# Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind (Sightsavers) oral intervention to the UN CEDAW Committee’s half day of General Discussion on gender-related dimensions of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change – 29th February 2016, 63rd session

Thank you for the opportunity to address this important discussion. Sightsavers (known as Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind) works to prevent avoidable blindness and promote the rights of people with disabilities. Sightsavers is also an active member of the International Disability and Development Consortium, a network of member organisations which promote inclusive development, and works closely with the International Disability Alliance.

We welcome the focus of this discussion, and would like to stress the importance of addressing the rights of women and girls with disabilities during disasters, and in addressing risks associated with climate change.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities outlines how people with disabilities can face barriers to participation in all aspects of life[[1]](#endnote-1). Poverty and disability are inextricably linked due to this multitude of barriers[[2]](#endnote-2). This relationship is relevant to the social construction of vulnerability to disasters: the poorest and most excluded people in a community are often the most vulnerable to the impacts of environmental hazards which expose existing inequalities. Environmental hazards quickly become disasters for the poorest and most excluded groups[[3]](#endnote-3).

There is, however, a lack of evidence on the causes of vulnerability to disasters for people with disabilities[[4]](#endnote-4), and how to ensure practice is genuinely inclusive[[5]](#endnote-5).

The need to prioritise the rights of girls and women with disabilities is demonstrated in findings from research in a Sightsavers programme in Bangladesh[[6]](#endnote-6).

The research identified three factors that increase risk for women and girls with disabilities:

Firstly, the context faced by women makes them more vulnerable to disasters than men. Attitudes around gender represent barriers to accessing rights, education and employment. Expected daily responsibilities – such as collecting food and supplies during waterlogging – increase the chance of contracting diseases and being exposed to risk.

Secondly, women experience reduced social mobility in comparison to men. During disasters men are able to move freely. However, conservative beliefs mean women cannot move within the community in the same way. A male respondent explained that he can evacuate and stay at a neighbour’s house in emergencies, whilst it is not acceptable for women to do so. Men with disabilities can also be physically carried by anyone in an evacuation. This was not considered possible for women with disabilities.

Thirdly, the lack of separate spaces for women at shelters increases risk and influences decisions to evacuate. This is due to security concerns and sexual violence, which is common at shelters. Fears of sexual abuse in women’s homes were also raised as men from neighbouring areas take shelter.

The research identified other factors that increase risk for all people with disabilities including: poverty and barriers accessing employment; reduced mobility due to widespread inaccessibility; and inaccessible warning systems, shelters and relief distribution.

However, the research also found that through advocating for their rights people with disabilities have increased their representation on the bodies responsible for disaster preparedness at the local level.

These findings demonstrate the importance of engaging people with disabilities and decision-making bodies at local, national and international levels.

We call on the Committee to prioritise the rights of women and girls with disabilities in your General Recommendation, and consider how inclusive, integrated approaches can:

* Target and engage people with disabilities – giving particular focus to the inclusion of girls and women with disabilities – and agree minimum standards for inclusive programmes;
* Strengthen national information systems, data collection and use gender sensitive and disability inclusive participatory assessments to identify risks, and;
* Strengthen the capacity and resources of people with disabilities and representative organisations and actively engage them in all stages of a disability-inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to the development challenges posed by poverty, vulnerability to disasters and climate change[[7]](#endnote-7).
1. United Nations (2006) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. <http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Groce, N. Kett, M. Lang, R. & Trani, J-F. (2011) ‘Disability and Poverty: the need for a more nuanced understanding of implications for development policy and practice’, in Third World Quarterly. Vol.32 No.8 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Hewitt, K. (1983) ‘Interpretations of calamity in a technocratic age’, in Interpretations of calamity, ed. Hewitt, K. 3-30. London: Allen & Unwin, Inc.; & Wisner, B. Blaikie, P. Cannon, T. & Davis, I. (2004) At Risk. Natural hazards, people’s vulnerability and disasters. Second edition. London: Routledge [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Smith, F. Jolley, E. & Schmidt, E. (2012) Disability and disasters: The importance of an inclusive approach to vulnerability and social capital. UN Women & UNICEF Addressing Inequalities Global Thematic Consultation. <http://www.worldwewant2015.org/node/287097> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (2007) World Disasters Report. Focus on Discrimination. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Sightsavers (2015) Disability, disasters and empowerment. [www.sightsavers.org/satkhira](http://www.sightsavers.org/satkhira) [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Schipper, L. & Pelling, M. (2006) ‘Disaster risk, climate change and international development: scope for, and challenges to, integration’ in Disasters. Vol.30 No.1 19‐38 [↑](#endnote-ref-7)