring equal attention to women as well as men with disabilities and to others facing multiple discrimination."⁹⁶

Regional actions were taking place as well. In the Asia-Pacific region in 2003, towards the drafting of the CRPD, governmental and non-governmental organizations, national disability and human rights institutions and independent experts came together to draft what was known as the Bangkok Recommendations,⁹⁷ which were also the basis for the Bangkok Draft,⁹⁸ elaborated at the Regional Workshop towards a Comprehensive and Integral International Convention on Protection and Promotion of the Rights and Dignity of Persons with Disabilities, in October 2003.

⁹¹ Proposals for the elements and format of the convention, and supporting documents (including reports, position papers, summaries of expert meetings, and legal analysis) came from "States, observers, regional meetings, relevant United Nations bodies, entities and agencies, regional commissions and intergovernmental organizations, as well as civil society including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), national disability and human rights institutions and independent experts." UN AHC, Report, A/58/118 & Corr.1.

⁹² UN AHC, Overview of Issues and Trends related to Advancement of Persons with Disabilities.

⁹³ de Silva de Alwis, "Women and Disability."

⁹⁴ Savua, Statement under Agenda Item 5 and 7.

⁹⁵ Mwandha, Statement under Agenda Item 5.

⁹⁶ Murray, Statement under Agenda Item 5.

⁹⁷ UN AHC, "Bangkok Recommendations."

⁹⁸ UN AHC, "Bangkok Draft."

In both these documents, an intersectional approach was highlighted, and gender equality was identified as both a principle and a stand-alone article.⁹⁹ The Asia-Pacific Network of Women with Disabilities was involved in these negotiations, in which Miyeon Kim, who was also in Beijing, was a delegate.

Following these first two sessions, a Working Group was set up to prepare the first draft of the proposed convention. The Working Group met in January 2004, composed of 27 representatives from member state governments, 12 from international DPOs and one from National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs). 16 members were women, including Kicki Nordström (representing the World Blind Union) and Theresia Degener (representing Germany) – women with disabilities who were both at the 1995 Beijing events. The NHRI representative was Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, a woman with a disability working for the South African Human Rights Commission, who had been selected by her NHRI peers to represent all NHRIs.

This first draft was presented at the third AHC session, to form the basis of the negotiations. It was comprised of a Preamble and 25 Articles but did not have substantial language on the specific circumstances and concerns of women with disabilities. It is speculated that the omission may have been inadvertent, given the short two-week time frame that was available to make the draft.¹⁰⁰

Be that as it may, women with disabilities, particularly from the Republic of Korea, were extremely disheartened with these developments, especially after the momentum that their own movement received after Beijing. At the second AHC in 2003 there was also a women's forum which met on the sidelines of the AHC.¹⁰¹ Despite the efforts resulting in the Bangkok Draft, the draft Convention did not seem to reflect the required specific language on women with disabilities.

The women with disabilities movement proposed to the Government of Korea the importance of having an article on the rights of women with disabilities, in line with the Bangkok Draft. The Korean Government's proposals were drafted under consultation with the International Disability Convention Solidarity in Korea, of which the women with disabilities network was a member, by Prof Ick Seop Lee¹⁰² and were presented at the third AHC as 15bis. The women with disabilities network emphasized the importance of this inclusion given the discriminations experienced by women and girls with disabilities in the Asian context.

⁹⁹ Article 7: Equality of women and men with disabilities in the enjoyment of rights: "1. States Parties recognize that women and girls with disabilities are subject to multiple discrimination and that focused, gender-specific measures (including protective measures) will be necessary to ensure that women and girls enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms on the basis of equality with men and boys. 2. Each State Party undertakes to take all necessary measures to ensure the equal right of women and men with disabilities to the enjoyment of all rights set forth in this Convention."

¹⁰⁰ Theresia Degener, who was a part of the Ad Hoc Committee as an expert member of the German government delegation and part of the task force which was responsible for the first draft of the Convention text in January 2004, in Arnade and Haefner, *Standard Interpretation*, pp. 16–17.

