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When War Forgets Women and Girls with Disabilities: Recommendations for the U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security

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The World Health Organization and the World Bank estimate that 15 percent of the world's population lives with some form of disability. Worldwide, prevalence of disability is higher in women than men in both developed and developing countries—19.2 percent for women¹ These numbers are rising due to population aging, the spread of chronic diseases, and war and conflict. Disability is defined under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities,” such as taking care of oneself, seeing, hearing, communicating, learning, or standing, among others.² While women with disabilities are nominally recognized in U.N. resolutions on maintaining peace and security in conflict and post-conflict areas, a great deal more must be done to include them as meaningful participants in peacebuilding and conflict resolution processes and to provide them assistance in emergency situations.

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has highlighted the importance of including women in peace and security discussions, stating that “women often expand the scope of peace agreements [to] include concerns that peace processes dominated by men are more likely to leave unaddressed, including accountability for past abuses, psycho-social support for victims of violence, restoration of health and educational systems, reintegration of displaced persons and refugees, and the protection of victims of trafficking.”³ Even where women are included in peacebuilding efforts and conflict-related planning and prevention, women with disabilities may

still be excluded, based on stereotypes based on both their disability and gender. People may assume that women with disabilities cannot make their own decisions or are incapable of contributing to discussions on peacebuilding and conflict resolution.⁴ Furthermore, due to stereotypes and discrimination based on gender, women with disabilities are frequently marginalized in discussions related to disability rights, and consequently the issues they face are marginalized as well. Due to multiple layers of discrimination, these women have frequently been denied the opportunity to join or form organizations that fully represent their needs.⁵

To be fully inclusive, peace and security resolutions and plans aimed at including women must also expressly include women and girls with disabilities. The most effective discussions will include their unique perspectives and recognize that they are not just a group in need of special protection but one that can meaningfully contribute to peacebuilding and conflict resolution.

The U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, as updated in 2016, aims to ensure that women and girls have access to humanitarian assistance and can contribute to peacebuilding and conflict resolution.⁶ To ensure that women and girls with disabilities are also included, the United States must take positive steps to ensure their participation in the implementation of NAP 2016 and accompanying programs. Further, the United States must continually revise and enhance the plan to adapt to the evolving understanding of the needs of these women and girls.

I. Issues Affecting Women with Disabilities in Conflict Areas

Women with disabilities are often overlooked in conflict situations, even though they make up a significant portion of the population and are at greater risk for human rights violations during wartime when compared with men with disabilities or women without disabilities. Furthermore, per a 2007 report, “girls and women are more likely to become disabled because of violence, armed conflicts, aging and gender-biased cultural practices.”⁷

Interstate and civil wars, on average, affect women more adversely than men.⁸ Because conflict situations often exacerbate health care, educational access and financial problems facing women and girls with disabilities, they inordinately suffer both during and after conflict.⁹ In the case of refugees with disabilities, they are particularly affected by the limited access to health care, largely as the result of the exorbitant costs of such care as well as the uninformed and often negative attitudes of health care providers toward people with disabilities.¹⁰ Women and girls with disabilities may also be forced to leave their wheelchairs, medications, assistive aids, and prosthetics behind in an attempt to seek safety.¹¹ Further, already limited disability-accessible transportation or infrastructure often breaks down in times of conflict, leaving some women with physical disabilities without access to resources.¹²

During conflict, all women are at an increased risk of gender-based and sexual violence, which is spurred on by the breakdown of justice and protection mechanisms that otherwise help stem this violence.¹³ Although all women suffer during periods of conflict, women with disabilities are generally less able to flee conflict zones, less able to defend themselves, and have less access to methods of reporting and justice. Thus, they are “more vulnerable to physical, psychological, sexual, or financial violence, and they are vulnerable to neglect, entrapment, and degradation.”¹⁴

Even if disabled women are able to flee violent conflict zones, refugee camps often lack the infrastructure to assist women with disabilities and seldom provide accommodations in toilets, shelters, or health care facilities.¹⁵ Because infrastructure and other relief services are often inaccessible, women with disabilities rely on others to get the support they need, a situation that can also make them more vulnerable to gender-based violence and abuse.¹⁶ Furthermore, mothers of children with disabilities sometimes face social stigma and increased caregiving responsibilities that can make it harder to flee conflict and to obtain humanitarian relief services.¹⁷ As the World Health Organization emphasized in its 2011 World Report on Disability, “The needs of families and caregivers must also be taken into account, both among the displaced population and in the host communities.” To

reduce these risks, states must facilitate advocacy by women with disabilities, drawing on their experiences of living and working in conflict areas.

