# The Educator

## The Girl Child

Volume 39– Issue 3 – July 2025



A Publication of

ICEVI
INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION OF PEOPLE WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT

International Partners

ONCE

OVERBROOK SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND

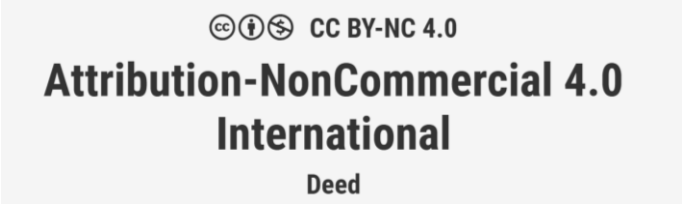
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# The Educator Volume 39, Issue 3, July 2025

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**Image on the front cover:** A young girl with Albinism. Photo by Dr Shawn Piantoni, used with parental permission for this publication.

## Contents

**The Educator Volume 39, Issue 3, July 2025** ..... **2**

**Contents** ..... **3**

**About ICEVI and The Educator** ..... **5**

**President's Message** ..... **6**

**Editor's Message** ..... **8**

**Celebrating International Women's Day 2025** ..... **10**

The Right to Education of Women and Girls with Blindness, Low Vision, Deafblindness, and Multiple Disabilities - Ms. Ana Peláez Narváez ..... 10

**Our Daughters, Our Strength: Mothers Share Their Stories** ..... **13**

An Introduction – Susan LaVenture ..... 13

From Darkness, I Crafted Light – Jamileh Afarideh ..... 14

Juniper: A Girl Whose Vision Innovated an Accessible Abacus – Chi-Hoon Kim ..... 16

Blind and Insightful – Nili and Guila Seidel, mother and daughter ..... 18

Growing up with Visual Impairment: Social Nuances that Distinguish Girls from Boys - Ganit Shaked and Ofek Liyladenu ..... 19

**Voices of Women with Blindness, Low Vision and Deafblindness** ..... **22**

Defying the Odds: Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame's Journey of Vision, Voice, and Global Advocacy ..... 22

Reflections on My Education as a Blind Female – Maryanne Diamond ..... 24

Expectation and Education - Dr. Diana Stentoft ..... 25

Leading with Purpose: My Story from Argentina to ICEVI - Gladys Viviana Correa ..... 27

Living Without Sight in a Foreign Country: My Journey Through Challenges and Support – Yulia Mironova 28

From Vision Loss to Purpose: A Story of Resilience Through Inclusive Education - Putri Rokhmayati, S.Kom 29

The Story of an Actress: A Blind Girl in the World of Silence – Negin Safarzadeh Moghaddam ..... 34

Challenges of the Children with Visual Impairment: The Case of the Girl-Child – Ruby Okwaa Martinson 36

The Journey Beyond Sight – Nguyen Thi Thu Uyen (Jessica) ..... 38

Sight unseen: The Experience of Growing up Blind – Galit Marin ..... 39

The Role of Education in My Life as a Young Woman with Low Vision – Larasati Riskia Adiani ..... 41

Who's that Girl? – Katrina Taylor ..... 46

Lost Sight, Not Vision: A Girl's Journey Through Blindness, Education, and Living as a Lady for Others – Ma. Bless S. Adriano ..... 56

Personal Reflection – Mrs. Cheryl K. Cobbler-Adams ..... 58

**Educating Together: Service Providers Supporting Inclusion ..... 60**
Two Girls' Stories: How Inclusive Education Made an Impact on Their Lives – Sabah Zuraiqat ..... 60
Against Odds: How Ananya is Rewriting Her Future – Saumya Tripathi and Salome John ..... 62

**Inclusive Futures: Global Reports and Submissions on Education, Equity and Wellbeing ..... 64**
Call for written submissions on the draft guidelines on addressing multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities – Issued by Treaty bodie, UNCRPD ..... 64
Blindness has no Boundaries – Carey Phillipps ..... 66
The ONCE School Contest: Over Four Decades Inspiring Equality and Inclusion in Spanish Classrooms – Fernando Riaño Riaño ..... 67
TouchingMaths+ - A European Project That Makes Learning More Accessible for All! – Annemiek van Leendert, Aukje Snijders ..... 70
Beyond Access: Ensuring the Continuity of Education for Adolescent Girls with Disabilities – Ndeye Khady Fall and Arielle Goubert ..... 71
Girls Get Equal: Supporting Girls with Disabilities to Stay in School and Say No to Child Marriage – Jasson Chandhla ..... 74
Adolescent Girls and Maternal Health: Review of UN Reports on Progress and Persistent Gaps – Compiled by Frances Gentle ..... 75
From Exclusion to Leadership: Advancing the Rights of Women and Girls with Disabilities through Inclusive Systems and Global Solidarity – Dr. Shawn Piantoni ..... 79

**ICEVI: Regional Highlights and Global Leadership ..... 86**
Clovernook Center for the Blind & Visually Impaired: Our Story – Samuel Foulkes ..... 86
Celebrating the 104th ICEVI European Conference and General Assembly ..... 88
Celebrating the III ICEVI Latin America Regional Conference and General Assembly ..... 90

**Invitation to Contribute to Future Issues ..... 92**
Themes and submission deadlines for upcoming issues ..... 92
Submission Guidelines ..... 92

**Introducing the ICEVI Executive Board, 2025-2028 ..... 93**
Join ICEVI: Expand Access to Inclusive Education for People with Visual Impairment ..... 94

# About ICEVI and The Educator

The International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) is a global non-profit membership network committed to promoting inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education for individuals with visual impairment, including those with low vision, blindness, deafblindness, and multiple or additional disabilities.

Since 1952, ICEVI has been a leader in convening stakeholders worldwide, fostering collaboration, and driving meaningful change in the field of visual impairment.

ICEVI's flagship publication, *The Educator*, is a key platform for sharing insights, research, and advancements in the education of individuals with visual impairment. Published twice a year, *The Educator* is available for download from the ICEVI website: https://icevi.org/.

**Acknowledgements**

ICEVI acknowledges the contributions of the Editor and Editorial Committee:

Dr Frances Gentle (Editor)

Ms Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame

Dr. Judit Gombás

Ms Susan LaVenture

Dr Shawn Piantoni

Dr Emily White

**Disclaimer**

This publication features contributions from individuals worldwide, sharing their ideas, experiences, and practices. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect ICEVI's stance. References to products, services, organisations, or individuals are for information only and not endorsements. Readers should use their own judgment when applying the information.

# President's Message



Dear Reader,

Warm greetings from the International Council for the Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI).

As a global membership network, ICEVI is committed to strengthening efforts to ensure that children with visual impairment—and indeed all learners with disabilities, wherever they are—can access quality, inclusive education. We continue to convene stakeholders, connect good practices, and influence systemic change that promotes educational inclusion.

Over the past months, ICEVI has actively contributed to key global forums. These include the General Assembly of the International Disability and Development Consortium (Berlin, 26–29 March), the 3rd Global Disability Summit (Berlin, 2–3 April), the 18th Conference of States Parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (New York, 9–12 June), and the Tactile Reading and Graphics Conference (Amsterdam, 2–4 June). At each of these gatherings, ICEVI shared perspectives, participated in strategic meetings, and amplified the voices of learners with visual impairment.

We have also marked important commemorative days by issuing public statements, including on 16 June, the United Nations Day of the African Child, and on 27 June, the inaugural International Day of Deafblindness. These statements reflect ICEVI's solidarity with underrepresented groups and our advocacy for inclusive and equitable education.

Two of our regions held successful conferences and general assemblies in May. The ICEVI European Conference took place in Padova, Italy (15–17 May) under the theme "Supporting children and young adults with visual impairment: What can we do? What can be done?" In Latin America, the regional conference was held in São Paulo, Brazil (30 May–1 June) on the theme "Transformative pillars for an inclusive society." On behalf of the Executive Board, I warmly congratulate the regional Presidents and Boards on the success of these events and extend our appreciation to all participants.

As we look ahead, the ICEVI Principal Officers are preparing to join our colleagues from the World Blind Union (WBU) at the World Blindness Summit and General Assembly in Brazil, 1–5 September 2025. This will mark the first in-person meeting of the ICEVI

Principal Officers for the 2025–2028 quadrennium, and we anticipate fruitful dialogue and collaboration.

