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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and
peace for the twenty-first century”**

Statement submitted by Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind (Sightsavers), a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

Statement

Sightsavers is an international development organisation which works with partners to eliminate avoidable blindness and promote equality of opportunity for people with disabilities in more than thirty low and middle-income countries. Our programmes also include work to ensure quality inclusive education, strengthen health systems and eliminate neglected tropical diseases. Sightsavers is accredited to ECOSOC under our legal name of Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind. Through this submission we would like to make the following observations reflective of the priority theme for Commission on the Status of Women 70 and would be grateful if these could be considered as part of the Commission's deliberations.

Access to justice for all women and girls:

Women and girls with disabilities constitute a significant proportion of the global population, with an estimated 18 per cent of women living with a disability (World Health Organisation and World Bank, 2011). Despite this, women and girls with disabilities, in all their diversity, face entrenched and intersecting barriers to accessing justice (UN Women, 2023). While international and regional frameworks provide strong normative protection, their implementation remains inconsistent and inadequate. Unless these gaps are addressed, women and girls with disabilities will continue to be denied equal protection before the law and meaningful participation in justice systems.

International and regional frameworks to accessing justice:

At the international level, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, particularly Articles 6, 12 and 13, affirms the obligation of States to guarantee effective

access to justice for women and girls with disabilities. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, particularly General Recommendation 18 and 40, and General Comment 35, also provide essential protections against discrimination and for equal legal recognition for women and girls with disabilities. Regionally, the African Disability Protocol provides an important contextual framework, with Article 13 addressing access to justice directly and Article 27 recognising the specific barriers faced by women and girls with disabilities across the continent.

Despite these robust standards, national translation of commitments into law and practice remains fragmented. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Committee has repeatedly observed that women and girls with disabilities are denied equal legal standing, discredited as witnesses, and excluded from legal professions (International Disability Alliance, 2022). This demonstrates the need for States not only to ratify international and regional treaties, but also to harmonise domestic legal frameworks, allocate resources to implementation, and ensure accountability. The agreed conclusions should urge States Parties to review and repeal discriminatory legislation, guarantee women with disabilities equal legal capacity, and incorporate gender and disability sensitive measures into justice sector reforms.

Key barriers to accessing justice:

Systemic barriers continue to prevent women and girls with disabilities from accessing justice on an equal basis. Discriminatory laws and legal procedures directly undermine their rights. In many countries, guardianship regimes deny women with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities the ability to testify or bring complaints (UN Women, 2024).

Harmful practices, such as forced sterilisation, continue to be permitted or tolerated, stripping women of autonomy over their bodies and silencing them in legal proceedings (International Disability Alliance, 2022).

Physical and procedural inaccessibility of justice systems also remain a major barrier for women and girls with disabilities (Global Campus Africa, 2020). In Zambia, for example, most court buildings are not wheelchair accessible, and there is a lack of formal procedures for providing accommodations like sign language interpretation (United Nations, 2016). In Malawi, a deaf woman who reported rape saw her case collapse in court because she couldn't afford a sign language interpreter (Disabled Women in Africa and Women Enabled International, 2021)

This is compounded by gender and disability stereotypes, which often perpetuate stigma and discourage reporting. Women with disabilities are often viewed as unreliable witnesses, incapable of decision-making, or unworthy of protection. In Samoa, 60% of women with disabilities who experienced violence chose not to report it, citing fear, shame, and negative attitudes from service providers (Pacific Disability Forum, UN Women and NOLA, 2020).

Therefore, the agreed conclusions should call on States Parties to remove guardianship regimes, provide free and accessible legal aid, ensure reasonable accommodations in judicial processes, and establish awareness-raising and training for justice actors to dismantle harmful stereotypes.

Emerging good practices on accessing justice:

Globally, there are some emerging good practices that show progress is possible. For example, Uganda has developed Draft Judicature Rules to make proceedings more inclusive, and the Uganda Human Rights Commission has made both its offices and its outreach accessible to women with disabilities (ADD International, 2022). India's Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2013 introduced survivor-centred reforms such as safe spaces for testimony, video statements, and access to interpreters (Women Enabled International and UN Women, 2022). Indonesia's National Commission on Women has proactively monitored institutions, issuing recommendations to address abuses against women with psychosocial disabilities (Women Enabled International and UN Women, 2022). These examples demonstrate that inclusive reforms are not only feasible but effective.