II. UN Security Council Resolutions on Women, Peace, and Security

The U.S. government has long demonstrated bipartisan support for including women in conflict resolution programs and post-conflict peacebuilding. Beginning in 2000, a framework for including women and girls with disabilities in the provision of humanitarian assistance, peacebuilding efforts, and conflict resolution was codified in a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions (UNSCRs) on women, peace, and security, which the United States incorporated in a National Action Plan. Some of the resolutions adopted since 2000 have explicitly aimed at protecting women with disabilities during periods of conflict and including them in post-conflict rehabilitation programs. UNSCR 1894 (2009) was the first resolution concerning women, peace, and security to explicitly mention women with disabilities.¹⁸ Its primary goal was to encourage states to “support country efforts in clearing landmines . . . and to provide assistance for the care, rehabilitation, and economic and social reintegration of victims, including persons with disabilities.”¹⁹ The resolution also stressed that conflict has a particularly significant impact on “women and children, including as refugees and internally displaced persons” as well as on those “who may have specific vulnerabilities, including persons with disabilities.”

A second resolution to explicitly mention women with disabilities, UNSCR 1960 (2010), reaffirmed a commitment to UNSCR 1325.²⁰ This resolution called on states to increase access to health care, psychosocial support, legal assistance, and socioeconomic reintegration services for victims of sexual violence, while considering the specific needs of persons with disabilities. The most recent resolution to include women and girls with disabilities—UNSCR 2106, adopted in 2013—focused on the prevention of sexual violence during armed conflicts and called for nondiscriminatory and comprehensive health services for survivors of sexual violence, “including sexual and reproductive health, psychosocial, legal, and livelihood support and other multi-sectoral services for survivors of sexual violence, considering the specific needs of persons with disabilities.”²¹

III. The U.S. National Action Plan and Its Implementation

The U.S. National Action Plan (instituted in 2011 and revised in 2016) includes some references to women and girls with disabilities and the particular risks they face in conflict situations.²² NAP 2016 mandates that the government—in particular, the U.S. State Department, USAID, and the U.S.

Mission to the United Nations—“[s]upport the participation and leadership roles of women from all backgrounds, including ... women with disabilities ... in peace negotiations and mediation, donor conferences, security sector reform, countering violent extremism efforts, transitional justice and accountability processes, and other related decision making forums...”²³ NAP 2016 also asks the Department of State and USAID to promote equitable access to “medical services, psychosocial support services, and legal services, as well as opportunities for livelihood training, education, and rest and recreation ... for women and girls with disabilities.” Furthermore, NAP 2016 calls for the provision of services to victims of “conflict, torture, and sexual violence, [including] persons with disabilities ... through direct services, including psycho-social support, trauma-informed mental health services and sexual and reproductive healthcare.” The plan names the State Department, USAID, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as responsible for implementing this action.

Implementation efforts to date have been insufficient and under resourced. USAID’s 2012 implementation plan highlighted its efforts to support amendments to criminal laws, strengthen the justice system, improve the capacity of women’s rights institutions, and adopt measures to protect transgender persons from violence based on gender identity, and carry out awareness and sensitization programs for men, boys, and traditional leaders in developing countries.²⁴ It failed to mention women with disabilities or include any actions focusing on them.

The U.S. can remedy this by fully implementing the revised US NAP 2016. It can begin by examining good practices and adopting lessons learned. Indeed, there are many examples of good practices for ensuring that women and girls with disabilities are included in many aspects of conflict-related planning, humanitarian assistance, and peacebuilding efforts.

