



Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for
CHILDREN AND ARMED CONFLICT

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**17th session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the
Rights of Persons with Disabilities**
Better protecting children with disabilities affected by armed conflict

12 June 2024

UNHQ, Conference Room 4, New York

Distinguished Chairs,

Excellencies,

Dear colleagues,

I am grateful for the opportunity to speak at this roundtable dedicated to the crucial question of persons with disabilities in situations of risk and humanitarian emergencies, taking place in the context of the 17th session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The creation of my mandate by the General Assembly in 1996 was primarily a response to the appalling situation of conflict-affected children documented in Graça Machel's report on "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children". In 1999, the Security Council also placed the issue of Children and Armed Conflict on its agenda as an issue affecting international peace and security. The Council equipped the mandate with several tools for its implementation and identified six grave violations against children in armed conflict that it considered as particularly egregious: recruitment and use, killing and maiming, rape and other forms of sexual violence, abduction, attacks against schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access to children. Last year, the United Nations verified nearly 33,000 of those grave violations committed against children. Each of these

instances serves as a stark reminder that, despite our collective efforts, there is a pressing need for further action.

Dear colleagues,

While UNICEF estimates that nearly 240 million children – or one in 10 children worldwide – have disabilities, with indications that a significantly higher number of children with disabilities live in conflict situations, I would however be unable to tell you how many of them count among the victims of these grave violations and how they were impacted by them. That is because the impact of armed conflict on children with disabilities has been vastly underreported and understudied, including within my mandate. To fill this gap, my Office published, in December last year, a study which investigates the unique repercussions of armed conflict on children with disabilities and formulates recommendations to promote a human rights-based approach to disability inclusion in the protection of children with disabilities in armed conflict.

The first conclusion of our study has come as no surprise: the lack of data on children with disabilities in armed conflict undermines efforts to gain a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the impact of war on these children

and contributes to perpetuating their invisibility in the development of prevention strategies, protection measures and reintegration services.

Despite this gap, the review of available literature and interviews conducted with relevant stakeholders demonstrate the disproportionate impact that armed conflicts bear on children with disabilities.

Children with disabilities are at higher risk of being recruited and used by armed forces and groups, killed, or maimed in hostilities, fall victim to sexual violence and be abducted in armed conflict. Pre-existing barriers to their full participation in daily life, such as access to schools, health, and other services, are exacerbated with the destruction of infrastructure in conflict zones and the shrinking of safe spaces, which often correlate with an increased risk of grave violations. Children with disabilities may also experience difficulties fleeing attacks. The inadequacy of early warning systems and evacuation procedures often complicates their escape. They may be left behind by parents or caregivers, especially when routes are inaccessible or when they are institutionalized. In conflict-affected areas, children with disabilities may not have access to assistive devices, such as wheelchairs or hearing aids, or such devices might be inadequate for their age and size, thus

exposing them to a higher risk of being recruited and used, killed, or maimed, or abducted.

Stigma, exclusion, a lack of protective social networks, a heightened risk of being unaccompanied, and sometimes reliance on others for support contribute to a higher vulnerability to sexual violence for children with disabilities. When it comes to reporting to authorities, children with disabilities and their families are also less likely to do so for fear of not being believed, owing to the wrongful perception that children with disabilities are desexualized and therefore not the target of sexual violence.

While children with disabilities are not necessarily more at risk of experiencing attacks on schools and hospitals and denial of humanitarian access due to the collective nature of these grave violations, their impact on them may, however, be more severe.

Because they often require specific support and services, which are not readily available, children with disabilities are more likely to be left out of school and, when they do go to school, attacks may compel them to discontinue their education. Out-of-school children are at a higher risk of violence and exploitation.

Attacks on hospitals have a particularly detrimental effect on children with disabilities as they may require regular access to specific medical care, counselling, rehabilitation, or assistive technology. Reversibly, untreated injuries or illnesses may lead to long-term or secondary impairments.

Likewise, the denial of humanitarian access prevents children with disabilities from accessing food, water and sanitation, healthcare, assistive devices, mental health, and psychological support. This, in turn, may lead to the worsening of health conditions which may lead to new or exacerbate existing long-term impairments.

Dear colleagues,

The dismal picture that I have just painted for you *today* is the daily reality of many conflict-affected children with disabilities *every day*, and it calls for urgent and resolute action.

Our research points to several avenues to guide this action:

First, the strengthening of data collection on children with disabilities, including in the framework of the Security Council-mandated monitoring and reporting mechanism on children and armed conflict, would build an evidence base to inform programming and policymaking. This includes the disaggregation of data by disability – in addition to other diversity factors such as gender and age.

Second, consultations with persons with disabilities, including children, and the organizations that represent them at all levels would support the mainstreaming of disability inclusion into child protection policies and ensure that the views of children with disabilities are reflected in processes that concern them, including in mediation and peacebuilding efforts. They are indeed best placed to express their own requirements and experiences, which are necessary for the development of legislations, policies, and programmes, adequate to protect their rights and wellbeing.

Finally, awareness raising initiatives and the provision of training and other capacity building efforts on disability inclusion including but not limited to military personnel, humanitarian actors, and child protection staff, would contribute to enhancing the protection of children with disabilities in armed conflict.

Dear colleagues,

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Convention on the Rights of the Child echo each other in calling for bridges to be built and strengthened between disability inclusion and child protection. I stand before you today with that objective in mind and the hope that the dialogue we have established will continue beyond the end of this roundtable. Our task is clear: we must ensure that all persons with disabilities, including children, receive the adequate protection they deserve, so that no one is left behind.

I thank you and stand ready to answer any question you might have.