We are also excited to share that ICEVI is in the process of developing a new website, which will be launched in the coming months. The updated site will better reflect our mission, showcase our activities, and serve as a more accessible and informative platform for members and partners.

This issue of The Educator focuses on “The Girl Child.” We chose to highlight girls and women because female learners with visual impairment continue to face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination in accessing education. Yet, if we work together to remove these barriers, we will see an increase in success stories and reduce the longstanding backlog of illiteracy among female learners. This issue features many inspiring and thought-provoking articles that shine a light on both the challenges and opportunities facing girls and women in education.

I extend my thanks to all contributors for your valuable submissions. I encourage you to share this issue widely and to send your feedback and reflections to the Editor—we would love to hear from you.

Thank you for your continued commitment to our shared mission.

Warm regards,

Mrs Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame

President

# Editor's Message



Dear Readers,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the July 2025 issue of *The Educator*, the flagship publication of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI). This special issue is dedicated to *The Girl Child*, a theme that resonates deeply with our mission to promote equitable and inclusive education for all learners with visual impairment, including those who are deafblind or have multiple disabilities.

Around the globe, girls with blindness and low vision continue to face numerous barriers in accessing quality education and realising their full potential. These barriers are often compounded by poverty, gender inequality, discrimination, and lack of inclusive educational systems. Yet, despite the odds, the stories and articles presented in this issue remind us of the remarkable courage, resilience, and achievements of girls and women who are blind or have low vision, and the champions who walk alongside them.

The issue opens with a powerful message from *Ms. Ana Peláez Narváez*, an internationally respected advocate for the rights of women and girls with disabilities. In her 2025 International Women's Day message, Ana frames the importance of drawing attention to systemic inequities while calling for urgent and sustained action to ensure inclusive and accessible education for all girls.

The next section, *Our Daughters, Our Strength*, introduces stories from mothers around the world who reflect on their journeys raising daughters with visual impairments. These personal narratives—such as Jamileh's poetic tribute to her daughter Nazanin, and the beautifully co-written piece by Nili and Guila Seidel—speak to the unique challenges and joys of motherhood and reveal the transformative power of love, belief, and support.

In *Voices of Women with Blindness, Low Vision and Deafblindness*, we are honoured to feature the lived experiences of accomplished women from diverse countries and cultures. Each contribution offers a unique lens on education, identity, gender, resilience, and advocacy. Whether through *Maryanne Diamond's* reflections on her education, *Putri Rokhmayati's* journey through inclusive schooling in Indonesia, or *Galit Marin's* exploration of what it means to grow up blind, these voices offer both testimony and inspiration.

The section *Educating Together* highlights inclusive education in practice, with articles from educators and service providers who have supported the journeys of girls with visual impairment. These stories provide real-world insights into the power of inclusive classrooms and the positive long-term impacts of early support and family engagement.

In *Inclusive Futures*, contributors explore broader systems and policies that affect girls with disabilities, from community-based initiatives to large-scale international programs. Articles include reviews of maternal health data, advocacy against child marriage, and long-standing projects such as Spain's ONCE School Contest and *TouchingMaths*+, an Erasmus+ project in Europe. This section also draws attention to the recent Call for written submissions on the draft guidelines on addressing multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities, issued by the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. This global initiative underscores the urgent need to close implementation gaps and build repositories of good practice to address systemic discrimination.

The final section, *Regional Highlights and Global Leadership*, celebrates recent ICEVI regional conferences and showcases our collaboration with member partners such as the Clovernook Center for the Blind (USA). These updates reflect the vibrancy and diversity of the ICEVI network and our continued commitment to collective leadership and change.

On behalf of the ICEVI Publications Committee, I would like to express our sincere thanks to all contributors who submitted articles, reflections, and stories for this edition. We have been truly humbled by the response and the depth of insight shared. Your voices strengthen our commitment to advocating for the rights of girls and women with visual impairments globally.

As readers, we invite you to reflect on the strength and spirit of the girls and women whose stories are shared within these pages. We hope that this issue not only raises awareness but also fuels action—to promote policies, attitudes, and systems that ensure every girl with a visual impairment can learn, grow, lead, and thrive.

Warm regards,
Dr Frances Gentle

On behalf of the ICEVI Publications Committee

# Celebrating International Women's Day 2025

## The Right to Education of Women and Girls with Blindness, Low Vision, Deafblindness, and Multiple Disabilities - Ms. Ana Peláez Narváez

Expert of the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); Commissioner for solidarity and international cooperation of the ONCE Social Group and 2nd Vice-President of the ONCE Foundation for Latin America; Equality Commissioner of the Spanish Committee of Representatives of Persons with Disabilities (CERMI) and Executive Vice-President of the CERMI Women Foundation; Secretary General of the European Disability Forum.

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Every March 8, on International Women's Day, the world pauses for a moment to reflect on the progress and remaining challenges in the fight for gender equality. In this context, it is impossible to ignore the reality of millions of girls and women with disabilities, who face additional obstacles in accessing a basic right: education. Despite global efforts, discrimination, lack of resources and the invisibility of their needs continue to perpetuate systematic exclusion.

Organizations such as the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) have taken on a fundamental role in the struggle to change this reality. Their tireless work for inclusive quality education has led to significant progress, but there is still a long way to go. Education is not only a tool for empowerment, but also a way to exercise other rights and achieve equal opportunities, thus transforming the lives of thousands of women and girls around the world.

### Beyond the Numbers: An Invisible Reality

The numbers speak for themselves. According to UNICEF, only 1% of women with disabilities in the world are literate. In addition, girls with disabilities are less likely to have access to school than boys with the same condition. These data are not mere numbers in a report: they represent lives cut short, dreams deferred, and rights denied.

Barriers to education for girls and women with disabilities begin at home, where harmful gender stereotypes and misconceptions about their abilities persist. Many families, due to lack of information or resources, believe that education is not a priority for their daughters with disabilities. However, the limitations are not inherent to them but are imposed by discriminatory social perceptions towards women and girls with disabilities and by an environment that is not designed to include them.

These barriers are compounded by challenges in educational centers. The lack of inclusive teaching methods and accessible materials; the lack of adequate infrastructure, including the availability of safe, accessible female toilets and support for menstrual hygiene management; the absence of protection against violence or sexual abuse of girls, coupled with their lack of education on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the absence of teachers trained to serve students with disabilities with a gender perspective, among other obstacles, make school a hostile environment for many girls. On too many occasions, they end up being marginalized, abused or even abandon their studies due to the impossibility of continuing their learning in safe and dignified conditions.

Overcoming these inequalities is a challenge that requires a comprehensive approach and the commitment of various sectors of society. It is not only a matter of guaranteeing access to education, but also of ensuring that it is truly inclusive and of quality in an environment free of violence and abuse.

One of the first steps is to change the mentality within families and communities. It is imperative to sensitize society to the importance of education for girls and women with disabilities and to eliminate stereotypes that limit their opportunities. Awareness campaigns and government support can play a key role in this process.

At the structural level, it is urgent that schools have accessible facilities. This implies the adaptation of physical spaces, such as the construction of ramps, adapted bathrooms and classrooms with inclusive resources, but also the availability of educational materials in accessible formats, such as Braille books, audio books and technological tools that facilitate learning.

## Teacher Training, Key to Inclusion

Teacher preparation is another fundamental pillar in building a truly inclusive education. Educators must not only be trained in disability-friendly methodologies but must also learn to recognize the structural and social gender barriers faced by these girls with disabilities and actively work to overcome them.

Teaching strategies should be adapted to the individual needs of each student, ensuring that they can develop their full potential without being excluded due to lack of reasonable accommodations. In addition, the presence of role models, such as female teachers with disabilities who have managed to overcome these obstacles, can be a source of inspiration and motivation for female students.

## The Road to Inclusion

In the digital age, online education has proven to be a powerful tool for expanding access to knowledge. However, many girls with disabilities are excluded from this educational revolution due to lack of access to technological devices and lack of training in digital skills.

To close this gap, it is necessary to develop accessible digital literacy programs that allow girls and women with disabilities to use technological tools for learning. In addition, it must be ensured that online education platforms are inclusive and accessible to all people, eliminating navigation and content barriers.