¹⁰¹ Mijoo Kim, interview by Laura Hershey for Radio Feminista.

¹⁰² Later, President of Disabled Peoples International, Korea.

The text therefore included references to protection against violence, specific needs during pregnancy and motherhood and the right to equal participation.

In the fourth and fifth AHC sessions, the Republic of Korea continued to advocate for this proposed article, holding discussions with interested member states and civil society delegations.

Language on women and girls with disabilities was proposed during negotiations on other articles such as “Freedom from violence and abuse” and “Liberty and security of the person.” In its statement on the latter, the International Disability Caucus (IDC) took the opportunity to note that “women with disabilities have not been recognized in any international convention on protection and rights so far. There is a lack of gender interests in the drafting of this convention. IDC proposes that a gender aspect and special protection for women with disabilities in the upcoming articles be included.”¹⁰³ In the negotiations on the “Respect for privacy, the home and the family” article, New Zealand recommended that the Beijing Platform be considered, given that the Platform was adopted by consensus and states women’s right to decide freely about their sexuality.¹⁰⁴

In the sixth session, delegations were in agreement that the Convention needed to address the situation of women with disabilities, but there were varying opinions on how this should be done and where this language should be placed in the text – mainstreamed throughout the thematic articles, referenced in the preamble and monitoring paragraphs, in a stand-alone article, or using a twin-track approach (a specific article and mainstreaming).¹⁰⁵ The Republic of Korea reiterated their position:

*Women with disabilities have remained invisible in legislative and policy efforts at both national and international levels, without an anchor in disability discourse or women’s rights discourse. The existing global norms, either on persons with disabilities or on women’s rights, directly reflect this lack of attention and offer little in terms of concrete or action orientated language addressing women with disabilities. A separate article on the rights of women with disabilities is a vital element of a convention on the rights of people with disabilities, in addition to references to gender in the general provisions.*¹⁰⁶

Concerns were raised that a stand-alone article could cause confusion between this convention and the CEDAW, weaken protections for women by relegating them to one article only, as was the experience under the Convention on the Rights of the Child,¹⁰⁷ create inequality for men or lead to separate articles for many other social groups.

¹⁰³ UN AHC, “Daily Summary of Discussion at the Fifth Session, Volume 6, #8.”

¹⁰⁴ UN AHC, “Daily Summary of Discussion at the Fifth Session, Volume 6, #8.”

¹⁰⁵ UN, “Article 6, Sixth Session: Comments, Proposals and Amendments Submitted Electronically.”

¹⁰⁶ UN AHC, “Daily Summary of Discussion at the Sixth Session, Volume 7, #2.”

¹⁰⁷ Theresia Degener, in Arnade and Haefner, Standard Interpretation.

Counterpoints raised included that women could not be considered a social group as they are half of the population, that the discrimination and marginalization faced by women with disabilities was particularly egregious and that CEDAW lacked specific mention of women with disabilities. Lydia Zijdel, now with the EU Commission, remembered feeling tension from officers who had worked on the CEDAW, who were reluctant to provide support in case it negatively affected CEDAW work.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, Dr. Heishoo Shin, who was a member of the CEDAW Committee from Korea, presented to the Ad Hoc Committee that CEDAW lacked a disability perspective, and moreover, in poorer countries, merely taking a mainstreaming approach would not be sufficient.¹⁰⁹

Among civil society groups, there was generally support for the proposed stand-alone Article. Miyeon Kim, who was coordinator of the Women's Committee of the International Disabilities Caucus, firmly highlighted that the mainstream women's movements did not sufficiently consider the issues of women with disabilities and noted that their experiences of intersecting discrimination needed to be explicitly included. The European Disability Forum (EDF) Women's Committee recalled that women with disabilities are mentioned in the Beijing Platform for Action, pointing out that this is not a legally binding document.

