

# **OPENING STATEMENT TO THE JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE ON DISABILITY MATTERS**

Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Good morning to you all, my name is Maureen McGovern from Ballyfermot I very much welcome this invitation to speak to you today as a disabled woman who has struggle all of my life to live in a Society that discriminates against me because of my impairment and gender, be it education, training/employment, health care, in social, economic and culture life.

I have been a strong activist in the human rights of disabled people at local level for most of my life. My work is informed by the issues of concern to myself as a disabled woman and member of the local NGO Disability Action Collective in the Ballyfermot and Chapelizod area, who by the way has the largest population of disabled people in an urban setting 20%. My work is underpinned by an understanding of the social model of disability. This model says that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person's impairment. It looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people. I also work from a disability equality perspective. This is a belief that I/we, as disabled people, should enjoy equal rights and opportunities to participate in economic, social and cultural life, have choice and control over how we live our lives and are enabled to reach our full potential.

As a disabled woman who has experience sexual violence over a long period of time, I did not get the same supports that a non-disabled woman would have got at that particular time. We have made a small bit of progress in this area, however for all disabled women to live free from violence more action is urgency required. After years of working really hard to get an understanding of the issue, I believe the following:

## **Violence against Disabled Women**

Disabled women are not visible in the wider response to violence against women. Data on disabled women does not always exist, but the following statistics highlight disabled women's increased vulnerability to violence. Fundamental Rights Agency in an EU-wide survey in 2014, found that 34% of women with a health problem or disability have experienced physical or sexual partner violence, compared with 19% of women who do not have a health problem or disability. Recent research from NUI Galway found that disabled women are more likely to experience violence with 40% of disabled female students reporting experience of rape (compared with 27% of non-disabled students).

More resources are needed to ensure access to support for disabled women across the country. It is vital that they know that supports exist and that our safety is paramount particularly during this public health crisis. Alongside this, disabled survivors of abuse should be involved in designing better support and accessible awareness rising campaigning, for example more visibility of disabled women in the **“no more excuses”** campaigns. We know home is not a safe place for many women. More research is needed to understand the dynamics of domestic abuse and institutional abuse and ensure that legislation adequately protects all women. Disabled women living in congregated or institutional settings or with families may find accessing specialist support agencies difficult due to a lack of privacy or access to digital devices. The Second National Strategy on Domestic Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2016-2021 has no targeted interventions with disabled women and we urgently need consistent and quality data on disabled women's experiences of gender and sexual based violence.

## **Participation in public and political life**

Disabled women are underrepresented across all levels of leadership in public and political life. We do not have an identified disabled women representative in the Oireachtas and only one disabled women councillor in Local Government.

As a disabled woman who is very active in my local community, I often feel my voice is not listened to due to my impairment and gender which impacts on my mental health greatly. I'm not the only disabled woman who has been subject to this experience, this effects disabled woman across the country who is fighting for the rights of disabled women to fully participate for change at local level.

We call on the committee and the government to seek the input of disabled people's organisations, including disabled women's organisations locally and nationally, in all policies that impact disabled people.

As disabled women, we want to see the full realisation of the rights of disabled women, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The state must take the necessary steps to ensure that all disabled women can fully realise their social, cultural, political and economic rights. I look forward to engaging with the work of the committee further and wish you all a Happy International Women's Day.