Digital accessibility is a right that cannot be ignored. Implementing innovative technological solutions, such as screen-reading software, artificial intelligence for text interpretation and accessible videos with audio descriptions and subtitles, is fundamental to creating a digital environment where all girls can learn without restrictions.

## A Safe Learning Environment

Education is not only about accessing knowledge, but also about doing so in a safe and violence-free environment. Unfortunately, girls with disabilities are more vulnerable to bullying and gender-based violence in and out of the classroom.

It is essential to implement protocols for prevention and response to cases of violence, training teachers and educational personnel to detect signs of abuse and act effectively. In addition, girls themselves should receive training on their rights, reporting mechanisms and strategies to protect themselves from risk situations.

## The Importance of Effective Public Policies

Making inclusive education a reality requires the implementation of effective public policies that protect and promote access to education for girls and women with disabilities. This includes legislation requiring accessibility in educational institutions, scholarship programs and specific aids, and constant monitoring to ensure that laws are enforced in practice.

Government policies must contemplate access to comprehensive education and ensure that girls and women with disabilities are not segregated in differentiated programs but are part of an inclusive education from childhood to higher education.

## A Collective Commitment

Ensuring the right to education for girls and women with blindness, low vision, deafblindness and multiple disabilities is not just a task for governments or international organizations such as ICEVI. It is a commitment that must be made by society as a whole, from families to educational communities to the private sector.

It is time to move from speeches to actions. Every girl who receives an inclusive, quality education is a girl with more opportunities to build her own future, to contribute to her

community and to break the cycles of exclusion. Education is undoubtedly the key to a more just and egalitarian society, and it is everyone's responsibility to ensure that no girl or woman is left out of this fundamental right.

March 8 reminds us of the importance of continuing to fight for gender equality. It is the time to make the reality of girls and women with disabilities visible and to work so that inclusive education ceases to be a distant goal and becomes a tangible reality for all.

# Our Daughters, Our Strength: Mothers Share Their Stories

## An Introduction – Susan LaVenture

President, the International Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairments

In this special issue with the theme *The Girl Child*, we share remarkable stories written by mothers, offering their perspectives on raising daughters—some co-authored with their daughters! What stands out in all these stories is the relationship between mothers and daughters, demonstrating their shared courage in facing the unique challenges that blind and deafblind girls encounter growing up, and the strength of their bond. Other threads within these stories highlight how mothers have been actively involved in their daughters' education, fostering creativity and encouraging independence.

The first story is written by Jamileh, mother of Nazanin, who was born with Usher Syndrome and became both blind and deaf. Jamileh instinctively knew, "From the very beginning I believed that being different does not mean being less. It means finding new ways to connect, to grow, and to shine." Her story of raising her daughter in Iran shows how she became a bridge for Nazanin between a world that often refused to understand her. You'll read how Jamileh supported Nazanin on her journey to success.

Nili and Guila, daughter and mother, wrote their article together, and you can feel the closeness of their special relationship. Nili is an accomplished creative musician and singer-songwriter who teaches blind adults, and Guila is the founder of the Israel Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairments and co-founder of the International Parents Association (IAPVI). Guila raised Nili with high expectations for her to pursue education, develop her musical talents, and become an independent woman. She also became a Parent Leader both nationally and internationally, influencing education policy and supporting 1,400 families in Israel. In recognition of her extraordinary advocacy and cross-border collaboration, Guila was honoured with the *Beyond Borders Award*.

Nine-year-old Juniper and her mother, Chi-Hoon Kim, co-authored their story too! Juniper was the only blind child at her mainstream school and wanted to introduce her favourite maths tool—the abacus—to her classmates. Surprised to learn that no children's book existed about the abacus, Juniper set out to write one herself! Their story is a wonderful

example of a blind girl's passion to make a difference, and a mother who nurtures her daughter's imagination and creativity, leading to the creation of a tactile book.

We are also fortunate to hear from Ganit, a social worker and psychologist, who shares her expertise by writing about the social nuances that distinguish girls from boys. She affirms that girls with visual impairments face challenges that are distinct from those experienced by boys.

Sometimes, there is a tendency for parents and teachers to overprotect girls who are blind or deafblind. In some cultures, religions, and societies, *The Girl Child*, especially a girl with a disability, is still not fully recognised as capable or worthy of receiving an education. Yet girls should be encouraged to explore, to dream, and to shape their futures. Even if your daughter has a disability, parents can, and should, hold expectations for learning, for life experiences, for achievement, and for embracing life's challenges and joys.

## From Darkness, I Crafted Light – Jamileh Afarideh

Iranian mother of Nazanin Abolverdi, a girl with Usher syndrome living with deafblindness

I am Jamileh Afarideh—a mother who did not learn life from the path of ease, but from roads paved with hardship and courage. I was given a daughter, Nazanin, who was born both blind and deaf. Yet within her rested a soul brimming with hope, hands eager to create, and a heart glowing with inspiration.

From the very beginning, I believed that being different does not mean being less. It means finding new ways to connect, to grow, and to shine. So, I made a vow: whatever Nazanin wished to learn, I would learn it first myself. I became her hands, her eyes, her ears—her bridge to a world that often refused to understand her.

Every classroom, every skill, was a journey of patience and perseverance for us. Alongside her teachers, I acquired the knowledge necessary to help her understand the world through touch and feeling. With no sight or sound, her path to learning had to be created from scratch—with fingertips, with repetition, with innovation, and with love.

Together we mastered Braille, tactile Persian script, and hand spelling. We immersed in pottery, leathercrafting, machine knitting, embossed clay art, and more. Each craft became a stepping stone, leading her toward independence, self-expression, and recognition.

Nazanin is now a university graduate in Handicrafts (with a focus on Persian carpets), with numerous vocational certificates. Her works have been featured in national and international exhibitions, earning her awards and acclaim—from Tehran to Shiraz, and even as far as Australia.

Multiple documentaries have been made about her extraordinary life, including "Afarideh", which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Parvaz International Film Festival in

2022. But above all, she has become a symbol of determination and creativity—an inspiration not only for those with disabilities, but for anyone who has ever faced a challenge.

Through all this, I have not only been her mother—I have been her mentor, her interpreter, her lifeline. Even now, she cannot navigate society alone. Sadly, our country lacks the systems and infrastructure necessary to support individuals with her level of needs. My greatest fear is what will happen when I am no longer here to be her voice and her guide.

We've been encouraged to move to countries like the United States, where people with disabilities have lifelong access to education and personal assistants. But the financial burden is beyond our reach. Still, I remain hopeful. I believe that if teachers, leaders, and communities across the globe invest in inclusive support systems, young people like Nazanin will not just survive—they will thrive. They are not burdens; they are beacons of human potential.

As a mother, I have spent every day pulling light from the darkness to illuminate my daughter's path. And I will continue, with every breath, to shape a world where she—and others like her—can live, learn, and shine.

*Edited and translated by Dr. Fatane Amiri, Founder Director "Parvaz International Film Festival" / "Miss World with Disability"*



*Caption: Jamileh Afarideh and her daughter, Nazanin Abolverdi.*

# Juniper: A Girl Whose Vision Innovated an Accessible Abacus – Chi-Hoon Kim

Co-Author of *Juniper and the Red Swoosh*; Tactile Literacy Advocate (PhD)
New York City, NY, USA.

Meet Juniper Eisenberg, a 3rd grader and co-author of the multi-modal children's math book *Juniper and the Red Swoosh*. "Hi, my name is Juniper! I am 9 years old, and I am legally blind. My favourite subject is math, and I want to be a math teacher when I grow up! I was inspired to write *Juniper and the Red Swoosh* with my mom to introduce more people to the abacus as a tool for people with vision impairments. My hope is for everyone to learn how to use the abacus and become friends with "Clicky" the 3D-Click™ abacus!"



*Caption: Photograph by Chrystal Trowbridge of the 3D-Click™ abacus with the multi-modal book Juniper and the Red Swoosh.*

Everyone has dreams, but never did we think that Juniper's idea would expand into a mission-driven project to advocate for tactile literacy and empowerment. Here is how it all began: At the age of six, Juniper started learning how to use the Cranmer Abacus, an abacus adapted for people with vision impairments. Using the abacus helped Juniper develop a strong foundation in math and unlocked a new world of possibilities. As the only blind child in her mainstream school, Juniper wanted to introduce her favorite math tool to her friends to help them become stronger mathematicians. Juniper asked her mother (Chi-Hoon Kim) for a children's book about the abacus to share with her friends. When Juniper discovered that no children's book existed, she decided to write one. Once Juniper completed the story, artwork, and abacus calculations, her drive to bridge the sighted and blind communities grew. She aspired to make it accessible to more readers. Juniper also believed that the best way to teach other children the abacus was to offer a 'learning-by-doing' experience.