The AHC chair appointed Theresia Degener as facilitator of this proposed article, to hold consultations on how to best address the rights of women with disabilities within the text. While the various delegations could agree that women and girls with disabilities did in fact face multiple and intersecting discrimination, it continued to be difficult to reach agreement on how and where to acknowledge this in the text.¹¹⁰ In an October 2005 letter, the chair noted that the issue had still not been resolved and urged AHC members to work towards consensus on this in the coming session (the seventh).¹¹¹ An updated Working Text (also known as the Chair's Text) was developed in advance of the seventh session, leaving a placeholder for the potential stand-alone article, now proposed as Article 6 on Women and Girls with Disabilities.

Consultations on the Working Text ranged far and wide, with key organizations and groups gathering diverse voices to contribute to comments, proposals and amendments. In Africa, regional consultations were held in Uganda that brought together all the African NHRIs to review the text and gather language suggestions. It was a very intense process, trying to fit in as many consultations with as many people as possible, all before the next session.¹¹²

There was strong support from civil society and OPDs on Article 6, through direct lobbying to member states who were yet not on board¹¹³ as well as awareness-raising

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Lydia Zijdel, 26 June 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Mijoo Kim, interview by Laura Hershey for Radio Feminista.

¹¹⁰ Arnade and Haefner, Standard Interpretation.

¹¹¹ UN, "Article 6, Sixth Session: Report by the Chairman, Draft Article 15bis."

¹¹² Interview with Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, 7 August 2020.

¹¹³ Interview with Jahda Abou Khalil, 23 June 2020.

activities such as wearing T-shirts with slogans.

It is evident that without having women with disabilities themselves proposing and advocating for Article 6, it probably would not have been included.¹¹⁴ This is manifest in the records of the AHC sessions, where states that had initially opposed a stand-alone article eventually became strong supporters of it. The twin-track approach was introduced in the sixth session as a viable solution to have as a guiding principle but also legally binding upon states' obligations.¹¹⁵

Article 6, in its final articulation, and the twin-track approach adopted in the eighth session, represent significant advancement towards a more nuanced articulation of the multifaceted nature of the disadvantages confronted by women and girls with disabilities. Article 6 also stands as a clear statement of the duty of states to safeguard and promote gender equality.¹¹⁶

The CRPD Committee and its implementation

On 13 December 2006, the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol. It was opened for signature a few months later, and entered into force on 3 May 2008.

The first CRPD Committee had 12 members, five of whom were women, reflective of another important clause negotiated in the CRPD, Article 34, mandating balanced representation in the Committee.¹¹⁷



¹¹⁴ Interview with Silvia Quan, 4 August 2020.

¹¹⁵ Charlotte McClain-Nhlapo, interview by Laura Hershey for Radio Feminista.

¹¹⁶ Mykitiuk and Chadha, "Article 6 – Women with Disabilities."

¹¹⁷ Article 34.4: "The members of the Committee shall be elected by States Parties, consideration being given to equitable geographical distribution, representation of the different forms of civilization and of the principal legal systems, balanced gender representation and participation of experts with disabilities."

In the 2010 elections, Beijing +5 alumnae Theresia Degener and Silvia Quan were selected to join the Committee. At one point, there were six women (out of 18) on the Committee, all of whom were strong on women's issues. They were proud to be able to bring gender into all areas of the Committee's work, and to draft General Comment 3, which focused on Article 6.¹¹⁸ Theresia was later the only woman on the CRPD Committee, which caused a significant backlash¹¹⁹ and demonstrated that there was still much work needed to ensure that women with disabilities could consistently participate in decision-making at the highest level.

At present, 11 out of 18 members of the CRPD Committee are women, including the chair and both vice chairs. This includes Vice Chair Miyeon Kim, who was instrumental in pushing the Korean Government to introduce the clauses related to Article 6, and Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame, who was closely following the processes around Beijing and also leveraged the Platform in negotiations on Agenda 2030.

