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Nationwide Organization of Visually-Impaired Empowered Ladies (NOVEL)

“Nothing about us without us” is grounded on the principle of meaningful participation. Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognizes participation as both a general obligation and a cross-cutting issue. In fact, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities enshrines the obligation of States parties to closely consult and actively involve persons with disabilities (art. 4 (3)) and the participation of persons with disabilities in the monitoring process (art. 33 (3)) as part of a wider concept of participation in public life.¹

Even before the outbreak of COVID Pandemic, persons with disabilities are already experiencing attitudinal and environmental barriers in accessing information, facilities and services and participation in the community. They are often excluded or restricted in decision-making spaces. Discrimination is compounded when it comes to Women and girls with disabilities as well as those coming from the marginalized genders. 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

Despite the disproportionate effects of the pandemic to persons with disabilities, Filipinos with disabilities through their representative organizations continue to demand for the recognition, protection and fulfilment of their rights. Existing connections are fortified, constantly building coalitions and adapting to new platforms to continue the advocacy.

Days following the imposition of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Nationwide Organization of Visually-Impaired Empowered Ladies (NOVEL), Life Haven Center for Independent Living and Philippine Coalition on the UNCRPD spearheaded a two-part survey on the situation of Filipinos with disabilities. Both surveys had a nationwide reach, but majority of the response came from the National Capital Region (NCR) at 60% and the remainder were scattered around the different provinces. From the total of 2,500 respondents, 65% identified themselves as female, 33% identified as male and 1% did not mention their gender. 92% of the respondents belong to the working age (18 to 60) while 8% were composed of children and older persons.

Data collected showed that aside from food and financial assistance, persons with disabilities primarily needs access and support to their disability-related needs such as medicines, rehabilitation services, services of sign language interpreters etc. Unfortunately, at the time of the survey, only 38% received assistance from their local government units and only received food packs and hygiene kits. No respondent reported that they received or even consulted on their disability-related needs.

Results and recommendations from the first survey was forwarded to the Commission on Human Rights Economic and Socio-Cultural Rights Office and was endorsed to Department of Interior of Local Government (DILG). In response, DILG issued Memorandum Circular No. 2020-066 directing all Local Government Units to ensure that persons with disabilities are able to access adequate food; taking into account nutritional requirements; and have permission to the use of transportation services. It was followed by the release of Joint Memorandum Circular No. 1 series of 2020 providing special guidelines on the provision of social amelioration measures to the most affected residents of the areas under enhanced community quarantine. The Coalition also sent the survey results to the concerned local government units and call out for their immediate attention and action.

Towards the conclusion of the first wave of Social Amelioration Program (SAP) distribution, the Coalition conducted again an online survey from April 28 to May 2, 2020 to know the current situation and the true ground experiences of their fellows with disabilities in accessing the said program. At the time of the online interview, only 9% of the households received SAP. Many of the persons with disabilities faced significant barriers such as accessing the information as forms and details on the program are not available on accessible formats, difficulty in communicating as there was no provision of sign language interpreter services, and inaccessible distribution sites.

¹ **Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities**, General comment No. 7 (2018) on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention

Many of migrant workers and students with disabilities who were stranded in their apartments did not receive any assistance as the local government unit has no data of them. Some reported that some LGU even asked for proof of residence or person with disability ID before assistance was provided.

The cash assistance only covered basic needs like food but not disability-related expenses such as medications that should be taken regularly for seizure management for those with epilepsy and cerebral palsy; rehabilitation services, payment for support services such as sign language interpreters and personal assistants, purchase and maintenance of assistive devices, diapers and other medical supplies like catheters, urine bag, petroleum jelly, gloves, and under pads. It became more evident that disability related expenses takes a considerable amount of money, a factor that is not considered in classifying who are living below or above poverty line and who should be considered for inclusion in the financial assistance by the government. Assessing how much income a household have and the proxy means testing missed consideration that should be given to all disability-related expenses as basic necessities of household. Even if a household earns at least the minimum wage, considered to be enough to support the average size,, it's still insufficient for a household that has disability-related cost. It will become an "either or" situation where support for disability-related expenses will mean taking away budget for household necessities such as food. This reduces the chances of having an acceptable level of quality of life for households who has members with disabilities. If not addressed by a specific social protection program to support disability related expenses, for example support allowance for disability-related needs, the disability poverty relationship will always exist. This is contrary to the target of SDG to eradicate poverty in all its form.