The story *Juniper and the Red Swoosh* features Juniper, a blind girl who uses her abacus to remediate a coin theft from a red creature that swooshes out of Corn Market with a bag of coins totalling 100 cents. Juniper and Ms. Maize, the shop owner, chase after the red creature and retrieve the coins using wit and humour. Readers are invited to learn how to set the 3D-Click™ abacus, which is included with the book, by following Juniper's step-by-step calculations.

Although the abacus is an under-utilized math tool in the West, it is an ancient calculation device that helps people visually and tactilely add, subtract, multiply, and divide numbers that is still used today in East Asia. Just as typically sighted people use pen and paper to solve math problems, those with vision impairments can use an abacus. When introduced early to school-aged children, it can unlock foundational concepts such as number sense, number bonds, and place value.

To realize Juniper's ambitious ideas for the book, we partnered with Mountain Lakes Public Library Makerspace and Clovernook Center for the Blind & Visually Impaired to give an ancient math tool a universal design makeover and produce the book in Braille, large print, and audio narration. The collaboration resulted in the invention of the 3D-Click™ abacus, an innovative 3D-printed abacus that features a unique "bump-click" system that allows beads to be clicked into place and provides haptic and auditory feedback.



*Caption: Team Juniper and the Red Swoosh at the Tactile Reading Conference in Amsterdam. Bottom row from left: Samuel Foulkes, Juniper, Richard He. Top row from left: Ian Matty, Quentin Roa, and Chi-Hoon Kim*

Individuals alone cannot deliver sustainable change to empower the lives of people with disabilities. You need a team of fierce supporters- who are the real heroes in actualizing dreams. Thanks to the commitment of accessibility advocates, engineers, artists, and educators, Juniper's vision grew into a grassroots movement to increase Braille and

tactile resources in public spaces. To describe the co-collaborative process, Juniper came up with a fitting slogan: Advocacy Together Powers Our Dreams!

We would like to thank our team Ian Matty and Richard He (Mountain Lakes Public Library Makerspace) and Samuel Foulkes, Quentin Roa, Mike Winegardner (Clovernook Center for the Blind & Visually Impaired), Christopher Mundy, and Jenny Hegelein who all championed Juniper's dream!

To learn more about our social impact project for tactile literacy please visit: www.JuniperandtheRedSwoosh.com.

## Blind and Insightful – Nili and Guila Seidel, mother and daughter

Guila is the Founder and Chairperson of "Ofek Liyladenu" – Israel Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairment.



When we read the call for papers for this issue of "The Educator," we immediately thought that the two of us could write together about our personal perspectives.

We are mother (Guila,73) and daughter (Nili, 42) who live with husband-father Pessach (78) near Jerusalem, Israel, in the same house, where Nili has an independent flat. Nili was a "premmie" and is totally blind. She has two sisters and a brother: Tal (46) who lives with her family in France, Einat (40) with her family in Jerusalem, and Matan (35), in Tel Aviv. Guila is the founder and Chairperson of "Ofek Liyladenu" ("Our Children's Horizon"), the Israel Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairment.

Nili is a creative musician and singer songwriter who teaches music to blind adults and just started her own business of "boutique" performances for various events. She studied in mainstream schools, served as a volunteer in the Army and holds a Master's Degree in Music Composition. She is a Braille fan and is proficient in Hebrew, Arabic, English and French, as well as Braille music notation. She has had two wonderful guide dogs, Jesse and Derby, and thanks to them is now an independent wanderer with her cane, looking for a two-legged wonderful partner.

We have a very close and special relationship, and our open dialogue is based on trust, understanding, appreciation, admiration and a great deal of humour. For example, we share laughter speaking in Hebrew while feigning various accents (Hungarian, French,

British, Ethiopian etc.). During our quality time together, Guila is the best one to choose articles and recipes from newspapers to read to Nili aloud, which exactly appeal to her taste, and Nili is the best culinary adviser and sous-chef. As for taste, Nili loves dark chocolate while Guila goes for milk chocolate which brings her to the erroneous conclusion, 'You are not my daughter."

Guila became Nili's ultimate mediator with the non-blind-friendly world surrounding us, mindfully audio describing the scene around her: For example, when her interlocutor disappears in the middle of a sentence, when the WC she is about to use is disgustingly dirty or when people stare at her attractive colourless eyes. Sometimes when it's about her appearance, for instance remarks about her stained blouse or untidy hair, Nili feels that it violates her personal space and reacts by saying: "You don't listen to me, you are only interested in my looks!". Guila explains once again that for us sighted people it is an instinctive reaction to what catches our attention. From Nili's point of view, it is the sense of hearing that is in the forefront as her major asset in life, is overwhelming and even scary. When she watches television and someone in the room answers a call or makes noise, she reacts, complaining: "You're blocking my view". When unexpected loud noises occur, such as door slamming, vacuum cleaning, pop-up ads or when someone starts speaking without Nili realizing his presence, she immediately startles.  This could be easily prevented by sharing what is about to happen.

Nili wishes that Guila would be even more understanding and sensitive to her needs, and Guila would like Nili to be even more tolerant and even more "normal" outside of her disability.  We make mistakes but always try to learn and improve. Writing this article together has certainly contributed to our relationship.

We both would like the surrounding world to have less prejudice regarding the needs of people with visual impairment, to accept and embrace them as they are.

We are proud to conclude our words with the video of Nili singing and playing the song "Imagine" in Hebrew, Arabic and English:
https://youtu.be/TIOEDItUm8Y?si=u3IsSSuoEOw9dCwt

## Growing up with Visual Impairment: Social Nuances that Distinguish Girls from Boys - Ganit Shaked and Ofek Liyladenu

Ganit Shaked, Social Worker and Psychotherapist, Israel; Ofek Liyladenu – Israel Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairment, Contact details: ganitshaked@gmail.com



My experience over 9 years (2017-2025) affirms that girls with visual impairment confront issues that are distinctive from the challenges faced by boys. As a social worker and psychotherapist for Ofek Liyladenu (Israel National Association of Parents of Children with Visual Impairment), I have taken note of issues that emerge and recur in my work with girls and their parents.  I've counselled hundreds of girls, boys, and parents.

Girls tend to have a strong capacity to enlist support and empathy from those in their environment and succeed in creating satisfying relationships with individuals in their sphere. Their capacity to develop mature discourse emerges at an earlier age than it does for boys. Their close relationships are the basis for their ability to give expression to the issues they confront in coping with their visual impairment. They can make their needs understood, and thus receive supportive responses from friends, educational staff, family members, and others.

Yet, the challenges of participating in social environments with other girls require higher level social skills in interpreting and understanding situations and nuances. They do not have access to visual information of body language, facial expressions, and the perception of movement in space. Parents describe their daughters' difficulties due to this deficit, as well as their difficulty in keeping pace with the momentum of the events that occur in their sphere. They face gaps when they participate in activities that are not adapted to their special needs.

At a young age, boys tend to be more engaged in physical activities and ball games, while girls are more likely to participate in low-key games and conversations as the focus of their social activity. This imposes fewer demands to participate in sports, which offers a certain advantage in achieving social integration. Yet, sports make a valuable contribution to the development of both boys and girls. In our experience, girls who engage in adapted sports activities develop a stronger sense of self-worth, confidence and enhanced self-image and are empowered by the experience.

Another aspect of social integration that is distinctive for girls is their preoccupation with how their appearance differs from their sighted peers. Parents describe this preoccupation, which begins as early as kindergarten. They may object to wearing glasses, an eye-patch or a hat, because they want to look more like their peers. Parents report that when their daughters reach adolescence, they are even more preoccupied with their appearance and body image. Some adolescents will try to disguise their differences. Adolescent girls with albinism may dye their hair and eyebrows. Parents then

confront the dilemma of the degree of autonomy to give to their daughters in determining their appearance and how to convey the value of accepting themselves as they are. Parents respond in different ways. Some relate to their daughters' need to look like their peers. They support their daughters' efforts to alter their appearance to enable them to avoid the social rejection they fear. Other parents insist that their daughters learn to accept themselves and love themselves as they are. They seek to convey to their daughters that their differences are unique and can also be a source of strength. But the challenge is complex because adolescent girls naturally seek peer acceptance and belonging, which includes a greater emphasis on appearance at that age.

