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**Submission to the PNG Parliamentary Inquiry into Gender Based Violence**

**June 2021**

**Introduction**

This submission seeks to bring to the attention of the Parliamentary Inquiry the very serious issue of family and sexual violence against women with disabilities in Papua New Guinea and responds to the following section of the Inquiry’s specific Terms of Reference:

(f) Consider the views and experiences of frontline services, advocacy groups and others working to address gender based violence

**About the Isabel Kila Foundation**

Isabel Kila Foundation has been set up by disability advocate, Ms Isabella Kila, to advocate for greater inclusion of people with disabilities in Papua New Guinea including through the provision of awareness raising and training and through increasing access to justice for women with disabilities.

Isabella Kila is an inspiring young Papua New Guinean woman with a disability. Despite having her own disability, Ms Kila has graduated from the University of Papua New Guinea with a Bachelor’s Degree in Law, has also graduated from the Legal Training Institute with a Certificate to Practice Law and has been admitted to the Bar in the National and Supreme Courts in Papua New Guinea. On the 20th of April 2012, the National Gaming Control Board’s “Community Benefit Fund”, were able to secure funds to support her education. Now that Ms Kila has completed her law degree, she has decided to use the remaining funds to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities, especially women with disabilities in PNG.

Isabella Kila has been providing inspirational talks at a number of events in PNG and has provided education and basic rights awareness sessions for PNG Government staff on how to increase access to justice for women with disabilities.

**Mission and Vision Statement**

* **Mission**

“To be the Voice and Hands for People with Impairments by Advocating and Providing Services for a Better and Effective Livelihood.”

* **Vision**

“To be the Agents of Change by Breaking Down Barriers and Promoting Disability Inclusiveness in the Lives of People with Impairments.”

**Women With Disabilities in Papua New Guinea**

The PNG National Policy on Disability 2015 – 2025 estimates that at a minimum, PNG’s disability population estimates match or exceed the World Health Organisation (WHO) global estimates that around 15% of any population have some form of disability.

There is no known data on the number of women with disabilities in PNG. However, according to UNWomen of the estimated more than one billion people in the world experiencing some form of disability, the average prevalence rate in the female population (18 years and older) is 19.2 per cent, compared to 12 per cent for males, representing about 1 in 5 women. Despite this, research across the Asia Pacific region indicate that women with disabilities hold much fewer decision-making positions than men with disabilities, are under-represented in national coordination mechanisms on disability matters and are underrepresented in gender equality institutions (UN Women).

Women with disabilities experience double discrimination due to both their gender and their disability and this often leaves them invisible when it comes to policy decisions as well as in service-delivery. This makes women with disabilities much more vulnerable to being victims of family and sexual violence and impedes their ability to seek justice and support.

**Family and Sexual Violence (FSV) Against Women with Disabilities (WWD) in Papua New Guinea**

While there is no specific data or research on the issue of family and sexual violence against women and girls with disabilities in PNG, international studies have shown that women and girls with disabilities are 2 – 3 times more likely to be victims of physical and sexual abuse than women without disabilities (UN General Assembly, 2021).

The consequences of family and sexual violence against women and girls with disabilities can be severe, therefore they require more specialised intensive support when they experience violence and seek assistance.

When discrimination based on disability combines with discrimination based on gender WWD can be more disadvantaged than able women as well as men with disabilities. This also greatly increases the likelihood of violence being perpetrated against women with disabilities and that perpetrators often exploit women’s disabilities as a form of violence.

Family and sexual violence is an issue of power and control and perpetrators often target women with disabilities, because they see them as having less power and exploit their vulnerabilities. This is particularly the case for women who have barriers to communicating with others about the FSV and women who are restricted in their physical movement (Our Watch, 2021).

International research has shown that women with disabilities experience all types of violence at higher rates, with increased severity and over longer time periods than women who do not have a disability (Our Watch, 2021).