The strengthening partnership between the Philippine Commission on Human Rights Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights Center (CHR GEWHRC) and women with disabilities didn't stop even during the pandemic. The project, "Community-Based Peer Monitoring on the Situation of Women with Disabilities Amidst COVID Pandemic" was launched right after the declaration of the Enhanced Community Quarantine. It was funded by the CHR and United Nations Population Fund Philippines covering the period from March to June 2020.

By design, the project is primarily participatory recognizing the importance of working with organizations of persons with disabilities in planning and responding to the COVID-19 crisis. It also upheld the capacity of each woman with disability to reach out to their peers, to identify and document issues among their sector, and to forward key recommendations and areas for action. The Commission, through GEWHRC, supported women with disabilities in the entire process by facilitating and guiding the documentation process, documenting, and forwarding key recommendations for urgent and continuing action. The main objectives of the peer monitoring were as follows:²

- To partner with women with disabilities and their organizations in selected sites for the conduct of community-based peer monitoring of situation of women with disabilities during the enhanced quarantine, GQC, transition and recovery period of the pandemic.
- To monitor women with disabilities' access to services and support from local and national government, including access to health services and to the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) and other benefits under the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, the gendered impact of the health crisis on women with disability, including possible experiences of discrimination and gender-based violence and other issues that they encountered during the crisis.
- To strengthen networks and community among women with disability and
- To contribute to individual and organizational empowerment of women with

disability through evidence-based peer monitoring, immersion in sector-specific issues and concerns, and calls for state accountability.

During the course of the project, a total of 643 women with disabilities, parents/carers of girls with disabilities participated which produced 2,382 responses. The peer monitoring was done via phone call, SMS and online means that's why it was able to reach women and girls with disabilities in many parts of the country. Majority came from the age group of 18-59 while 10% are girl-child with disabilities. The remaining 2% were composed older women with disabilities aged 60 and above. Different disability constituencies took part in the peer monitoring including persons with psychosocial disabilities, intellectual disabilities, with chronic illness, with hard of hearing, deaf women and those with multiple disabilities but they only represented a small percentage of the monitoring population. A large percentage of the interviewees are women with physical impairment and women with visual impairment (those who are blind and with low vision). More than half (55%) of the women interviewed have children with average of 3 per respondent.

² Community-Based Peer Monitoring of Access of Women with Disabilities During COVID-19 Pandemic
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Loss of income, food insecurity, increased barriers to information and communication, lack of access to facilities, medical and rehabilitation services are primary impact of the pandemic. Aside from these, weeks of monitoring surfaced the gendered impact of the lockdown to women and girls disabilities which included

- Did not receive in kind support for menstrual and hygiene kits
- Women with disabilities who were living alone cannot go out and buy their necessities including gender-related needs. Women with visual impairment who can travel alone couldn't and didn't want to go out in fear of contracting the virus through touching of surfaces which ironically helps them to navigate surroundings.
- Formula milk for mothers who couldn't breastfeed their babies
- Multiple burden among carers who are mostly the female members of the households
- Anxiety, depression, reemergence of psychosocial conditions and even suicide contemplation
- Women respondents with disabilities who tried to access their sexual and reproductive health and rights experienced discrimination and faced unwelcoming remarks from the local health center personnel. Some were also unable to avail SRHR commodities and services because they are not constantly available in local health centers. Women also prioritized basic needs like food due to limited financial resources.
- Family planning and reproductive health was also compromised as many had reported that their husband's became more sexually active resulting to unwanted pregnancies.
- There were also reports of gender-based violence such as rape and a deaf woman who just gave birth was emotionally and verbally abused by her in-laws

The project also stressed the cascading and lasting effects of discrimination and lack of access and equal opportunity on education and work & employment to persons with disabilities. Many of the respondents were women with visual impairment whose source of income is providing massage service. A lot of persons with visual impairment whether unschooled or finished a university degree end up being massage therapists. This job is equally decent but it did show that opportunity is limited for persons with disabilities like those with visual impairment. Massage industry is one of the mostly hit by the strict quarantine measures, leaving many persons with visual impairment jobless for months. If equal opportunity and equitable access to education and employment are given to persons with disabilities, they will have various options for work and employment where they can economically empowered and well-benefited.