Parents navigate their desire to encourage independence and the need to protect their visually impaired daughters. We have observed that parents tend to encourage their daughters' independence at home, but find it difficult to allow them greater independence beyond their homes. Parents of daughters are more likely than parents of sons to fear the dangers of the public sphere.  They tend to drive their daughters to school, friends' homes, and extracurricular activities because of their concern about their safety. Yet, we witness compelling processes in which parents are supported and gain the confidence to help their daughters become more independent. Ofek Liyladenu's "Employment on the Horizon" program provides teens with visual impairment with the opportunity to attend workshops in job skills and then take part in summer jobs (at financial services companies, retail chains and other workplaces). They gain experiences which help them acquire independence, success, and personal development. For some female teens, the program provides their first experience of traveling via public transport. Naturally, parents are apprehensive, but the outcome is that the teens and their parents were very satisfied with overcoming a longstanding challenge and achieving a new goal.

When teenagers begin to learn to drive, there is a significant difficulty for boys and girls who are unable to obtain a license due to their visual impairment. Conversations with parents indicate that this crisis is more severe among boys and it can be assumed that boys are more likely than girls to view driving as a significant component of their identity and self-image.

Our recommendation is to encourage conversations about these issues and promote self-advocacy to help girls develop meaningful and supportive social relationships with peers and adults. Strategies must be developed to fill in missing visual information and social integration. Physical activity, as well as confronting challenges and achieving success, can strengthen self-image and body image. Experiences that are accessible and adapted to special needs can build independence and capabilities. To develop targeted responses, it is important to increase understanding of the unique experience of the girls and their parents.

# Voices of Women with Blindness, Low Vision and Deafblindness

## Defying the Odds: Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame's Journey of Vision, Voice, and Global Advocacy

[Adapted from interviews with NPR Radio and Graphic Online]



At age ten, Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame began to lose her sight due to a progressive condition known as retinal dystrophy. What followed was a painful but formative journey of exclusion, resilience, and transformation. Today, she is recognised globally as a powerful advocate for disability rights, a champion for women and girls with disabilities, and a leader who continues to challenge systemic barriers.

Growing up in Ghana, Gertrude recalls the first signs of her vision loss: difficulty reading from the blackboard at school. Though her family was quick to respond, accompanying her to medical appointments and seeking solutions, no treatments could halt the progression of her vision loss. As her impairment deepened, so did the stigma around her. Enrolling in the School for the Blind in Akropong-Akuapem, in the Eastern Region, her hometown, became a point of shame in the eyes of some distant relatives and community members. "How will you be anything in the future?" some family members questioned. "They told me I had so much promise, but now I was a failure," she remembers. The pain of these words stayed with her for years.

But that moment of despair soon became a turning point. A young woman named Grace Preko, a student teacher at the presbyterian training college then, who was totally blind, visited Gertrude at the School for the Blind. "That conversation was very meaningful to me," Gertrude reflects. "It reaffirmed to me that blindness didn't mean the end. I had a future." Inspired by Grace, Gertrude transferred to the Presbyterian Training College, after her lessons in braille and typewriting, eventually becoming the first visually impaired graduate of both the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA) and the Akrofi-Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, earning two master's degrees in 2010 and 2016 respectively.

Gertrude's professional path has been as trailblazing as it has been purposeful. She is the Immediate Past Chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the first African woman to hold the position.

As a member of the CRPD Committee since 2018, among other issues, Gertrude worked to strengthen the representation of women and girls with disabilities and to elevate the voices of minority groups often left out of disability discourse, including those with psychosocial, intellectual, and multiple disabilities.

Gertrude currently serves as Global Advocacy Manager for Social Inclusion at Sightsavers, and in November 2024, was elected as global President of the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI), becoming the first African to hold the role. She also serves on the Executive Board of the World Blind Union, is a Commissioner of the World Council of Churches (WCC), and other national organizations, consistently using her platform to champion rights-based development and inclusion.

Gertrude doesn't see her blindness as anything bad or a misfortune. Her powerful reframing defines disability not as a medical condition but as the result of *social and attitudinal barriers* that hinder equal participation. "Disability is not the presence of the impairment," she explains. "Rather, it is the structures of our world that create exclusion."

Her advocacy spans decades and continents, with a particular focus on inclusive education, accessible infrastructure and literacy. "We want braille displays, sign language interpreters, and an environment that makes life easier for persons with disabilities," she says. Her message is clear: inclusion isn't charity—it's a human right.

Gertrude is especially passionate about addressing the double and intersecting forms of discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities. "We are more likely to be uneducated, more likely to face violence, and less likely to be heard. If we are not at the decision-making table, the world loses out." In response, she has mentored many young women with disabilities and continues to be a vocal advocate for their leadership and visibility.

Despite her global accomplishments, some of Gertrude's most cherished moments are personal. She speaks with pride of her husband, John, and her three daughters—Eugenia, Eunice Deide and Euget Zevi—each thriving in their professions and families. "They've never hidden me away. They brought their friends to meet me at school. They are my biggest supporters and advocates." Gertrude also acknowledges the many mentors, colleagues, extended family members, church community, and friends who have supported her throughout her journey. "Their encouragement, prayers, and belief in my potential helped shape the person I am today."

Looking ahead, Gertrude remains fuelled by the same fire that was lit in her teenage years. In 2026, she will help lead a new global Braille Literacy Campaign, co-led by ICEVI and the World Blind Union. The campaign will call for stronger commitments from

governments, institutions, and civil society to uphold the right to braille instruction and accessible literacy formats. Grounded in collaborative partnerships with the global disability community, the campaign will champion braille as a cornerstone of literacy, dignity, and independence, especially for children and adults who are blind or deafblind.

When asked what advice she would give her younger self, Gertrude does not hesitate: *“Disability is not an inability. Being a girl does not make you less. Join your peers. Be yourself. Study hard. The sky is your limit.”*

Through her life and work, Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame exemplifies not just defiance in the face of odds, but the power of voice, vision, and collective action.

**NOTE:** This article is adapted from the following sources:

“Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame: A visually impaired trailblazer leading disability advocacy.” Graphic Online, March 8, 2025 https://www.graphic.com.gh/lifestyle/life/gertrude-oforiwa-fefoame-a-visually-impaired-trailblazer-leading-disability-advocacy.html

“She's a U.N. disability advocate who won't see her own blindness as a disability.” NPR Radio (Washington), May 13, 2023 https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2023/05/13/1174089463/when-getty-began-losing-her-vision-as-a-girl-she-was-told-her-life-was-over-wron

## Reflections on My Education as a Blind Female – Maryanne Diamond

Board Member, National Disability Insurance Agency (Australia); Past President, World Blind Union; Past Chair International Disability Alliance

I was born in the 1950s in Queensland Australia into a family who had never met or interacted with a person who was blind. My parents were advised to place me in a residential school for the blind at age 4 years old. They were told this would provide the opportunity for me to learn the skills I would need in life. At age 7 years, my family relocated to Melbourne. Over ten years I would only come home on weekends and school holidays.

I did learn many good skills: braille, orientation and mobility skills, keyboard skills and more. I made many friends during this time; some I still have today. However, all I wanted at that time was to live at home with my family.

Moving into mainstream school for the last four years for my school education was difficult. I was one of the fortunate ones, who managed this transition finishing school before undertaking a university degree majoring in mathematical statistics and then a graduate diploma information technology.

I was advised at age 12 that I should be a telephone operator. I did not know that was but responded that I was not going to do something being recommended to many blind girls. In my final year at school, I decided to study mathematics. I was advised that I should not do this as I was a female and I may fail. This surprised me as I knew males who were blind and studied maths. And I responded that I had the right to fail. Fortunately, I did not.

During my final years at school and university, it was a challenge to receive all materials in braille or an accessible format in a timely manner. At university I established a network of readers from among my classmates for mathematical subjects to read to me. They would read their lecture notes to me; I would put them into braille. For other subjects I used a tape-recorder to record the lectures and later make notes into braille for my use and study materials. This method worked for me.