It is important to note that perpetrators of FSV may be a partner/spouse of another family member. Perpetrators might also be a carer or support worker. Men with disabilities can also be perpetrators. The violence inflicted on women with disabilities might also cause a secondary disability as a result of the mental and physical injuries experienced (Our Watch, 2021)

Despite being more at risk of violence for the abovementioned reasons, women with disabilities also experience greater challenges than the broader population in seeking support, safety, protection and legal services. Some of the key issues facing access to justice and safety for women with disabilities in Papua New Guinea include:

**Accessibility (infrastructure and assistive devices)**

Access to justice and support services for women with disabilities is very limited due to insufficient infrastructure and assistive devices. For example, there are a very small number of sign-language interpreters trained and qualified in sign-language despite this being one of the official languages of PNG. There is very limited funds allocated to providing a sign-language interpreter in courts, police stations, legal services and hospitals. Because of this, people who are speech or hearing impaired are unable to participate in critical legal processes such as making a police statement, or being a witness in court. Survivors of family and sexual violence already face enormous stigma, shame and re-traumatisation when sharing their stories with legal and support services. For women with disabilities, this is multiplied by the lack of accessibility which not only causes significant logistical problems but also compounds the trauma of the situation.

**Discrimination based on disability and/or gender**

All over the world, women with disabilities face discrimination, abuse, violence and stigma due to their gender and disability. This poses an enormous barrier to FSV survivors who are most likely already in a vulnerable and traumatised state in being able to access services and be treated with respect and dignity.

**Lack of training and awareness on disability**

The abovementioned issue of discrimination is worsened by the lack of training, awareness and capacity-building in PNG about women with disabilities, including in government. Many services are unaware of the true meaning of “disability” and the different types of disability. More importantly, there is very little awareness and understanding of reasonable accommodation.

**Safety**

Women with disabilities need extra support to ensure their safety. All FSV survivors are at risk and as such safety is always the highest priority when supporting an FSV survivor. Women with disabilities who are survivors of FSV have even greater concerns for their safety. Firstly, women with disabilities are more vulnerable due to the points raised above. They are also likely to have previously experienced either FSV or institutional violence due to their disability. FSV survivors with disabilities, need to know that they will be supported and that it is a safe environment.

**Recommendations:**

1. There is a critical need for the PNG Government to commit funding to the payment of qualified sign language interpreters. Sign language interpreters need to be available to allow / enable speech and hearing-impaired women to access essential justice and safety services including police, courts, family support centres and legal services.
2. There is a critical need to increase the skills of law and justice and other critical services to be able to communicate with speech and hearing impaired people in accessing justice. Therefore, it is respectfully recommended that Sign Language be made a Compulsory Course in UPNG and LTI in PNG.
3. There is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the current situation of people with disabilities in PNG, particularly in relation to FSV survivors with disabilities. In order to effectively improve access there needs to be resources allocated to a comprehensive research into the current prevalence of FSV survivors with disabilities in PNG.
4. There needs to be a stronger and more committed approach within PNG Government to ensuring people with disabilities, especially women, have access to the same services and opportunities as the wider population. It is therefore recommended that sensitisation and awareness on the rights and needs of people with disabilities in PNG be rolled out across the whole of PNG government.
5. Women with disabilities have largely been invisible in FSV policy and planning in PNG. There is a critical need to ensure that women with disabilities are represented on all policy and working committees to address Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in PNG and that current GBV government policies and strategies are amended to be more inclusive. Women with disabilities must be a part of all efforts to address GBV in PNG. These measures will ensure that strategies and policy are inclusive and leave no one behind.
6. The NPS GESI policy is aimed at improving gender equity and social inclusion for marginalised people in PNG. However, there is minimal reference to people with disabilities and women with disabilities in the policy. Furthermore, the current DPM GESI Desk does not include a Disability Section. It is recommended that a stronger disability focus be included in the NPS GESI policy and a Disability Section be included in the GESI Desk.

Despite the situations that they go through, Papua New Guinean women with disabilities, are smart, skilled, strong, and energetic and can accomplish anything, all they need is someone to recognize and support them.

By providing such opportunities for them, we are giving them a voice to be heard and the power to become equal members of the society.

If we want PNG to be a better and a fair country, include people with disabilities, especially women with disabilities, in the development of this country.

**References:**

* 1. Our Watch (2021), <https://handbook.ourwatch.org.au/resource-topic/tailor-primary-prevention-to-groups-and-settings/preventing-violence-against-women-with-disabilities/>
	2. PNG National Policy on Disability 2015 -2025
	3. UN General Assembly (2012). [Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences (A/67/227)](https://undocs.org/en/A/67/227).
	4. UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/12/the-empowerment-of-women-and-girls-with-disabilities>
	5. UN Women, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/women-and-girls-with-disabilities/facts-and-figures>