The CRPD Committee has worked with the CEDAW Committee to provide nuanced solutions to areas where the disability movement and the women's movement experienced discomfort. For example, on the issue of sexual and reproductive health and rights, a joint position of the CEDAW and CRPD Committee was developed.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Interview with Silvia Quan, 4 August 2020. UN OHCHR, "General Comment No. 3."

¹¹⁹ See the 2018 GQUAL campaign by IDA and IDDC highlighting the disparities: IDA, "Call on States Parties."

¹²⁰ UN OHCHR, "Guaranteeing Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights for All Women, in Particular Women with Disabilities."

Chapter 3: From Beijing to New York and beyond

Impact of the Beijing Platform for Action on the inclusion of gender in the CRPD

The processes that we learned in Beijing were absolutely fundamental to what happened in New York¹²¹

Women with disabilities at Beijing 1995 had both direct and indirect impacts on the inclusion of women with disabilities in the CRPD, particularly on the development of Article 6, but also on the twin-track approach that one sees throughout the Convention.

Many women involved in both Beijing and the CRPD processes believed that the engagement of women with disabilities in advocating for their inclusion in the Beijing Platform and Declaration paved the way for their later advocacy on Article 6. The experiences of Beijing showed there was a need for something that would guarantee the rights of women with disabilities that they were willing to fight for, and Article 6 fulfilled this role.¹²²

Many women with disabilities were personally involved in Beijing and the CRPD and spontaneously reflected on a clear link between the two and the direct impact of Beijing in the latter.

At the AHC, many of the women involved in the Article 6 discussions were linked not only through Beijing,¹²³ but also through the WILD programme, Beijing +5 and the 1997 Forum.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Interview with Kicki Nordström, 11 August 2020.

¹²² Interview with Jahda Abou Khalil, 23 June 2020.

¹²³ Interview with Lydia Zijdel, 26 June 2011. Judith Heumann, who had been part of her government's delegation at Beijing, was now the World Bank's Advisor on Disability, and participated in AHC sessions discussing data. She remembered witnessing Miyeon Kim, who had been part of the NGO Forum, lobbying her country's (Republic of Korea) delegation for the inclusion of women with disabilities in the convention.

¹²⁴ For example, Rosangela Berman Bieler, who was involved with both the Beijing +5 and the 1997 forum, as well

In the United States, the movement prioritized supporting younger activists with disabilities for Beijing +5.¹²⁵

Relationships that had formed between the mainstream women's movement and the movement of women with disabilities also played a very important role, with leaders from the mainstream women's movement demonstrating allyship. For instance, the government delegation of the Republic of Korea was represented by Kyung-wha Kang, who was a women's rights activist and former chairperson of the Commission on the Status of Women and was also a participant in Beijing 1995. Her friendship and allyship with Miyeon Kim since then would ensure a close alignment between the views of the women OPDs and the government in these tense negotiations.¹²⁶

Beijing's legacy was also in what was learned there – how to come together and strategize, how to influence the mainstream groups, how to overcome barriers and even turn them into strengths. These learnings became part of the playbook for the international movement of women with disabilities, a type of institutional knowledge that could be utilized by upcoming members of the movement during their participation in the CRPD's development.

Activists learned in Beijing how to act and react with the difficult work with advocating with government officials in the UN context, something with which they did not have prior experience.¹²⁷ Innovations like writing responses to the ongoing drafts of the Platform and giving them to government delegations, which was technically not allowed, were strategies piloted in Beijing and perfected in New York. The creation of the International Disability Caucus, which was eventually recognized as the experts, was also something that activists who were present in Beijing wanted to prioritize.¹²⁸

The other dimension of Beijing's legacy was the heightened visibility of women with disabilities in the mainstream feminist movement and United Nations world, and subsequent increased awareness of what women with disabilities could contribute, what their concerns were, and what barriers needed to be brought down to enable their participation.

Not only did women with disabilities create awareness and visibility at Beijing, but they also carved out a space for themselves and their concerns, both in the mainstream women's movement and in the United Nations sphere. The women at Beijing had fought hard to grab this space, which paved the way for activists and advocates who came after them to continue to work in this space, and then expand it. It also enabled women with disabilities to have greater influence and power in the mainstream disability movement.

as Silvia Quan, who found out about the AHC through the Beijing +5 events.

