



Call to Action:

Advancing the Rights of Children with Disabilities

Global Disability Summit April 2-3, 2025 – Berlin

Children with disabilities—1 in 10 children worldwide—continue to face systemic discrimination, exclusion, and violations of their fundamental rights. They continue to face exclusion from education, limited access to and use of health care, increased risks of violence, neglect and family separation and exclusion from decisions that affect them.

We, a collective of disability rights champion organizations, calls on all actors, especially governments to strengthen their commitments specific to children with disabilities and

- Invest in Inclusive Education for Every Child,
- Strengthen Universal Access to Healthcare & Assistive Technology,
- Establish Comprehensive Child Protection & Family Support Systems,
- Enable the Participation & Leadership of Children with Disabilities

Background: A Global Crisis of Exclusion

Children with disabilities—1 in 10 children worldwide—continue to face systemic discrimination, exclusion, and violations of their fundamental rights. Despite the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), millions of children with disabilities still experience:

Exclusion from Education: Hindering Learning and Development

Education is a fundamental right, yet children with disabilities remain among the most excluded from education worldwide. In low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), they are 25 per cent less likely to attend early childhood education, and 49 per cent more likely to have never attended school, which is in stark contrast to their peers without disabilities.¹ Even when they do attend, they frequently encounter significant barriers that effectively leads to the violation of their right to learn.

Key Barriers Include:

- **Inaccessible and Unsafe Learning Environments** – Many Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres and schools lack ramps, railings, safe terrain, accessible water and sanitation facilities, or adaptive furniture and learning materials, making it physically impossible for children with physical and visual disabilities to be safe (at school). Children who are blind or partially sighted often lack schoolbooks and materials in braille, large font, or

¹ https://data.unicef.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Disabilities-Report_11_30.pdf

tactile versions, while those who are deaf or hard of hearing often are not taught in sign language or provided with necessary adaptations to hear or follow lessons better.

- **Untrained Teachers & Lack of Support** – The majority of teachers (across all grades, starting with Early Childhood Education teachers) graduate from teacher training colleges with little or **no training in inclusive education and pedagogy**, leaving them **unequipped** to teach children with disabilities. Without **diversified pedagogy, assistive technology, individual education plans, and classroom aides**, pupils with disabilities risk not meeting their developmental potential and when entering the primary education system falling behind in their academic progression or even dropping out of school.
- **Discriminatory Attitudes & Stigma** – Many children with disabilities **face rejection from schools** or are **segregated** into separate, lower-quality institutions or **specialized learning facilities** (often referred to as special schools). In some contexts, children with disabilities are still perceived as less capable, leading to **low expectations on academic attainment and exclusion from learning opportunities**. This is even more the case where disability intersects with the child being female. Many times, parents/caregivers are also **hesitant** to send their children with disabilities to an Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centre or school for fear of bullying and corporal punishment or environmental hazards.
- **Lack of Inclusive Learning Materials** – Many national curricula fail to consider the needs of children with disabilities. There is a **shortage of accessible textbooks, digital learning tools, and alternative communication methods**, preventing children from engaging in the learning process.

Without urgent intervention, **millions of children with disabilities will continue to be denied their right to education**, further reinforcing cycles of poverty and exclusion.

Limited Access to and Use of Healthcare: A Life-Threatening Crisis

Children with disabilities face **systemic discrimination and exclusion from healthcare systems**, often resulting in untreated illnesses, **worse health outcomes, worsening conditions, preventable deaths, and inequities**. Studies show that children with disabilities, as well as adults, are **three times more likely to be denied healthcare** than those without. **This is a direct violation of their right to health and survival.**

Key Concerns Include:

- **Higher Risk of Malnutrition & Preventable Diseases** – Up to 80 per cent of children with disabilities experience feeding difficulties and, due to lack of identification and appropriate support.² Compared to children without disabilities they are at **higher risk of malnutrition** as they are 34 per cent more likely to be stunted and 25 percent more likely to be wasted, which in turn exacerbates developmental delays.³ Children with disabilities also face **higher risks of preventable diseases** due to lack of immunizations, poor access to sanitation, and exclusion from health promotion programs.
- **Inadequate Early Intervention Services** – Early detection of developmental delay(s) and referral to early intervention services, including rehabilitation, can **significantly improve** the long-term outcomes of children with disabilities. However, in many countries, these services are either **non-existent, unaffordable, or geographically out of reach**.
- **Discriminatory Practices by Healthcare Providers** – Many healthcare professionals lack training in disability-inclusive and child-friendly care, especially in combination, leading to

² Lefton-Greif MA, Arvedson JC. [Paediatric feeding and swallowing disorders: state of health, population trends, and application of the international classification of functioning, disability, and health](#). Semin Speech Lang. 2007;28: 161–165

³ [Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities - UNICEF DATA](#)

stigma, misdiagnosis, or outright refusal of treatment. Many healthcare facilities **do not provide sign language interpreters, accessible communication, or Assistive Technology,** making it impossible for children with disabilities to receive proper care.