The Commission on Human Rights through the Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights Center (GEWHRC) published the results and key recommendations and were forwarded based on the suggestions of the interviewees and peer monitors. Among them was really a call to apply intersectional lens in data collection and in responding to the needs and concerns of women and girls with disabilities as well as those coming from marginalized genders. Women and girls with disabilities as well as their families must meaningfully participating in all stages of decision-making. This will only happen if they are capacitated, their leadership is developed and their access and support needs are provided. Existing policies and recommendations to improve access to sexual and reproductive health and rights must be reinforced. State and the society must recognize the legal capacity and support the empowerment and decision-making of women and girls with disabilities in line with the principles of UNCRPD in all aspects of their lives including in their SRHR. Psychosocial support and GBV prevention and response mechanisms must be inclusive and accessible. Government, service-providers and other actors must continuously undergo gender-responsive and disability inclusive trainings. Current and new policies and programs for employment and livelihood as well as social protection must be ensured to be gender-responsive and disability-inclusive.

The peer monitoring paved the way to show support among women and girls with disabilities, a means for them to comfort each other and ease the pain brought by the pandemic. The project also provided source of income for the peer monitors and coordinators which helped with their expenses. Recognizing that assistive devices and technologies are facilitators of inclusion, the women peer monitors and coordinators received android tablets that they can use to continuously communicate with other women with disabilities, participate in knowledge and skills training, attend meetings and consultations, use for online employment or business, use for online classes, and advocate for their rights. Bantay Karapatan ng mga Kababaihang may Kapansanan (Monitors of the Rights of Women with Disabilities) was also formed as the solidarity network of the organizations and individual women with disabilities who participated in the project.

Leveraging partnerships With Civil Society Network for Education Reforms (E-Net Philippines), LAPIS SEESAW Channel an online community and platform, the Philippine Coalition on the UNCRPD took the advocacy on the next level by forming Inklusyon. A Filipino portmanteau of the words "Inklusyon" (Inclusion) and "Nasyon" (Nation), it is

a weekly online program discussing rights of persons with disabilities, disability-specific issues and how they relate to mainstream society. The production team is composed of persons with diverse impairments, parents of children with disabilities and allies from E-Net Philippines. The show is setting an example of inclusive practices such as provision of sign language interpretation and closed-captioning. Since professional audio description services are not available yet in the Philippines, the group are devising ways ensure that visual content have description and resource persons are descriptive with their presentations. Since its inception in June 2020, Inklunasyon has reached a wider audience with a viewership ranging from 2,000 – 5,000 per episode. Inklunasyon has engaged and continuously attracts not only persons with disabilities and their families but government officials from the Executive and Legislative branches, allies from the civil society such as gender, children and DRR movements and representatives from United Nations and European Union Delegation to the Philippines.

The COVID-19 crisis has magnified the vulnerabilities of persons with disabilities and highlighted the limits of the current social protection system. The vast majority has experienced loss of income and has multiple needs. Due to the limitation of the current social protection systems and despite the government efforts to roll out new measures, most persons with disabilities did not yet receive any support.³ Recognizing these realities, the Philippine Coalition on the UNCRPD through the leadership of Life Haven Center for Independent Living and Nationwide Organization of Visually-Impaired Empowered Ladies (NOVEL) are pushing for the passage of Support Allowance for Disability-Related Needs Bill. In complement of existing measures and schemes, adopting and progressively rolling out a support allowance of 2,000 pesos will effectively address some of those critical issues. It will provide basic income support to families of children with disabilities, persons with disabilities who are not in position to work. The disability support allowance should be compatible with work, even if, at a reduced rate, to cover the disability related costs associated of getting and keeping work and to prevent pressure from households on the person with disabilities not to take up work for fear of losing the benefit.⁴

“Bayanihan To Heal Us One” is the battle cry of the Philippine government in its fight against COVID 19 Pandemic. In realizing this spirit of communal unity and cooperation, the government and actors need to step up to safeguard the well-being and security of their citizens by protecting them from vulnerability and deprivation. The government must make sure that persons with disabilities are not omitted from programs. Affirmative and enabling measures must be in placed in order for people with disabilities to build back better. The State must support organizations of persons with disabilities in all aspects whether its human, technical, administrative or financial resources in order to sustain advocacy and ensure their full and effective participation. Facilitators of inclusion such as comprehensive accessibility, assistive devices and support services must be provided and available in the community. 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.

³ Breaking the Cycle of Disability and Poverty & Supporting Resilience, Inclusion, and Dignity: The Case for a Universal Disability Support Allowance in the Philippine; May 2020

⁴ Breaking the Cycle of Disability and Poverty & Supporting Resilience, Inclusion, and Dignity: The Case for a Universal Disability Support Allowance in the Philippine; May 2020