I was not sure what I would do after university but moved into the information technology sector. This was a relatively new field at the time, and I managed to obtain a role with the Australian government as a cadet Computer Systems Officer. Over the years I was employed in other sectors such as advocacy, large service provider management, policy and senior government roles. I was fortunate to hold the position of President of the World Blind Union and Chair of the International Disability Alliance between 2008 – 2016.

I believe my good grounding in blindness skills and becoming a good self-advocate allowed me to succeed in obtaining many achievements in my long career.

## Expectation and Education - Dr. Diana Stentoft

Chair, Danish Association of the Blind, WBU Secretary General 2021–2025, researcher and educator.



Growing up in a rural part of Denmark it was obvious early on that different children were met with different expectations. Some were obviously met with expectations of joining a family business, some were expected to pursue an academic path because they were into books and yet others were not really met with any expectations because their families

had family issues, no money or showed little initiative in the local community. And then there was that partially sighted girl who I think the community struggled to place.

I grew up in a middleclass family. I was obviously not very handy and instead I sought comfort in books. But could I be trusted with expectations of getting an academic education? My Danish teacher in the small grades absolutely believed in me, my teachers in older grades did not really place any expectations on me. To them I seem like more of yet another burden in the classroom. My parents just wanted me to be happy and would support me in whatever I decided. Not really being met by any expectations was hard. It made me question myself and my possibilities to contribute and be a part. It also made me extremely lonely in my feelings of being different.

Two factors significantly contributed to my path forward. One was meeting with other blind and partially sighted youth and finally realising that I could in fact take an academic education and there were suddenly some expectations to meet. The other factor was my curiosity which was nourished particularly during my a-levels. This was a curiosity both on academic subjects but mainly on what I could do and be as a now young woman with a visual impairment. Could I go to university? Could I study a semester abroad? Could I be an intern abroad? And later on, could I go and work in an African country and could I do a doctorate and earn a Ph.D.?

The lack of expectations from others has no doubt impacted my life trajectory. The feeling of others doubting whether you can contribute and the sense that a community, a teacher or an employer struggles to see your worth can be devastating on a young girl or woman who is blind or partially sighted. It is easy to just accept and comply. In such situations what can make all the difference is access to education and in that a chance to explore, be curious and develop your own perspectives and most importantly shape your own expectations. For the visually impaired girl education can create dreams, hopes and desires going well beyond what anyone else may think you are capable of, interested in or good at. For me as the newly elected and first female leader of the Danish Association of the Blind, education has been key and continuing to learn continues to be essential in my everyday work. When I have lacked expectations from others the requirements from an education have provided a much needed scaffold and direction. But the doubt of whether I can contribute and be good at what I do still lingers and shows its ugly face on occasions. This doubt is at least in part anchored in lack of expectations from an early age and I have often fought that doubt through my education.

I firmly believe my story is not unique. There are many blind and partially sighted girls and women in this world who are not met with support but also expectations of them to be able to contribute and participate. The work done by organisations such as ICEVI and World Blind Union among others is invaluable as awareness of the potential of blind and partially sighted women and men alike is brought to educators, parents, communities and decision-makers.

# Leading with Purpose: My Story from Argentina to ICEVI - Gladys Viviana Correa

President, ICEVI Latin America

I live in Argentina, in the southern part of Latin America. I am 58 years old, blind, and the proud mother of a 32-year-old son. I hold a teaching qualification in the Braille system. I also completed all the coursework for a degree in Psychology. However, due to a serious act of discrimination—when a professor claimed that no student with a disability should study her subject—I faced years of struggle at university. Although I initiated legal action, the process became exhausting. With just two final exams and a research project remaining, I ultimately made the difficult decision to step away from the degree. Nevertheless, I gained knowledge and tools that I apply every day in my professional life.

I currently serve as Executive Director of an organisation of people with visual disabilities in my city, Mar del Plata. In 1998, together with a friend, I co-founded a rehabilitation centre for adults with visual impairments. I have led the Braille program there for many years and served as Technical Coordinator from 2007 to 2022.

In recent years, our organisation has grown through the creation of two additional services: a day centre for older adults who live alone or spend much of their time at home, and a program called *Shared Readings*. The latter began as a virtual initiative during the pandemic and now continues with monthly in-person gatherings, offering adults the opportunity to rediscover the joy of reading for pleasure. I am actively involved in developing and implementing institutional projects related to both services.

I also have a background in Scout leadership, which has greatly influenced my approach to leadership and teamwork across various roles. I have served in leadership positions at both local and national levels, including within the Argentine Federation of Institutions for the Blind and Partially Sighted (FAICA) and the Argentine Association of Professionals in Visual Disability (ASAERCA), where I held several positions, including President.

Since 2018, I have been actively involved in ICEVI Latin America. In 2021, I was appointed Coordinator for the Southern Cone subregion, overseeing activities across four countries.

Between 2022 and 2023, I had the honour of coordinating the development of a rehabilitation manual for adults with visual disabilities in Latin America. This significant project brought together 43 professionals from 16 countries, organised into 15 teams to draft individual chapters. I was also responsible for the final editing and ensuring stylistic consistency throughout the manual.

Most recently, on 30 May 2025, I assumed the great honour of serving as President of ICEVI Latin America. This role is both a beautiful and meaningful challenge in my life. I deeply value institutional collaboration and look forward to building strong communication with ICEVI colleagues, sharing experiences, and contributing wherever I can.

# Living Without Sight in a Foreign Country: My Journey Through Challenges and Support – Yulia Mironova



I am a blind person. The war in Ukraine forced me and my parents to leave our home, so we moved to Hungary. It wasn't an easy decision — there is still sadness in my heart from having to leave, to abandon familiar streets, the voice of my homeland, the home where I know everything by touch and sound. But at the same time, I feel deep gratitude. Here in Hungary, I am surrounded by new friends and teachers who are helping me build the steps toward my future. Back in Ukraine, there was no rehabilitation course for blind people. In Budapest, I started learning orientation and mobility and other skills of blindness. Thanks to my friends' and teachers' support, I am learning to cope with difficulties and discover possibilities I had never imagined before.

Being in a new country is challenging for anyone. But when you live as a blind person, it becomes a daily struggle. I found myself in an unfamiliar language environment, with no established support system. Even simple tasks, like finding a way or asking a question in the street, can turn into emotional trials. When you can't rely on sight, the usual cues — gestures, facial expressions, visual hints — disappear. You have to depend entirely on tone, instinct, and guesswork, and that becomes especially hard when the language isn't familiar.

It's hard for me, but I'm doing my best. There are moments when I feel tired, lost, even like a burden. Sometimes I'm afraid I'll say something wrong, misunderstand someone's tone, or miss the fact that someone is irritated or wants to leave. But I'm not alone. My family, my friends, and even strangers who don't walk past — all of them help me come back to myself and believe in myself again. With each day, I feel I am growing stronger.

Social situations can be tough too. Some people simply don't know how to talk to someone who's blind, and if there's a language barrier as well, they often choose not to try at all. That can hurt. But I try not to close myself off. I'm learning the language. I'm learning to ask for help, even when it's hard. I'm getting used to the fact that I may not be understood the first time — and I keep speaking anyway.

Technology helps a lot — voice assistants, screen readers, audio navigation maps. But there's still a quiet, persistent fatigue from having to explain everything, from the constant

need to be “one step ahead” so I don’t get lost, don’t mess up, don’t become a burden. Yet, even in the silence and confusion of new sounds and words, there are moments of light. Someone patiently repeats a sentence, someone learns to speak clearly and slowly, someone smiles in a way you can feel without seeing. These moments are like small stars — they guide me forward, even when everything around me feels dark.

All my life before losing my sight a couple of years ago was deeply connected to visual arts. From childhood, I studied at a special art school where I learned painting, graphic design, composition, and handcraft. Later, I entered an art college and became a graphic designer. My world revolved around visual expression—it shaped how I saw life, quite literally.

