

**Shiela May Aggarao – Philippines**  
**CRPD/EDAW Panel**

Good day everyone!

I am Shiela May Aggarao, a woman with visual impairment from the Philippines. Thank you for this opportunity to be here. I am so thrilled to share my organization's work and experience in writing and contributing to CRPD and CEDAW alternative reports.

It was in October of 2012 when we formed the Nationwide Organization of Visually-Impaired Empowered Ladies (NOVEL). At that time, voices of Filipino women with disabilities, let alone women with visual impairment, were rarely heard. In meetings and events, locally and abroad, there were instances that men with disabilities would even speak for us. It was through conversations with fellow women with disabilities that we started realizing how biases and barriers on our gender overlap with our experience as persons with disabilities.

At the same time NOVEL was launched in 2013, a milestone for the Philippine disability movement was also happening. The Philippine Coalition on the UNCRPD was formed and they were writing the first civil society parallel report on the implementation of the government of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. NOVEL was invited to contribute and participate halfway through the project. We missed the capacity-building sessions that other organizations had. There was already a draft when we joined them. Despite being new to the movement and unfamiliar with the process, we were driven by our desire to be visible and be part of the parallel report. We provided comments and recommendations with focus on Article 6 on Women with Disabilities. Some of the things we highlighted were the lack of data on women and girls with disabilities, having no separate commissioner representing persons with disabilities in the Philippine Commission on Women, non-recognition of UNCRPD as a legal framework for the said Commission, among others.

In 2014, we were invited to be part of a diverse team of women who will produce a CEDAW shadow report. NOVEL was part of a bigger disability group. We called ourselves Philippine Alliance of Women with Disabilities (PAWID). We represented women with visual impairment, wheelchair-users, the Deaf, women with chronic illness, and women with psychosocial disabilities. Before diving into the shadow report writing, the group allocated ample time for coalition and capacity building with other groups. The initiative was so empowering, it was my first time learning about intersectionality. Two years later, we finally finished the report and submitted it to the CEDAW Committee. My colleague was selected to be part of the CSO delegation to Geneva. Unfortunately, despite the complete supporting documents and following the rigid application process, her visa was denied. We were disheartened and confused as to what could have caused the denial of her entry and appeal. Overall, though, working alongside and being in solidarity with other groups was pivotal for us. We are no longer confined to the disability sector, but our issues are being raised in the mainstream feminist arena. Some of the issues where we contributed were gender-based violence, access to justice, disaster risk reduction particularly post-Haiyan disaster, and health.

In 2021, I joined the Inclusive Generation Equality Collective, a global network of feminist with disabilities working on the intersection of gender and disability. This is also the time I started collaborating with Women Enabled International (WEI), the convener of the Collective. In June 2023, WEI reached out and asked if NOVEL was interested in submitting a shadow report. We were excited about it, but we did not know what to do. Unlike the other report that took more than two years, we only had two months to produce it. WEI assured us of their support, so it gave us the confidence to do it. While girls and women with disabilities face multiple and compounding issues in the Philippines, we focused on pressing issues covering the Rural Area, Gender-based Violence, Sexual Reproductive Health and Rights, Education, and Access to Justice. It became very timely as NOVEL was also implementing a project in the Northern Samar province, supported by MADRE VIVA GIRLS. It was about supporting the empowerment of women, girls including LBTQIA+ persons with disabilities. In the focused group discussions with students, teachers, mothers with disabilities, barangay, or local village official, the accessibility and support requirements were accounted for by both facilitators and participants. Our research drew out data from reliable internet sources and past parallel reports on CRPD, CEDAW, SDG, and the Situation of Women with Disabilities amid the Pandemic. With WEI's support, we were able to finalize and beat the deadline for the CEDAW shadow report.

WEI also presented an opportunity to personally witness the CEDAW review of the Philippines and lobby for the rights of Filipino women and girls with disabilities. Without hesitation, I said yes to the offer. I connected with our allies from the feminist movement and participated in the civil society meetings. During this time, I was not sure yet if I would make it to Geneva. We only had two weeks to process our visa and the requirements were grueling. Luckily, after a week, the visa came, and it was an advance birthday gift for me.