¹²⁵ Interview with Corbett O'Toole, 30 July 2021.

¹²⁶ Mijoo Kim, interview by Laura Hershey for Radio Feminista.

¹²⁷ Interview with Kicki Nordström, 10 August 2021.

¹²⁸ Interview with Kicki Nordström, 10 August 2021.

This space for women with disabilities across the mainstream women's movement, the mainstream disability movement and the United Nations led to invitations to working groups, positions of leadership in organizations, advising governments, leading ministries, the opportunity to form new organizations, research and publications, engagement in conferences and membership on boards and committees. As the work towards a convention gained momentum, women with disabilities strategically put themselves in places and positions to influence and participate in the drafting process.

Beijing, New York... where to now?

We... express concern that, overall, progress has not been fast or deep enough, that in some areas progress has been uneven, that major gaps remain and that obstacles, including structural barriers, discriminatory practices and the feminization of poverty, persist, and recognize that 25 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women, no country has fully achieved gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, that significant levels of inequality persist globally, that many women and girls experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, vulnerability and marginalization throughout their life course, and that they have made the least progress, which may include, inter alia, women of African descent, women with HIV and AIDS, rural women, indigenous women, women with disabilities, migrant women and older women¹²⁹

Even with the tremendous success of the movement of women with disabilities from 1995 to 2006, and the increasing number of platforms on gender particularly related to Agenda 2030, organizations of women with disabilities are still struggling for spaces for inclusion and participation.

In the recent past, and particularly with the increase in online platforms during the COVID-19 lockdowns, many women with disabilities who were finding their way to navigate both movements of gender and disability found themselves excluded for reasons of lack of availability, affordability and quality of internet services and devices.

The 1st IDA Global Survey on Participation of OPDs had interesting findings with regards to participation of OPDs which were representing women with disabilities. Only 28% of respondents that represent women with disabilities reported being involved in government consultations.

¹²⁹ UN Women, Political Declaration on the Occasion of the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women, pp. 3–4.

Overall, on issues of gender equality, only 31% of respondents were involved in consultations by the government, and at best 27% with funding agencies.

The meaningful participation of organizations of women with disabilities is essential to their empowerment; still, there is tremendous work to be done to support building the capacities of organizations of government, representatives of UN agencies and funding agencies to best and meaningfully involve women with disabilities in decision-making processes, as well as to support women with disabilities to leverage opportunities, particularly in the Global South.

The nature of the movement is also changing. The movement of women, girls and trans and non-binary persons with disabilities, particularly among the youth, is perceived to be much more receptive to issues like intersectionality than the mainstream disability movement. In the United States, the movement has gone online, with youth leaders not feeling represented by the mainstream disability movement.¹³⁰ A lot of the discussions that took place in the Disability Tent are now condensed in the form of tweets and Tik Tok videos, making them accessible to a larger audience.

The implementation of the CRPD on the ground across the world varies greatly. In MIUSA's WILD program, participants are asked about how well they feel the CRPD is being implemented in their country. Many of the women describe situations where the CRPD is ratified but not effectively implemented, especially in relation to girls and women with disabilities, and where there may be laws in place as per the CRPD but they are not adequately enforced.

Some Beijing participants from the United States were engaged in a lot of work trying to get the CRPD through the United States Senate so it could be ratified, but the CRPD remains signed but not ratified by the United States.¹³¹

Agenda 2030 and Beijing +25 events

The UN Development, human rights and humanitarian systems have had mixed responsiveness to the rights of women and girls with disabilities.

Agenda 2030 reaffirms the outcome of the Beijing Platform for Action and expressly references it in Goal 5 related to gender equality. As the Agenda 2030 focuses on having an intersectional approach, OPDs of women with disabilities are taking the opportunity to advocate for disability disaggregated data pertaining to progress on this goal.