So, when I began to lose my vision, it felt like a cruel joke—one that wasn’t funny at all. I suddenly found myself in complete darkness, both literally and metaphorically. And from that point on, none of my previous skills could guide me. I had to start over—completely. In the beginning, I couldn’t even imagine what the new path of my life might look like. I spent days, weeks, months—even years—searching for a new way to live, to express, to be. I tried hundreds of things—and I still do. Ceramics, writing, translating, guiding meditation, yoga, singing, playing musical instruments … Each one became a way of reaching out into the darkness, hoping to touch something true. And while I’m still walking this path, still searching, the most important lesson I’ve learned is this: the search itself is the path. The task of finding myself isn’t something I will ever “complete.” It’s a process—a quiet, ongoing unfolding. What matters most is to keep moving forward. To be patient with myself. To stay open—with the support of friends, family, and the quiet guidance of the universe.

## From Vision Loss to Purpose: A Story of Resilience Through Inclusive Education - Putri Rokhmayati, S.Kom

Quality Assurance Engineer, Bhumi Varta Technology, Indonesia



### Introduction

For many people, education is a path to knowledge, employment, or improved living standards. But for blind individuals like me, education is something much deeper. It is a

path to social inclusion, a tool for independence, and often, a reason to keep believing in ourselves. This is a personal reflection of my journey from being sighted to becoming blind, from feeling lost to finding meaning through education. Along the way, I discovered just how powerful education can be, especially when it is inclusive, accessible, and empowering.

## From Science Student to Uncertainty

I was not born blind. For the first 20 years of my life, I could see clearly. I grew up in a family that deeply valued education. My parents, despite not having access to higher education themselves, always emphasized one core belief: that education was the key to building a better future. That belief stayed with me. From an early age, I had a strong interest in science and mathematics. I found joy in solving problems and understanding how things worked. The world of logic and experimentation gave me a sense of direction, built my confidence, and shaped my aspiration to one day contribute to society through knowledge and innovation. That aspiration led me to pursue higher education. I was awarded a scholarship and admitted into the Chemical Engineering program at one of Indonesia's leading universities. At the time, everything seemed to be going according to plan. I enjoyed studying, participated in campus activities, and envisioned a clear future: graduating on time, gaining professional experience, and building a career in research or industry. But not everything in life unfolds the way we expect.

In the middle of my third year, I was diagnosed with brain tuberculosis, a condition that affects the central nervous system and gradually damaged my optic nerves. Within months, I began to experience serious vision loss. I found it increasingly difficult to read, recognize faces, or move around independently. Losing my sight was more than just a physical change. It marked a deep emotional and psychological shift that touched nearly every part of my life. The most difficult part wasn't the loss of vision itself, but the painful realization that I had to let go of the dreams I had worked so hard to pursue.

Eventually, I had to pause my studies. I could no longer navigate the campus independently or keep up with the visually demanding coursework. Letting go of the academic path I had worked so hard for was not easy. It meant setting aside the plans I had built for years and coming to terms with a future that suddenly felt uncertain. The career I once envisioned was no longer within reach, at least not in the way I had imagined it.

## Finding New Light Through Community

One of the things that helped me rise from the lowest point after losing my sight was the power of community. At that time, I was introduced to Yayasan Mitra Netra, a nonprofit organization in Jakarta that supports blind people in Indonesia. From the moment I entered that space, I met individuals who completely changed the way I perceived blindness. There were teachers, musicians, therapists, and entrepreneurs, many of whom had also experienced vision loss. And yet, their spirit to live fully remained. They

spoke with confidence, had clear goals, and led active, productive lives. Their lives may have looked different from the future I once imagined, but they brought new hope and meaning. From them, I learned that blindness wasn't the end of dreams it was simply a redirection. They showed me that limitations do not define who we are, how we respond to those limitations does.

This awareness gave me the courage to start over. With a renewed sense of purpose, I decided to continue my education. However, I realized that returning to my previous field was no longer a viable option, as Chemical Engineering heavily relies on visual skills. So, I made a big decision to pursue an entirely new field of study.

## Starting Over: A New Path in Tech and Education

I chose to study Informatics Engineering, a field rarely pursued by people with visual impairment in Indonesia at the time. This decision raised many questions and doubts. There were no known role models in the country who were blind and working professionally in tech. Without examples to look up to, many viewed my decision as unrealistic, too ambitious, or even impossible. Moreover, technology was seen as an unusual path for women. In the programming communities I joined, I was frequently the only woman and certainly the only blind woman. But despite the doubt and hesitation around me, I held on to a simple belief: technology had helped me regain my independence. And for that reason, I wanted to understand it more deeply, so that one day, I could help build empowering solutions for others just as technology had empowered me.

This journey wasn't easy. In my cohort, I was the only visually impaired student. For many lecturers and classmates, I was the first person with a disability they had ever encountered in an academic setting. Almost all the material was delivered visually, from diagrams to interfaces to live demonstrations. Many of the lecturers were unfamiliar with teaching blind students. These factors often made me feel left behind, especially in the first semesters. But I soon realized that to survive, I needed more than just technical adaptation, I had to build open, honest communication. I began designing my own learning strategies: recording lectures, converting study materials into screen reader–friendly formats, and searching for alternative, more inclusive learning resources. I learned to grasp concepts through sound, logic, and structured thinking, not through images or visuals.

Over time, I also learned to be my own advocate. I began expressing my accessibility needs clearly to both lecturers and classmates without shame or hesitation. I realized that people could not help if they didn't know what I needed. Communication became the key to making the learning process more inclusive and fair. This experience taught me that inclusion in education isn't just about assistive tools, it's about perspective. My presence in the classroom challenged norms, but it also created opportunities for shared growth. Some lecturers began voluntarily adapting their teaching methods, delivering

lessons without over-relying on visuals, providing materials in accessible formats, and offering additional time for certain assignments.

My classmates also started to see inclusion as a collaborative process that enriched everyone's learning. They helped describe things I couldn't see, engaged in more open discussions, and most importantly welcomed me into the academic community without stigma. Each of these small steps proved that inclusion isn't something "granted" to those seen as different, it's something we build together, every day.

## Education as a Turning Point

For me, returning to university wasn't just about earning a degree. It was a declaration that I still had a place and purpose. The world may have changed after I lost my sight, but my passion for learning remained, and education gave me a channel to direct that passion into something real. Each course I completed, each technical challenge I overcame, reminded me that I was not defined by my disability. I began to believe in my own abilities again. Not because everything became easy, but because I was learning how to face it in my own way.

Education became my turning point. It was where I rebuilt my confidence, reclaimed control over my life, and discovered the belief that I could still contribute. It didn't just change how I saw the world; it changed how I saw myself: stronger, more aware, and more courageous. Through this process, I began redesigning my future. Not based on outdated maps, but on a vision I created myself, one grounded in experience, resilience, and the unwavering belief that I could still create meaning.

## Technology: A Path to Independence and Contribution

My decision to pursue technology wasn't just practical, it was deeply personal. After becoming blind, I experienced firsthand the power of technology to restore independence. With technology, I could read, write, access information, and communicate just like everyone else. That experience sparked a desire in me to move from user to creator. I wanted to be part of building technology that was truly accessible, especially for those who had long been left behind by the digital world.

Today, I work as a Software Quality Engineer. I ensure that systems run reliably and meet high standards. It's not a common career path for blind people, especially women—but that's exactly why I chose it. I want to prove that we can show up and contribute anywhere. I believe my presence in the tech industry is meaningful. Not just for myself, but for other blind girls and women who are unsure whether they belong in tech, or in other fields once considered out of reach. I want to show them that there is a path forward and that lived experience can be a powerful asset in shaping inclusive design, development, and innovation.

## The Broader Impact: Family and Social Life

As my confidence grew through education and a meaningful career, I began to feel the ripple effects, especially within my family and social circles. In my family, the transformation has been profound. Relatives who once feared I would remain dependent now see me as a confident, independent woman forging her own path. I'm included in important decisions, trusted, and respected, not just for overcoming blindness, but for the real contributions I make. My achievements inspire not only my parents but also many other families facing similar challenges.

Socially and professionally, I found a new role as someone who could give back, share stories, and help clear the path for others. I was no longer seen merely as someone who needed help, but as someone capable of offering help. I began speaking at public forums, mentoring others, and participating in projects that champion accessibility and inclusion. This, to me, is the transformative power of education for blind girls and women: it not only restores confidence but also reclaims one's role in the family and society. It rebuilds the relationship between the individual and her environment. Not as a burden, but as a contributor with value and voice.