Before the constructive dialogue between the CEDAW Committee and the Philippine government, three important meetings happened. First was the civil society meeting organized by International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific. They walked us through the process of CEDAW review of the Philippines and what to expect as part of the CSO delegation. This meeting was one of the biggest challenges that I had during the entire process. There was a segment when we needed to decide who will speak and what areas will be covered for the 11-minute public oral statement among the CSOs. Everyone wanted airtime for their own issues including me. I struggled balancing my agenda and maintaining a good relationship with my colleagues. In the end, I did not get a slot dedicated for women and girls with disabilities. While all of us are advocates, power dynamics still come into play. I noticed there was a tendency to champion for each one's sub-sectors, with fellow CSO representatives citing that disability inclusion is cross cutting and would naturally appear in the oral statement and the oral intervention. However, historically, concerns of persons with disabilities are hidden or neglected. If it is not raised explicitly, it will continue to be omitted in human rights discussions. On the other hand, I was the nominated speaker for the statement on gender-based violence and access to justice. Side discussions and advocacy had to be done with peers and colleagues to ensure that concerns of women and girls with disabilities were explicitly mentioned by other resource persons such as in the issue of access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, etc. Preparing for the oral statement was stressful as I only had 90

seconds to say my piece and the speech was only finalized the night before. I had to memorize my speech because it will save me more time.

The following day, in the private meeting with the CEDAW Committee, was another opportunity to put forward specific issues and recommendations of women and girls with disabilities for two minutes. I did memorize it again but this time I was more relaxed. During the entire time, Women Enabled International were there to support me. Part of our strategy was to create closer contact with the CEDAW Committee members. So, during the lunch break of CEDAW members, we maximized this opportunity to meet with some of them. We share our elevator speech focused on the state of women and girls with disabilities and suggest questions that they may raise for the Philippine government delegation. My primary target was the Committee Member of Japan as she was the special rapporteur for the Philippines. Before talking to her, Sierra and I wrote down the suggested questions for the Philippine government. We knew we had to be very succinct as we only had a few minutes of their time during their break. The Committee Member of Japan generously led us to the Committee Members from Sri Lanka and Nigeria. I was happy that they took the paper with questions.

Finally, the day of the Philippine review came, and it was the decisive moment. Ana Pelaez, the chair of the CEDAW Committee, is a woman with disability. It was a leverage somehow because she was critical of disability concerns. Women and girls with disabilities were mentioned/asked by Committee members around nine times. There were questions that were specific but most of the time the concerns were lumped with LGBTQIA+ women, Indigenous women, rural women, etc. It was disappointing that the Philippine government did not include representatives from the National Council on Disability Affairs. And on the two instances they mentioned disability, their responses were unclear and disconnected.

After the dialogue, I got the chance to speak to Ana Pelaez. She was delighted, we embraced, and she assured me that disability inclusion will appear in the concluding observations and recommendations. The next day, we had a private meeting with CEDAW Committee members to promote the Feminist Accessibility Protocol. I had an extra post-dialogue exposure, hoping it reminded them of recommendations for women and girls with disabilities.

The Concluding Observations and Recommendations was published after three weeks.

1. In total, there were fourteen mentions of women and girls with disabilities. Our role now in NOVEL is to monitor the implementation of the recommendations. It is another process we admit we need to learn and engage more. I learned from this last CEDAW experience that preparation is a key. We should have engaged earlier with other Philippine CSOs and the government. This experience also underscores the need for a wider disability inclusion sensitization among the public, including fellow advocates. Even if my colleagues and CEDAW Committee members are human and women's rights defenders, not all are familiar with working with persons with disabilities or exercise reasonable accommodation in the conduct of activities. Given that the CEDAW process was not thoroughly inclusive, it is strategic to have a fellow disability rights advocate/expert as part of your team.

I am so grateful for the full support of Women Enabled International, Sierra, my fellow Filipino CSO representatives. Because of their presence and advice, I was able to thrive and advocate with my colleagues, government and CEDAW Committee members. But most importantly I am thankful to NOVEL. It is a very unforgettable experience for us, being able to submit our first solo shadow report. It is difficult to describe how we felt knowing that the stories of women and girls with disabilities from the Philippines were brought to the global gender equality arena and became the basis of concrete recommendations to make their lives, our lives better.

Maraming salamat po and Mabuhay! Thank you.