

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

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**REMARKS TO THE 16<sup>TH</sup> SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE OF STATES PARTIES  
TO THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

**New York, 13 June 2023, 10:00 a.m.**

Excellencies,  
Distinguished delegates,

I am pleased to join you as we open the 16<sup>th</sup> session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

We are together today to look back and take stock – and look ahead and take action.

The adoption of the Convention 17 years ago marked a landmark moment in our shared journey towards a more just and inclusive future for all.

Since then, the Convention has spurred remarkable progress:

186 countries have ratified it.

75 per cent of State Parties have passed laws to guarantee the integration of students with disabilities in mainstream schools – and the percentage of countries with school materials inclusive of students with disabilities has tripled.

Nearly 80 per cent of State Parties now prohibit discrimination in hiring against persons with disabilities.

And over 90 per cent have adopted national disability laws.

Today, however, the progress we achieved is at risk of reversing.

We are confronting a cascade of crises – from the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to the worsening climate emergency, to proliferating conflicts, soaring humanitarian needs, and a global cost-of-living crisis.

There are more than 1 billion persons with disabilities worldwide. 80 per cent are of working age; 80 per cent live in developing countries.

Yet when crisis grips communities, persons with disabilities are often hit first and worst.

In every emergency – from natural disasters to pandemics to armed conflicts – persons with disabilities lose their lives at vastly higher rates.

Workers with disabilities – who were already experiencing exclusion and marginalization – are often the first to lose their jobs and the last to be re-hired.

Women and girls with disabilities are more likely to suffer violence and abuse, face discrimination, and remain trapped in poverty.

We must do better.

Everyone everywhere has the right to live lives of dignity and opportunity, in societies that are peaceful, prosperous, and just.

This is our shared ambition – and it is our collective interest.

Because a world in which persons with disabilities can realize their full potential is a world that is more equal, more inclusive, more vibrant, fairer and better for all.

And it begins by ensuring the principles enshrined in the Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are made real in people's lives everywhere.

Excellencies,

This conference highlights three areas where we must make progress now.

First, we must improve digital accessibility for persons with disabilities.

Innovation and technology can be powerful tools for inclusion.

They can enhance access to information, education, and lifelong learning. And they can open new avenues for persons with disabilities to fully participate in every aspect of life – social, economic, cultural, and political.

But that remains theoretical unless technology is accessible.

Which is why we must invest in closing the connectivity gap. Leaving no one behind means leaving no one offline.

Second, we must ensure equal access to sexual and reproductive health services for persons with disabilities.

This issue deserves far greater attention because it has been so deeply neglected.

It is not only a matter of justice and rights, including fundamental reproductive rights – for women with disabilities, access to sexual and reproductive health services can be the difference between life and death.

Third, we must do more to ensure the full inclusion and active participation of persons with disabilities in all their diversity – including children and older persons with disabilities, indigenous persons with disabilities, and persons with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.

Specifically, that means shifting mindsets to ensure persons with disabilities are fully included in decision-making processes on *all* issues that affect them.

It means working together from start to finish – with much closer consultation with persons with disabilities, particularly from underrepresented groups, and their representative organizations.

And it means realizing the powerful call of the disability movement: ‘Nothing about us, without us.’

Excellencies,

At the United Nations, we are committed to take ownership and show leadership.

Our United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy is now in its fourth year of implementation.

As of today, UN entities and country teams have met 30 per cent of the benchmarks set out in the strategy.

Let me be clear: while this is progress – it is neither fast nor broad enough.

We must pick up the pace.

My commitment is ironclad: guided by persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, we will not stop until disability inclusion and accessibility are fully built into every aspect of our work – across every policy, programme, and operation; from headquarters to the field.

Dear friends,

Together, let us keep our promise to leave no one behind.

And let us at long last realize a world in which every person can live lives equal in dignity and rich in opportunity.

Thank you.