

UNITED NATIONS



NATIONS UNIES

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL

REMARKS TO THE 12TH SESSION OF THE CONFERENCE OF STATES PARTIES TO
THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

11 June 2019, New York

Excellencies,
Distinguished Delegates,
Dear Friends,

Just a few weeks ago, a remarkable young woman came to the United Nations to share her story with the Security Council.

Her name was Nujeen Mustafa, a 20-year old refugee from Aleppo, Syria.

Nujeen happens to have cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair.

She movingly described her life as a young woman with a disability in the midst of war – the difficulties, the challenges and her constant fear that her disability might have caused her family to be seconds too late from fleeing a bombing.

Nujeen carried a clear message. As she put it:

“ [the phrase] ‘No one left behind’ should not just be words that you say. You can and should do more to ensure that people with disabilities are included in all aspects of your work. We can’t wait any longer.”

This was reflected in my most recent report on Protection of Civilians which explicitly highlights the situation of persons with disabilities – a first such reference in more than a decade.

Nujeen’s words also echo in my mind today as we come together for this 12th session of the Conference of States Parties to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

I want to express my deepest gratitude for all you do to advance the rights of persons with disabilities across our agenda and around the world.

Your work is vital – not just for persons with disabilities, but, indeed, for all people.

Disability inclusion is a fundamental human right.

When we fight to secure those rights, we move our world closer to upholding the core values and principles of the United Nations Charter.

Disability inclusion is central to the promise of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

When we remove policies or biases or obstacles to opportunity for persons with disabilities, the whole world benefits.

Indeed, the International Labour Organization found that excluding people with disabilities from the world of work can rob countries of as much as 7 per cent of their Gross Domestic Product.

Realizing the rights of persons with disabilities is a matter of justice as well as a common-sense investment in our common future.

You know this.

The distinguished President of this Conference – Ambassador Luis Gallegos of Ecuador, who led the drafting of the Convention – knows this.

The 177 State Parties that have ratified the Convention – nine out of ten members of the United Nations – know this.

But we also know something else.

We have a long way to go in changing mindsets, laws and policies to ensure the rights, opportunity and dignity for persons with disabilities around the world.

So we are here, together, to take action to make the goals and the objectives of the Convention a reality on the ground.

We are here to promote stronger collaboration among Member States, the UN system, civil society organizations -- in particular, organizations of persons with disabilities – as well as the private sector and academic institutions.

And we are here -- as the Convention eloquently states -- “to transform society and development to be inclusive, accessible and sustainable for all”.

Distinguished Delegates, Dear Friends,

This is a crucial effort and much work remains.

Last December, I issued the first-ever UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development.

It highlights core challenges: disproportionate levels of poverty, lack of access to education, health services, employment and the under-representation of persons with disabilities in decision-making and political participation.

We must do much more to address discrimination and exclusion -- particularly against girls and women with disabilities.

We must do much more to ensure full accessibility to schools, health care and services, the workplace, leisure and recreational activities, sports, and all areas of life.

We must also do much more on transportation, infrastructure and information and communications technology to make our cities, rural areas, and societies inclusive.

Our destination is clear: a world in which all persons -- including those with disabilities -- can enjoy equal opportunities, have a full say in decision-making processes and truly benefit from economic, social, political and cultural life.

I urge all actors -- particularly State Parties to the Convention and their international partners -- to be more ambitious in implementing their commitments to ensure the realization of the rights of all persons with disabilities.

Distinguished delegates, Dear friends,

In all these efforts, the United Nations must lead by example.

Early in my tenure, I commissioned a comprehensive review of our performance on disability inclusion.

I will be frank. It is not a pretty picture.

Yes, we have some examples of good practices -- but the review shed light on gaps -- big gaps -- across all our work from headquarters to the country level.

The report revealed a lack of understanding and systemic approaches to ensure we fulfil our responsibilities.

It showed unevenness in our approach -- in our use of existing tools and mechanisms -- in not only our strategies, but even awareness of core policies.

I believe in confronting these challenges head-on.

That is why today I am announcing the launch of the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy.

It is not a strategy of words – it is a strategy of action – action to raise the standards of the UN’s performance on disability inclusion across the board – and action to bring about the unified and transformative change we need.

I have insisted on an accountability framework to monitor progress and make sure we address the challenges and gaps – not only in headquarters but in the field.

We have established clear benchmarks and a focus on critical areas including leadership, strategic planning, accessibility, participation, programming, procurement and a call for more persons with disabilities working in the United Nations and better supported by the organization.

I want the United Nations to be an employer of choice for persons with disabilities.

I want our humanitarian, development and peace operations to fully recognize and advance the rights of persons with disabilities.

And I want the United Nations to be fully accessible for one and all.

It is very simple: We cannot be a platform for change when persons with disabilities cannot access that platform to speak.

I count on the strong support of Member States as we move this Strategy forward.

And I count especially on persons with disabilities and their organizations to ensure that the entire UN family makes good on the promise of this strategy.

Together, we can raise awareness and remove barriers.

Together, with persons with disabilities as agents of change, we can build an inclusive, accessible and sustainable world.

And together, we can create the conditions to realize the simple dream that young Nujeen Mustafa shared with the Security Council:

“My hope,” she said, “is that people with disabilities – particularly women and girls – one day live in a world that protects, respects and values us.”

Distinguished delegates,
Dear friends,

Every person should expect nothing less.

We must deliver.

Thank you.

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