- **High Costs & Financial Barriers** – Even when services are available, the costs of specialized medical care, Assistive Technology, and rehabilitation are **prohibitively expensive** for many families. Without **adequate health insurance or social protection schemes,** many children with disabilities simply go without the care they need.

Without **targeted investment in child-friendly, disability-inclusive healthcare policies and services,** children with disabilities will **continue to be denied their right to health and rehabilitation,** further limiting their prospect of an independent life.

Increased Risk of Violence and Neglect: Hidden but Widespread

Children with disabilities are at **significantly higher risk of violence, exploitation, abandonment, family separation and neglect** than their peers without disabilities. Studies reveal that they are **three to four times more likely** to experience physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. **This is a human rights crisis that demands urgent attention.**

Key Risks Include:

- **Abandonment, Institutionalization and Family Separation** – Children with disabilities are more likely than their peers without disabilities to be separated from their families and often placed in boarding schools, rehabilitation centres, **institutions or orphanages.** This is often due to stigma, lack of support for families, or poverty but also upon recommendation from influential professionals such as doctors or social workers. These institutions **often lack oversight,** leading to severe neglect, maltreatment, and even cases of forced restraint or deprivation of basic needs. Family reunification is rarely prioritised for children with disabilities, particularly when they are perceived as a financial burden or when families feel unprepared to care for or ensure the safety of the child.
- **Higher Risk of Sexual & Physical Abuse and Neglect** – Children with disabilities are experiencing violence both at home and in school to a larger extent than children without disabilities. Perpetrators often target children with disabilities because they are perceived as easier targets and may be **less likely to defend themselves, report abuse and access justice** systematic or communication barriers as well as not being believed. Girls and boys with disabilities, especially intellectual and sensory disabilities face an even **greater risk of sexual violence.** Other forms of abuse which children with disabilities experience disproportionately is material and emotional neglect, as well as over protection and being made more dependent on others than necessary due to low expectations.
- **Family & Community Discrimination** – Raising a child with disabilities may come with some additional considerations in terms of financial, emotional, material and environmental investments. Even where there is little stigmatisation, and robust social policy and support systems, families may struggle to meet the needs of the child in comparison to siblings without disabilities. In some cases, other children may be neglected because of the high support needs of the child with disability. In some cultures, children with disabilities are also seen as **a source of shame or bad luck,** leading to severe abuse within the home. This includes **social isolation, neglect, physical, emotional and sexual violence, family separation or even infanticide.** Many are hidden away, denied basic care, and **excluded from family and community life** which often create long term psychological harm.
- **Lack of Legal Protection & Access to Justice** – Legal frameworks in many countries **fail to explicitly protect children with disabilities from abuse,** and reporting mechanisms are **not**

inclusive and accessible. When abuse does occur, children often **cannot access police, legal aid, social services or counselling** due to communication barriers, negative stigma and lack of reasonable accommodations (e.g., adapted interview techniques, access to sign language).

Without stronger **child protection law and standards, inclusive reporting mechanisms, and community awareness programs** in place, children with disabilities will continue to be denied their right to a safe life free from violence and abuse, further preventing healthy development and security.

Lack of Representation: Excluded from Decisions that Affect Them

Children with disabilities are perpetually excluded from decisions that concerns them by not being listened to. Many remain unaware of their rights and children with disabilities are often **absent from child-led networks as well as adult-dominate disability movements.** Not being allowed to express their view freely on matters affecting them is a **violation of their rights and requiring shifting power dynamics.**

Key Barriers Include:

- **Uninformed and unaware of their rights** – Children with disabilities are often kept from learning about their rights due to barriers. This can include stigma and sociocultural attitudes to disability, limited social interactions, communication barriers or by being excluded from places where children learn about rights such as schools, sports, leisure or cultural activities. This not only leads to reduced likelihood of demanding things and expressing wants and needs but can also lead to increased dependency on others in the immediate environment such as siblings, parents/caregivers, carers or other professionals.
- **Lack of Accessible Communication & Advocacy Platforms** – Even where children can learn about their rights and how to express their views and exercise self-advocacy, they are often denied full participation due to **inaccessible forums and formats, absence of sign language interpretation, or assistive communication devices.** Many decision-making forums, even on school and community level also lack these and then makes it hard for children with disabilities to take part.
- **Exclusion from Policy & Decision-Making** – Most national education, health, and child protection policies are developed **without consulting children with disabilities or their representative organizations.** This leads to interventions that fail to **reflect their lived experiences.** When consultations do happen, they often focus on adults who speak on behalf of children, or they include children with disability types who are able to contribute without requirements for accessibility and adaptations which often leads to the exclusion of children with sensory, intellectual or multiple disabilities or those with neurodivergence or alternative methods of communication.
- **Absence from Public Life & Media Representation** – The voices of children with disabilities are **largely absent from mainstream media, education campaigns, and public discussions.** Without visibility, **stereotypes and misconceptions persist,** reinforcing exclusion.

Without actively **engaging children with disabilities, listening to their perspectives, and ensuring their voices shape the future** by being part of policy dialogue from scoping to implementation, their right to be part of shaping decisions on matters relevant to them will continue to be denied.

The Time to Act Is Now

These critical barriers highlight why the **Global Disability Summit 2025 must lead to urgent commitments and concrete action for children with disabilities**. Without inclusive policies, **millions of children with disabilities will continue to be denied their fundamental rights**. It is time for bold and **transformative action** to ensure no child with disability is left behind.

We call on Governments, Donors, Development and Humanitarian actors and the Private Sector to:

Prioritize Disability Inclusive Development Investments

- **Include disability perspectives** in all global and national development goals, ensuring children with disabilities are part of broader social and economic strategies.
- **Support disaggregated data collection** on children with disabilities across all sectors to inform evidence-based policies.
- **Adopt the Washington Group Child Functioning Module** in surveys and monitoring systems to collect valuable data and track progress towards national, regional and global goals.
- **Fund and support Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs)**, especially those working with or led by children with disabilities and their families.
- **Increase investments and secure equitable budget allocations** across departments that both **mainstream** disability inclusion and support **targeted interventions** for children with disabilities.

Invest in Inclusive Education for Every Child

- **Make education systems inclusive of all learners and prioritize disability-inclusive education in national policies and budgets** with clear targets and accountability mechanisms.
- **Train teachers** in inclusive education pedagogy and ensure Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) centres and schools are physically, socially, and pedagogically inclusive and accessible.
- **Expand early childhood education and intervention** programs to identify and support children with disabilities from birth using appropriate referral systems and provision of assistive technology where relevant.

Strengthen Universal Access to Healthcare & Assistive Technology

- **Ensure inclusive and affordable healthcare services**, including early detection, rehabilitation, and mental health support and strengthen policy and provision for subsidized services for children with disabilities with additional health and rehabilitation requirements.
- **Mainstream disability inclusion across all health and nutrition programs and policies**, ensuring accessibility, and enabling caregivers with disabilities and children with disability to participate fully in decision-making and accessing nutrition services.
- **Fund and strengthen systems for Assistive Technology and Rehabilitation**, including referral pathways, provision of assistive products and support the continuum of associated services for children who need them.

- **Train healthcare providers** in disability-inclusive health services, including nutrition counselling, to reduce attitudinal, systematic and environmental barriers to high quality health care and to promote the standard of making information and communication available in varying formats to enhance patient experiences.

Establish Comprehensive Child Protection & Family Support Systems

- **Enforce laws against discrimination, abuse, and institutionalization of children with disabilities** and strengthen case management, support services and access to justice.
- **Invest in community-led child protection structures and strengthen disability-inclusive social service systems and workforce**, including prevention and case management.
- **Strengthen alternative family-based care** and work to actively phase out non-family-based alternatives whilst focus support on equipping families to care and nurture for their children with disabilities at home to prevent family-separation.

Enable the Participation & Leadership of Children with Disabilities

- **Support children with disabilities to learn about their rights** and equip them with the tools and confidence to share their views as self-advocates
- **Facilitate engagement with duty-bearers** so that children with disabilities can contribute with their views and experiences in dialogue shaping national policy and decision-making processes affecting their rights and well-being.
- **Invest in child-led networks and organisations** and support them to exercise their mandate and achieve their vision, especially as it relates to engaging in advocacy and monitoring of rights.
- **Promote accessible information and communication** across public spaces and services to ensure that children have access through varying formats and communication modes.

Join Us Today!

We urge governments, donors, and organizations to submit bold commitments at:

www.globaldisabilitysummit.org/commitments

No Child Left Behind. No Rights Ignored. ACT NOW!

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