- Fostering Collaboration.** Encouraging collaboration between humanitarian agencies and organizations of women with disabilities can elevate the voice of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution. For instance, a coalition of nongovernmental organizations in Pakistan—including a national civil society organization, a humanitarian service provision group, and a “women with disabilities” organization—came together to host a forum on women with disabilities in Baluchistan, the poorest state in Pakistan and one frequently beset by crises. This forum brought together different perspectives on crises and supported organizations working on crises in Baluchistan to expand their networks for future collaborations.²⁵ Similar partnerships in Uganda and throughout Africa have also had a positive effect on the ability of humanitarian organizations to include women with disabilities in their planning and implementation efforts and on organizations of women with disabilities, which are able to develop better expertise in humanitarian response efforts and become better self-advocates in those arenas.²⁶
- Supporting Leadership.** Additionally, ensuring that women with disabilities serve in leadership roles within organizations and planning efforts can help raise the profile of issues affecting women with disabilities in conflict situations and peacebuilding efforts. For instance, in response to a survey conducted by the Women’s Refugee Commission, a UN agency representative in the Central African Republic highlighted how having an implementing partner agency focused on women with disabilities and also led by a woman with disabilities helped ensure that women and girls with disabilities were included in agency efforts and recognized in the wider community.²⁷ Furthermore, because a woman with a disability representing UNICEF in its Haiti earthquake response efforts had a seat at the table at important stakeholder meetings throughout planning and implementation, she was able to break down stereotypes, change the attitudes of officials working on earthquake response, and ensure that organizations of persons with disabilities were included in the response.²⁸
- Providing Targeted Funding.** Supporting the work of organizations of women with disabilities—including through specific funding sources for these organizations—also helps raise the profile of issues affecting women and girls with disabilities in conflict situations and ensures their participation in humanitarian assistance and peacebuilding efforts. For instance, adequate funding enabled an organization of women with disabilities in Malawi to raise awareness of local and international authorities during site visits to refugee camps and to highlight issues facing women with disabilities—including the necessity of selling sex in order to obtain access to humanitarian relief.²⁹ An organization of women with disabilities in the Democratic Republic of Congo publicized statistics and stories through the internet that it had gathered from women and girls with disabilities during the country’s conflict. It was thus able to tap into a new audience and connect women with disabilities to other humanitarian stakeholders.³⁰
- Ensuring Accountability.** Helping to ensure the access of women and girls with disabilities to justice during conflict situations can help raise their voices and highlight gaps in service provision and inclusion. For instance, a program by Equality Now in Uganda, #JusticeForGirls, is helping to tackle an epidemic of sexual violence in the country, including in conflict areas, that has particularly affected women and girls with disabilities. The group is raising the national and international profile of instances of sexual violence, calling for changes to legal procedures and increased protections, and working through local channels to achieve justice.³¹

IV. Conclusions and Recommendations

The revised U.S. National Action Plan contains valuable references to women and girls with disabilities, acknowledging their vulnerabilities in conflict. In implementing the plan, however, the U.S. can do more. Learning from the good practices described above, the U.S. should consider taking the following actions as part of its efforts to implement NAP 2016:

- **Establish an internal disability rights liaison/expert** involved in the design, planning, and implementation of programs associated with NAP 2016 who can provide effective guidance with respect to women and girls with disabilities.
- **Ensure the participation of women and girls with disabilities** in peacebuilding and conflict resolution by:
 - Creating a fund specifically for supporting organizations of women and girls with disabilities in conflict situations;
 - Establishing spaces for on-the-ground collaboration between humanitarian assistance organizations and organizations of women and girls with disabilities; and
 - Ensuring that spaces where important peacebuilding and conflict resolution efforts take place are physically and informationally accessible to persons with disabilities.
- **Promote accessible accountability mechanisms** to ensure access to justice for women and girls with disabilities who experience rights violations, including gender-based violence, because of conflict. Institute trainings for justice system actors that specifically target stereotypes about women and girls with disabilities—including about their sexuality and capability of giving evidence—and train these individuals to provide reasonable accommodations when seeking justice.
- **Facilitate the involvement of local women and girls with disabilities** in the planning and design of humanitarian relief programs and peacebuilding processes. Emphasize that humanitarian response services and social supports should be accessible to all women and girls, including women and girls with disabilities, and outline efforts to ensure disability accessibility, including by ensuring that buildings and sites are physically accessible, that information is easy to read and provided in multiple formats, including Braille, and that sign language interpretation is available.

Taking these steps will significantly improve the situation of women and girls with disabilities in conflict situations and humanitarian emergencies and ensure their contributions to their communities are valued.

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