The Commission on the Status of Women 70 should encourage governments to scale up such initiatives, share lessons across regions, and commit to monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that track the impact of reforms on women and girls with disabilities. The agreed conclusions should be developed with, and prioritise, women and girls with disabilities and recommend that States Parties to resource local organisations of women with disabilities, ensuring their expertise and lived experiences inform justice reform processes.

Women's full and effective participation and decision making in public life:

Women and girls with disabilities remain systematically excluded from societal decision making processes. For example, a report by the World Bank in 2021 across 190 countries found that women with disabilities are excluded from fully participating in social,

family, and work life. Structural, societal, and institutional barriers limit their agency (or capacity to act) and their ability to engage equally in decision making at all levels.

Enabling women with disabilities to engage fully in political and local development processes is essential. Participation not only advances the rights of women with disabilities but also strengthens broader development outcomes, as they bring unique perspectives and insights to public discourse. Political participation is particularly critical given its role in influencing national governance, policymaking, and the fulfilment of Sustainable Development Goals. Article 3 (General Principles) and Article 29 (Participation in Political and Public Life) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also affirm the right of persons with disabilities to participate fully and equally in political and public life and call on States Parties to actively foster inclusive environments.

Key barriers to participation and decision making:

Women and girls with disabilities frequently encounter discouraging attitudes from families, communities, and political actors, alongside inaccessible physical and communicative environments, all of which undermine self-esteem and limit political engagement (Sightsavers, 2022). Sightsavers' research in Senegal found that persons with disabilities were 2.9 times less likely to have ever voted due to administrative barriers, such as lacking identification documents, while women with disabilities were around half as likely to engage in political debate compared to women without disabilities (Sightsavers, 2022). In Cameroon, women with disabilities were less likely than men with disabilities to vote, participate in political parties, or engage in local committees, with women with intellectual disabilities particularly excluded from standing for office (Sightsavers, 2022).

To address these challenges, it is essential that persons with disabilities are meaningfully included in the Commission on the Status of Women 70 review theme. States Parties should ensure voting procedures, facilities, and materials are accessible, comprehensible, and easy to use. Additionally, States Parties should guarantee that women with disabilities can vote independently and in secret, stand for elections, hold office, and perform all public functions, including through the provision of assistive and digital technologies where appropriate. Assistance in voting should be available on request from a person of the voter's choice, protecting the free expression of electoral will.

Commission on the Status of Women Revitalisation Resolution:

The resolution on the revitalisation of the Commission on the Status of Women presented an opportunity to strengthen meaningful participation of women in all their diversity. However, despite advocacy by civil society, the resolution made no reference to accessibility, inclusion, or to marginalised groups, including women and girls with disabilities. This omission is deeply concerning and risks perpetuating their exclusion from decision-making structures.

In line with Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Article 29 and commitments in the Pact for the Future, the Commission on the Status of Women must guarantee an accessible and enabling environment, both in person and online, throughout its processes. We recommend that Commission on the Status of Women embed accessibility standards in all consultations and events, and that two civil society seats on the Commission on the Status of Women's Bureau be reserved for women with disabilities. UN Women should also support mentoring, capacity building and leadership pathways to elevate women with

disabilities in decision making. Finally, organisations of women with disabilities must be resourced and meaningfully involved in the Commission's preparations and delivery.

UN80:

As part of the UN80 reforms, the proposals to establish a Centre of Excellence on Women, Peace and Security and to merge UNFPA and UN Women carry significant implications for women's full and effective participation and decision making. Any restructuring must ensure that the rights, voices and leadership of women and girls with disabilities, and other marginalised groups, are safeguarded and advanced.

Disability inclusion is rarely visible in peace and security negotiations or in gender equality programmes. The proposed Centre must therefore embed disability expertise, ensure accessible consultation processes, and guarantee representation and leadership of women and girls with disabilities in peacebuilding, conflict prevention and decision making.

Similarly, in any merger of UNFPA and UN Women, mandates, expertise and experience on gender equality and disability inclusion must be preserved across normative, operational and coordination functions. Civil society, including organisations of women with disabilities, must be central to these consultations and assessments. These reforms must be transparent, inclusive and adequately resourced to protect hard won gains on gender equality while expanding participation and leadership for all women and girls, especially those with disabilities.