¹³⁰ Interview with Corbett O'Toole, 30 July 2020.

¹³¹ Interview with Marilyn Golden, 2 July 2020.

The Beijing +25 events and outcome documents do not reflect the gains that the women with disabilities secured in the platform document in 1995. While the Political Statement issued by the CSW reflects the fact that women with disabilities are among the groups who have gained the least from the Platform, the report of the Expert Group mentions disability only in the context of recipients of care work by women.¹³²

Regionally, the Asia-Pacific Beijing +25 review highlights the importance of financial inclusion of women with disabilities, the necessity of birth registration and the impact of environmental and health hazards on women with disabilities, related to the Sendai Framework.¹³³ In Europe and in Latin America the processes highlighted the lack of and the need for disability disaggregated data.¹³⁴

The Political Statement from Africa¹³⁵ on Beijing +25 specifically invokes the Platform and the need to realize the commitments with respect to women with disabilities.¹³⁶ It accords “special attention” to persons with disabilities, ensuring their concerns will be reflected throughout the document. Specific mentions have also been made with regard to education, social protection, gender-based violence and disability disaggregated data. Beijing 1995 was also invoked in another manner: the event venue was not accessible for persons with disabilities, leading to a brief protest by organizations of women with disabilities, supported by many allies, which ended in the venue being changed.¹³⁷

The Generation Equality Forum

Launched in 2021, and convened by UN Women, the Generation Equality Forum (GEF) aims to ensure implementation of the 1995 Beijing Platform as well as the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.¹³⁸ It was launched with hybrid events held in Mexico City and Paris. The Forum seeks commitments from stakeholders in terms of policy, program and financial commitments towards gender equality.

From its inception, organizations working with women with disabilities were concerned with issues regarding the accessibility of the platforms and processes.

¹³² UN Women, “Report of the Expert Group.”

¹³³ UN ESCAP, Asia Pacific Beijing +25 Declaration and Report.

¹³⁴ UN Economic and Social Council, “Economic Commission for Europe: Beijing+25 Regional Review Meeting: Regional Review of Progress: Regional Synthesis”; UN ECLAC, Regional Report on the Review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Latin American and Caribbean Countries, 25 Years On.

¹³⁵ UN ECA, “Political Declaration and Key Messages and Priority Actions on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.”

¹³⁶ “We commit to the social and economic inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in all priority actions, to accelerate implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. We recognize the different types of disabilities, while being cognizant of the fact that women and girls with disabilities often live below the poverty line.”

¹³⁷ @awwdinigeria, “Beijing+25 African Review is on hold as women with disabilities protest inaccessible entrance to the venue of conference.”

¹³⁸ Generation Equality, “The Generation Equality Forum.”

While intersectionality is a key principle underpinning the framework, disability is not expressly included as an intersectional characteristic.

An Inclusive Generation Equality Forum came together composed of a group of feminists with disabilities and organizations that advocate for rights and justice at the intersection of gender and disability, to advocate for the inclusiveness of the events.¹³⁹

Despite their advocacy, issues still remained. In the case of Paris, hosting of events on the online platform was not planned with the needs of persons with disabilities in mind, and the facilities of the platform did not allow for the full and effective participation of women with disabilities. In response, an event organized by OPDs was withdrawn and held as a shadow event in parallel.¹⁴⁰ The GEF has since been working with OPDs and organizations at the intersection of gender and disabilities to improve accessibility measures. In the meanwhile, the Inclusive Generation Equality Forum came together to draft the Feminist Accessibility Protocol¹⁴¹ calling upon UN agencies, feminist organizations and other stakeholders to commit to a set of minimum standards to ensure the full and effective participation of women with disabilities in their processes.

