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Nationwide Organization of Visually-Impaired Empowered Ladies (NOVEL)

Where are women with disabilities in the conversation and when making decisions? These are the questions that propelled me and my colleagues to form Nationwide Organization of Visually-Impaired Empowered Ladies or NOVEL. We want to be seen, heard and take on the lead. For 8 years now, NOVEL has been partnering with many groups to support the empowerment of Filipino women and girls with disabilities through awareness raising on their human rights and building their capacity for leadership and participation. We have pushed our agenda by contributing to the parallel reports submitted to CRPD and CEDAW Committees together with our OPD and CSO partners. As a promoter of disability inclusive development to OPDs, government, CSOS and other stakeholders, we make sure that intersectionality is understood and applied early on the table.

After a lockdown was declared in the Philippines on March 15, 2020, NOVEL and Philippine Coalition on the UNCRPD led the nationwide survey on the situation and needs of Filipinos with disabilities. The result of this survey and a set of recommendations were forwarded to Commission on Human Rights and concerned national agencies and local government units. These prompted the government to formulate guidelines and issue a memorandum circular mandating all local government units to provide necessary support and assistance to persons with disabilities. We also issued a position statement calling out the government to ensure disability-inclusive response and address the adverse impact of COVID 19 to persons with disabilities.

Recognizing the intersecting needs and multiple barriers and discrimination women and girls with disabilities might face during the pandemic, NOVEL in partnership with other groups of women with disabilities, Commission on Human Rights Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights Center and UNFPA Philippines conducted a 3-month long project. It was entitled "Community-Based Peer Monitoring on the Situation of Women with Disabilities Amidst COVID Pandemic. The project had the following results:

1. Documented and reported the access of women and girls with disabilities on services and support provided by both the national and local government particularly on sexual and reproductive health and rights as well their incidents gender-based violence and discrimination
2. Capacitated women with disabilities and their organizations through evidence-based peer monitoring, immersion on sector-specific issues and calling for state's accountability
3. Formulated key recommendations to ensure non-discrimination, full inclusion and effective participation of women with disabilities in the planning, response, transition and recovery.
4. Strengthened network and community among women with disabilities as well as with the government and UN agencies

I think there are 3 major barriers to the participation and leadership of persons with disabilities

1. Limited resources of OPDs – whether it's human, financial, technical and administrative resources to sustain the advocacy
2. Limited or lack of comprehensive accessibility and support services like personal assistance and sign language interpreters in the community
3. Lastly, intersectionality is still an afterthought in many groups and discussions that's why the intersecting and multiple identities, barriers and support needs of persons with disabilities particularly women and girls are left behind

Some of the lessons learned during the pandemic are:

First, maximize the use of technology for wider range of advocacy – I'm currently part of a weekly online program called Inklusasyon, it's a portmanteau of "Inclusive" and "Nation". Unlike before that only few can hear us on our advocacy campaign, now we are being viewed by thousands of people each episode and we are able to discuss various issues with all stakeholders, call the attention of the government and set as an example of inclusive online platform. I know we can't wait to see each other face-to-face but whether we admit or not we have learned to take advantage of online platform for a more efficient use of our resources and minimizing our carbon footprint. Second, the pandemic had magnified our vulnerabilities and as a sector we are now clearly seeing what are lacking and what are of prime importance. Here in the Philippines we are now working us one to push for a universal disability-support allowance to cover part of disability-related costs and as part of bigger disability-inclusive social protection in schemes both policies and programs. Lastly, persons with disabilities particularly women and girls will continue to be left behind unless intersectional approach is understood and applied and gender equality is realized.

Thank you and Mabuhay!