Excellencies,

I wish to extend my appreciation to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities for its efforts to guarantee the recognition of persons who have experienced leprosy as persons with disabilities within national legal and regulatory frameworks.

When I began my second term as mandate holder in November, 2020, the first step I took was to consult all the existing organizations of persons who have experienced leprosy, in order to develop a participatory work plan for the next three years that embodies the views of experts by experience.

Importantly, the barriers to the rights to work and at work were systematically pointed out to me by the people’s organizations as being simultaneously the result and one of the leading causes of ongoing discrimination. Furthermore, while monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic - which I have been doing since March 2020 - I quickly realized the close relation between the historic and systematic exclusion of persons who have experienced leprosy from the open labour market (and the concomitantly widespread denial of their rights to work, at work and to social protection) and the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their right to life.

Hence, an inclusive recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic that addresses with determination the multiple divides that keep pushing a significant part of the world’s population furthest behind, including persons who have experienced leprosy, is vital, and the General Comment on Article 27 of the CRPD is not only timely, but can be of great value in such a context.

Persons who have experienced leprosy face formidable, intersecting and multiple barriers to freely choose their work and to enjoy rights at work, such as: a) the more than one century State’s policy of forced segregation; b) the more than 100 discriminatory laws that are still kept in force; c) customary law that denies land and inheritance rights to persons who have experienced leprosy, especially to women; d) discrimination in what concerns hiring policies for public jobs; f) discrimination at school, which has pushed too many persons who have experienced leprosy out of education; g) interpersonal discrimination in both public and private employment settings.

For the reasons mentioned here and others that I refer to in my written submission, I kindly request the honorable members of the Committee to include an explicit reference to leprosy as a prohibited ground of discrimination, as well as to persons who have experienced leprosy as being entitled to the rights provided by the CRPD, and more specifically to the provisions of article 27, as a means to contribute to a much-needed paradigmatic shift towards the recognition of persons who have experienced leprosy as right holders and as person with disabilities in national legal and regulatory frameworks.

Thank you

Alice Cruz

Special Rapporteur on the elimination of discrimination against persons affected by leprosy and their family members