Ongoing work to monitor the GEF commitments for disability inclusion have revealed that as of September 2022, only 127 commitments (out of 2695) mentioned disability, with only 24 robust commitments on women with disabilities.¹⁴²

The Global Disability Summit

The Global Disability Summit offers a concrete mechanism for commitments which are critical to achieving real change for persons with disabilities. The first Global Disability Summit was held in 2018, co-hosted by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Government of Kenya and the International Disability Alliance (IDA). The GDS18 inspired unprecedented engagement and generated commitments to action that will help deliver Agenda 2030's vision to "Leave No One Behind" (LNOB) as well as existing obligations under the CRPD. In 2022, the second edition of the GDS took place online, co-hosted by the Government of Norway, the Government of Ghana and IDA. The GDS 22 also hosted the GDS Youth for the first time in history.

In the 2022 Global Disability Summit, out of 1421 commitments,¹⁴³ only 119 commitments have explicitly mentioned women with disabilities. Of those, 42 have been made by national and local governments, 38 by civil society organizations, 16 by multilateral organizations, 7 by foundations and 16 by other organizations, including by IDA.

¹³⁹ Women Enabled International, "Generation Equality Forums."

¹⁴⁰ Zsoldos, "Feminists with Disabilities Cannot Take the Floor at the Generation Equality Forum."

¹⁴¹ Women Enabled International, "Sign On to the Feminist Accessibility Protocol"; Inclusive Generation Equality Collective, Feminist Accessibility Protocol.

¹⁴² Ongoing research by Sightsavers and Women Enabled International: "Sightsavers engagement with Generational Equality" (to be published soon).

¹⁴³ Global Disability Summit, "Commitments."

The humanitarian systems



The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, negotiated by the governments of Thailand and Finland, and published in May 2015, highlights under its Guiding Principles that “disaster risk reduction requires an all-of-society engagement and partnership. It also requires empowerment and inclusive, accessible, and non-discriminatory participation.” Likewise, all policies and practices should “integrate a gender, age and disability perspective, including through the promotion of women and youth leadership.”¹⁴⁴ The Sendai Framework brings the twin-track approaches to disabilities in over 18 references to women, gender and persons with disabilities throughout the text.

The Human Rights Council Resolution on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Situations of Risk and Humanitarian Emergencies, A/HRC/RES/31/6, published in April 2016, follows the same spirit as the Beijing Framework, the CRPD and the Sendai Framework, stressing “that girls and women with disabilities are often subject to multiple, aggravated or intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage.”¹⁴⁵

The Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action carries one reference to gender, in the context of protection and safety.¹⁴⁶ However, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the highest-level humanitarian coordination forum of the UN System, released the IASC Guidelines on the inclusion of persons with disabilities in humanitarian emergencies¹⁴⁷ to follow up on the Charter, which emphasizes the impact of the intersections of age and gender on persons with disabilities in humanitarian emergencies throughout the document.

¹⁴⁴ UN, Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030, para. 19, d.

¹⁴⁵ UN OHCHR, “The Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Situations of Risk and Humanitarian Emergencies.”

¹⁴⁶ “Pay specific attention to the situation of women and girls of all ages with disabilities in the context of situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies and further take all necessary action to empower and protect them from physical, sexual and other forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and harassment.” Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action.

¹⁴⁷ IASC, IASC Guidelines, Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action, 2019.

Security Council Resolution 2475¹⁴⁸ on the protection of persons with disabilities in armed conflict has only one mention of women with disabilities in the context of providing timely assistance; however, women with disabilities are seeking to leverage both this resolution as well as an earlier one on Women and Peace and Security to advocate for better inclusion as important peacekeeping stakeholders.¹⁴⁹ INGOs and others still needed to recognize the real message of the CRPD – having persons with disabilities in the center, not only as beneficiaries – to ensure real change.¹⁵⁰

The global movement of women with disabilities

As the world, including donors, UN agencies, the private sector and other stakeholders, moves towards a “turbo-charged”¹⁵¹ effort to get back on track towards the SDG Goals, there is a risk that groups that are hardest to reach will fall through the cracks, for example persons with disabilities experiencing intersectional forms of discrimination, such as women with disabilities. As has been seen above, the number of opportunities for engagement at the global level has only been on the increase, in terms of gender equality as well as disability rights and inclusive development. While there are important leaders of the movement of women with disabilities working at the global level, including those who were engaged in Beijing 1995, a global organization of women with disabilities is still yet to emerge.

