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Across Boundaries: The Emergence of an International Movement of Women with Disabilities

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**International Leadership Forum
for Women with Disabilities
Bethesda, Maryland, USA
June 15-20, 1997**

STATEMENT - FINAL DRAFT

We the 614 women from 82 countries around the world at the International Leadership Forum for Women with Disabilities in Washington on June 15-20, 1997, are deeply encouraged by the emerging strength in the empowerment of women and girls with disabilities. We hereby want to send signals to all our sisters and brothers in the disability and women's rights movements. This important process is meant to include the possibility of growth of each and every individual woman and girl with disabilities worldwide. Consequently, we need partnerships with women and men in all walks of life. Our issues are among the top priority concerns of all human development.

We believe that several concrete actions and considerations must occur regarding United Nations conventions and policies. Of specific importance are:

- * the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
- * the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
- * the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities

and the promises within the Platforms for Action from the United Nations conferences and summit meetings. Especially we note that the positive effects of the 1995 Beijing Conference on Women are still vigorously ongoing. We want the Beijing Platform for Action to be fully realized. We also demand that our states ratify the conventions, removing any reservations and other barriers to implementation.

Women in solidarity must unite and call for the stopping of wars and civil conflicts. Women and girls especially suffer the illnesses of poverty in wars' aftermath. Decision makers in countries affected by wars and conflict must take full responsibility to rehabilitate girls and women.

We state the following:

HUMAN RIGHTS & VIOLENCE

We demand that the message of disabled women and girls be heard clearly in all debates and policies concerning genetic engineering, bioethics, prosthetic design and human engineering such as cochlear implants, abortion on grounds of disability, assisted suicide, euthanasia and all eugenic practices.

Such issues vitally concern disabled women and men, and have the potential to violate our fundamental and universal rights. We demand that all violations stop. Further, we demand that women with disabilities participate in all levels of debate and policy development regarding reproductive research policies and programs.

We urgently raise our concern to our governments about the the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) draft of a Universal Declaration on the Human Genome and Human Rights to be finalized in July this year. We question the wisdom of the draft text in respect to the human rights of disabled persons. We recommend that the governments discuss the draft text with the organizations of and for disabled persons in their countries.

We urge that international and national governmental and non-governmental organizations recognize the high rate of violence against disabled women and girls as a critical health and human rights issue in policy and legislation. Legal enforcement of assault and sexual abuse laws should be strengthened, including severe punishment of offenders and support for victims throughout the justice system.

We cannot accept that family members, paid and volunteer care givers, institutional staff, police, and even friends, are humiliating, assaulting, raping, exploiting, neglecting, forcibly isolating, withholding assistance, medical care or supports, abandoning, disposing of, putting out to beg, selling and even killing, women and girls with disabilities at alarming rates. Disabled children of battered mothers are particularly vulnerable to abuse. We urge that effective support be developed for victims and family members.

We request that the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against women address violence against women and girls with disabilities as a pressing issue, in full cooperation with women with disabilities and their organizations. We request

that disability organizations include the issue of violence among their priority concerns. We request the world's women's movement acknowledge the vicious insults visited upon women and girls with disabilities the world over, and take steps to improve solidarity among all women.

We demand immediate action to build access to information and services to escape, heal and survive abuse, all steps to preventing future cycles of violence.

We protest in solidarity with disabled women in all countries, where: 1) laws currently allow legal abortion only for the protection of the mother's health, 2) in the case of pressing economic circumstances, and 3) in cases where the fetus is disabled. We demand that decision makers acknowledge the right of disabled women to choose for themselves. We also refer to the text in the Beijing Platform for Action.

EDUCATION

Poverty and disability among women and girls are closely linked. We demand effective access to education and employment as the primary tools for fighting poverty. We urge that education be used as the primary key for girls and women to be able to lead integrated and participatory lives in their communities.

We demand that decision makers include the education and skills development of girls and women with disabilities as an integral part of the educational system. Language and communication skills development are especially important in those countries where the use of several languages is practiced.

Local culture should be allowed to provide opportunities for girls and women to be recognized as full participants in meaningful social and economic roles.

We urge that both parents and teachers of girl children with disabilities receive further training in order that the quality of overall education be raised. We also urge that teacher training curricula include a disability component.

We demand that education provide effective opportunities for girls and women with disabilities to become empowered. The need has never been higher for organized women's groups to provide effective role models so that girls and women can take up leadership roles, increasing their self reliance.

