

Dear Colleagues

Many of you know that Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) was recently represented by our member Christina Ryan, on the Australian NGO delegation to appear before the CEDAW Monitoring Committee in July 2010 in New York. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is one of the core international human rights treaties and was ratified by Australia in 1983. WWDA was involved in the process of developing the CEDAW NGO Report, and issues facing women with disabilities were well covered in this sector wide Shadow Report. However, for the first time, the CEDAW Committee also accepted a separate Shadow Report from WWDA, focusing solely on the situation of women with disabilities in Australia. The CEDAW Monitoring Committee has just released its Concluding Observations on Australia's performance regarding the implementation of CEDAW. These are attached in PDF (I am currently working on a Word version).

The CEDAW Committee has taken great notice of WWDA's input, and has made very strong recommendations regarding the need for urgent action by the Australian Government in relation to women with disabilities. The Concluding Comments state, in part:

42. The Committee is concerned that women with disabilities are almost entirely absent from key leadership and decision-making positions and continue to be disadvantaged with regard to educational and employment opportunities. It is concerned about the high levels of violence experienced by women, particularly those living in institutions or supported accommodation. The Committee also notes with concern that non-therapeutic sterilizations of women and girls with disabilities continue to be practiced in some states in Australia and notes that the Commonwealth Government considers this to be a matter for state governments to regulate.

43. The Committee urges the State party, in the light of its recent ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the situation of women with disabilities in Australia. The Committee recommends that the State party address, as a matter of priority, the abuse and violence experienced by women with disabilities living in institutions or supported accommodation. The Committee further recommends that the State party adopt urgent measures to ensure that women with disabilities are better represented in decision-making and leadership positions, including through the adoption of temporary special measures such as quotas and targets, in accordance with article 4, paragraph 1 of the Convention and the Committee's general recommendation No. 25. The Committee recommends that the State party enact national legislation prohibiting, except where there is a serious threat to life or health, the use of sterilisation of girls, regardless of whether they have a disability, and of adult women with disabilities in the absence of their fully informed and free consent.

This recognition is long overdue. WWDA takes this opportunity to thank all our members for your hard work over many years in getting us to this point - helping us to ensure that our issues are recognised as issues of human rights, and supporting us to demand accountability from our Governments. Our work in many ways, is now just beginning!

WWDA also takes this opportunity to thank Christina Ryan for her sterling advocacy work on our behalf in New York. We would also like to acknowledge the support of Senator Sue Boyce, the Bendigo Bank (Calwell & Wanniasa branches), and the International Women's Rights Action Watch (Asia-Pacific) for providing funding support to enable Christina and her support worker to travel to New York. WWDA also acknowledges the support of Equality Rights Alliance (ERA) and the former Womenspeak Network, for their efforts in ensuring the inclusion of women with disabilities in the Australian NGO CEDAW Shadow Report processes.

Cheers
Carolyn

PS: As the current President of WWDA, I would like to thank Carolyn Frohmader on our behalf, for her dedicated work to bring matters concerning the status of women with disabilities in Australia to this point of recognition at the United Nations. In particular Carolyn's concern about the unlawful sterilisation of women and girls with disabilities in Australia has been steadfast, and focussed on the rights and needs of girls and women with disabilities. This has shown us all great leadership. With this recognition in the CEDAW concluding comments, WWDA can acknowledge the work that it has done over the past decade or more, and be thus encouraged to work even harder to improve the lived lives of all women with disabilities in Australia.

Regards, Sue (Salthouse)