Women with disabilities have tried to find a space in the mainstream women’s movement as well in the leadership of organizations of persons with disabilities. There have been considerable barriers experienced by many women with disabilities in both these efforts, where both the women’s movement and the disability movement must be more responsive and inclusive of women with disabilities and their very identities. Women with disabilities from underrepresented groups of persons with disabilities, or facing intersectional forms of marginalization, have made little headway in either of these groups.

Many interviewees opined that while strong women leaders emerged, they are more commonly placed in UN agencies and INGOs and not in the organizations of women with disabilities, and this was perhaps the missing link, much like Article 6 was.

In many countries, organizations of women with disabilities are well established and have grown to be sustainable in their governance and functioning, thanks to funding and capacity-building initiatives.

¹⁴⁸ UN Security Council, Resolution 2475 (2019).

¹⁴⁹ UN Security Council, Resolution 1325 (2000).

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Rosangela Berman Bieler, 6 August 2020.

¹⁵¹ UN, “Turn Words into Action to Get World Back on Track for 2030 Goals.”

At the regional level, there is a strong interest in strengthening a regional OPDs of women with disabilities in Africa from national-level women's leaders as well as from the continental OPD.¹⁵²

At the global level, an organization of women with disabilities (in line with the understanding of OPDs by the CRPD Committee¹⁵³) still remains elusive, despite efforts that have been made towards establishing one from time to time. From the trends that were seen in Beijing, in New York and also during the GEF, organizations of persons with disabilities and organizations working with women with disabilities come together organically to react to certain situations and events.

However, the time and energy that is involved in this initial organization can inadvertently exclude women with disabilities from underrepresented groups, or from the Global South, who may need additional supports, such as language interpretation or time, to be brought up to speed with the events and to participate equally and effectively. Many interviewees reflected on the limitations of this approach, to include women with disabilities from underrepresented groups, indigenous peoples with disabilities and LGBTIQ+ with disabilities, among others.



¹⁵² Disabled Women in Africa is a member of the African Disability Forum, and a recent consultation that took place in Kenya, organized by ADF, IDA & UDPK is supporting establishing a regional strategy.

¹⁵³ UN CRPD, "General Comment No. 7."

Conclusions

The movement for collective action of women with disabilities that came together for the first time at the global level in Beijing, was furthered with other events and initiatives and was rekindled in New York, has proved to time and again ensure important milestones of inclusion that subsequent generations of sisterhood of women with disabilities have managed to build on.

These events, platforms and initiatives have trained and cultivated leaders who adopted feminist principles of consulting peers, promoting intersectionalities and leaving no one behind. The collective ambition of the movement of women with disabilities is to ensure that these uplifting and career defining experiences are made available to a newer generation of disability activists who are bringing intersectional viewpoints.

Women with disabilities want to bring gendered perspectives on emerging areas of advocacy such as humanitarian frameworks, assistive technology, climate action and disability-inclusive social protection while also leveraging not only the CRPD but also the CEDAW and other treaty body mechanisms and work at the Human Rights Council. The political commitments of Agenda 2030 and mechanisms like the GDS and the GEF require global-level advocacy, which brings the local and diverse experiences of women with disabilities to the forefront.

The infiltration of the women's movement, INGOs, UN Agencies, private sector and government by women with disabilities has been welcome and has resulted in some powerful outcomes. Even then, the establishment of a well-resourced and sustainable organization of women with disabilities at the global level with very clear linkages to national and regional level OPDs of women is both desirable and necessary to push the agenda of women with disabilities in a twin-track approach – looking at mechanisms focused on persons with disabilities as well as at the mainstream women's movement.

We celebrate our sisters who are with us, and those who are now always with us, for trailblazing a path that we find now accessible to navigate.

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