We urge the development of mentoring programs for girls and young women with disabilities and demand the inclusion of positive images of women and

girls with disabilities in the media.

EMPLOYMENT

We demand that existing economic inequalities between women and men be equalized, and that the economic contribution to the society by women with disabilities be recognized. Women with disabilities should be afforded full support to pursue their ambitions and skills development regarding the use of their capabilities to support themselves and their families.

We urge that women with disabilities be encouraged to establish micro enterprises, for example, in the development of marketing devices, sales representatives, catalogues, etc, to bring the goods/products of other disabled women to market. Banks should recognize the multiple value of giving loans to women's business enterprises. Governments must recognize the efforts of women engaged in micro enterprise development with tax credits and other appropriate benefits. We demand that world commercial communication groups present in their programming positive examples of women with disabilities in their businesses.

HEALTH CARE

Because of the discrimination and ignorance of medical professionals and extreme poverty, women with disabilities do not have the same access and opportunities for health care as their able-bodied counterparts. The power of health care professionals, particularly in the mental health and developmental disabilities arenas will not be given up easily. Disabled women are dying prematurely as a result of not getting the care we need. Disabled women do not receive adequate personal assistance, assistive technology and supports because of lack of funds.

Therefore we demand that:

1. Women take power and control over their own health care, including having the choice of what medical tests and treatments they wish to have. Parents of disabled girls receive full information on the outcomes of medical procedures so they can give informed consent.
2. National Health policies and bureaucracies be accountable for improving the access, availability and affordability of high quality, culturally appropriate health care for disabled women and girls.
3. Schools for health professionals offer affirmative action to students with disabilities and include adequate training on the needs of women and girls of disabilities, including community-based rehabilitation and reproductive education.

4. Adaptive equipment, appropriate to local conditions, be developed
Studies be launched to evaluate the outcomes of medical procedures from the point of view of people with disabilities. Multidisciplinary health and medical care and research be done to provide a more holistic picture of gender specific impairments and diseases.
5. Disabled women be trained to be the leaders in research on disabled women's health care needs.
6. In war torn areas quality field-based health services be provided for disabled women and girls.
7. All countries insure that rehabilitation services are available to disabled girls and women without sexual bias.

SEXUALITY

Disabled women internalize the mythology of asexuality. Disabled women have internalized the notion that our bodies are not worthy to be loved. Many woman and girls are extremely lonely and touch deprived. We crave a disability sexual culture focused on our entitlement to pleasure and love, understanding the advantages of possessing bodies and functions different when compared to women's majority culture.

We urge that:

1. Women have a safe and private place to discuss with each other their sexual lives, desires, hopes and questions.
2. Disabled women and girls receive accurate information about sexuality, including training to publicize the good word that all disabled women are sexual and sexy and can give and receive love making in a variety of ways.
3. Disabled women be educated to work in women's health services, including training as sex educators and leaders in research on disabled women's sexuality.

COMMUNICATION & TECHNOLOGY & ACCESSIBILITY

We demand an end to the systematic denial of disabled women to appropriate information and mainstream lines of communication.

We demand that there be guidelines: 1) to ensure that disabled children and adults of both sexes are integrated into mass media programmings, including advertising; 2) these portrayals must be positive, sensitive and life enhancing. This includes public education campaigns designed to prevent disability, such as immunization.

We demand that all technical methods of communication are designed for universal use by disabled and non-disabled persons.

We urge that the communications and information needs of disabled women who are poor and have not received an education are given a higher priority.

UN CONVENTIONS

We further believe that the United Nations and our countries should intensify efforts to implement all existing conventions concerning disabled women and girls. Such actions should be effectively overseen by the United Nations bodies responsible for monitoring of these instruments, together with the non-governmental (NGOs) organizations concerned. Special cooperation should be established between the units responsible for disability, gender, human rights and NGO issues. Such actions should be applied at the local, national, regional and international levels.

We urge the United Nations and other relevant bodies to take immediate action regarding:

- * informing about the existing conventions using easy-to-read language, accessible formats and local languages
- * initiate the building of new knowledge with respect to women and girls with disabilities using surveys, research and case studies
- * encourage the development of dialogue with decision-makers at all levels
- * facilitate the co-sponsorship with NGOs of seminars dedicated to training of women and girls with disabilities about methods to implement policy and to take up decision making positions.

AFFIRMATION

**We hereby reaffirm the establishment of a global
sister network among women and girls with disabilities.**

**We affirm our membership in W I L D
Women's International Linkage on Disability.**

Bethesda, Maryland, USA, June 20, 1997