## Inclusion Does Not End in the Classroom

From my experience, I've come to understand that true inclusion cannot stop at the classroom. It must extend into every part of life, including workplaces, communities, and public spaces. Inclusive education isn't just about policies or facilities. It's a perspective that values diversity as a strength. It acknowledges that everyone learns differently, and those differences aren't barriers, but opportunities to broaden our collective understanding.

We, visually impaired women, don't seek special treatment. We only want fair opportunities to learn, grow, and contribute. When those opportunities exist, we don't just attempt to keep up, we make real impact. I've seen how the presence of just one blind individual in an academic or professional space can shift perspectives, teaching approaches, and even system design. Inclusion is contagious and when it's practiced sincerely, everyone benefits.

## A Hope for the Future

If there's one thing I've learned from this journey, it's that inclusive education can change lives. Not just for those who receive it, but for the ecosystems around them. Education helped me recover from loss, rebuild my future, and rediscover my role in society. I know there are many other visually impaired people who want to learn but are hindered by inaccessible materials, unprepared educators, or societal stigma. They don't need pity. They need access. They need to know they deserve space to grow.

I hope more educational institutions will see inclusion not as a burden, but as a step toward justice. I hope society grows to recognize diversity not as something to tolerate,

but something to celebrate. And I hope more girls with disabilities are not just supported to survive but empowered to thrive.

### Conclusion: Redefining My Path, Opening Paths for Others

My journey from a science student to a professional in tech has been full of unexpected turns. But it's also where I learned that loss isn't the end. With support from community, family, technology, and inclusive education, I've rebuilt a life I'm proud of. A life not defined by limitations, but by meaning, contribution, and hope.

I know I'll continue to face challenges. But I also carry with me the belief that I have something to give. I don't need to be perfect to be valuable. And I am not alone. Now, I want to help others do the same. Because every learner deserves the opportunity. Every student deserves to be seen. And every woman, regardless of background or condition deserves a future that's worthy, meaningful, and full of hope.

Let's keep building a world where education truly opens doors for all.

## The Story of an Actress: A Blind Girl in the World of Silence – Negin Safarzadeh Moghaddam



*"I have experienced the most beautiful conversations—wordless and unseen—in a world of silence'.*

My name is Negin Safarzadeh Moghaddam. I am eighteen years old, standing at the threshold of adulthood with a hopeful heart and a mind thirsty for knowledge, as I step onto the path of studying psychology. I am blind—but blindness has never taken away my vision for the depth of life. I have not merely gotten used to the darkness—I have made peace with it, and from its heart, I've shaped a light to guide my way.

Since birth, I have lived with glaucoma. Yet what stands out more than the darkness in my life is the constant, unwavering presence of my family—whose love has been an eternal lantern through my nights. With their support, I've rooted myself in various branches of art and learning: from storytelling and songwriting, to classical piano, recitation, dubbing, and acting.

And acting...

For me, acting wasn’t just an artistic endeavour—it was a gateway into an unknown world. In one of my acting experiences, I was cast alongside deaf actors whose language was not words, but expressions and movement. To share the stage with them, I had to step into a realm I had never known: the language of facial expressions, body movement, and raw, unfiltered emotion.

Imagine a blind girl, standing before a group of deaf actors—expected to speak with her face, create meaning with her hands, and connect through the movements of her body. A task that seems difficult even for those who can see. But in those silent moments, I discovered that the heart possesses abilities that eyes and ears may never fully comprehend.

With the guidance of my beloved coach, the kindness of my sister, and the patient companionship of my deaf friends, we dismantled the walls of silence and darkness and built a bridge of emotion. I learned how to express meaning with a raised eyebrow, a tilted shoulder, a barely-there smile—conveying my character to my fellow actors through sheer feeling. And they, in turn, opened the way for me with their sign language and their deeply kind eyes.

There’s a common misconception that the blind and the deaf cannot communicate—two worlds with no bridge between them. But my experience in acting shattered that belief. I lived the most beautiful dialogues, wordless and sightless, in a world of silence. And I learned that no barrier is insurmountable where there is will and love. I am proud of my blindness. It has taught me to see depth, to find paths that others pass by without noticing.

I believe that if a door closes in my life, I will craft a key—and if I cannot find a key, I will carve out a new way. Disability only exists when we begin to believe in our inability. I may never become a surgeon, but I can be a psychologist—one who heals the unseen wounds of the soul. Because disability is not an end—it is the beginning of a different journey, one that reveals strengths the eyes can never see ...

The "Parvaz International Film Festival", with a strong belief in the abilities of people with disabilities, has organized cinematic training programs such as acting, screenwriting, editing, graphic design, and dubbing to nurture and develop their talents.

*Compiled and translated by Dr. Fataneh Amiri, Founder Director, Parvaz International Film Festival and Miss World with Disability.*

# Challenges of the Children with Visual Impairment: The Case of the Girl-Child – Ruby Okwaa Martinson

Okuapemman School, Ghana

Children with visual impairment face unique challenges that can significantly impact their life. While individuals may learn to cope with challenges as they grow older, it is important to address the specific difficulties experienced by visually impaired children, especially the blind girl child.

These challenges can have long-lasting effects on their development and well-being. It is particularly crucial because many children with disabilities struggle to advocate for themselves, and their voices often go unheard. By shedding light on these issues, we hope to encourage support and understanding for visually impaired children, ensuring they receive assistance and the attention they need. One of the significant challenges faced by individuals with disabilities including visual impairment is dealing with inappropriate and hurtful questions from others. People often ask such questions out of curiosity, without realizing the impact they can have. Questions like “can you recognize people by their voices alone?”, or “do you see black and white or colourful dreams?” It is imperative to learn to desist from such emotionally hurtful questions.

Children with visual impairment frequently experience bullying from their peers. The children who engage in bullying behaviour due to someone’s disability often lack an understanding of respecting differences in God’s creation. It becomes the responsibility of adults including parents and teachers, to instil in children the value of embracing diversity. It is essential to educate children from a young age about disabilities and individuals with disabilities. They need to know that having a disability doesn’t make a person inferior or superior but simply different.

By fostering awareness, we can help children develop empathy, compassion, acceptance towards others, regardless of their abilities. By teaching children to appreciate and celebrate differences, we contribute to creating a more inclusive and compassionate society where individuals with disabilities are treated with respect and understanding. Overprotective behaviour of parents can also have negative ramifications on the child with disability, especially the blind child. Naturally, parents have genuine concerns for their child’s safety and well-being. However, excessive protectiveness can have its drawbacks. It can hinder a child’s development of self-confidence and independence. If children are constantly shielded from handling even their basic needs, they may become reliant on their parents for everything. Some visually impaired children have an inherent desire to be self-sufficient. The over-protective behaviour of parents can frustrate their natural inclination. They need the opportunity to explore despite the perceived risks. It is important to let them try, experience failures, and try again. They possess far more abilities than their parents or society may assume.

There is also the issue of difficult emotional moments. Children with visual impairment are acutely aware of their differences from others, and unfortunately, they often encounter individuals who make them feel inferior due to their lack of sight. These encounters can trigger challenging emotional moments for them. They hesitate to confide in their parent about their feelings. They may even experience guilt for perceiving themselves as burdens or causing trouble for their parents. Most of the time, these emotional struggles are sparked by external factors, such as the behaviour of others. The point mentioned above contributes to this situation, and it can profoundly impact on the child with visual impairment throughout their life, shaping their personality and self-perception.

As a girl child with visual impairment, I have faced numerous challenges, and I can confidently share my experiences, having encountered many of the issues mentioned. I must tell the gospel truth that, with regard to education, my parents have been very kind to me, ensuring my continuous presence in school from kindergarten to my current level in second cycle level. They will go all out to ensure my needs, as they themselves are teachers in schools nurturing children of other parents. My teachers are very helpful because they perceive and realize the talent in me as a brilliant girl. Thus, they have particular attention for me as an individual. Some of the acute challenges that are personally faced are how, as a lady, I will be able to choose appropriate clothing, apply makeup or style my hair. Public restrooms and changing facilities almost always lack accessibility features, making it harder for me to manage my care independently. It is at times difficult to see objects at a distance on a whiteboard or a blackboard.

I would like to take this opportunity to advise my fellow girls with disabilities who are growing up today, who feel isolated, discouraged, or unseen, to trust themselves and take their education seriously. The adage that "disability is not inability" has always been true and with a sound education, they will make it even better than their sighted counterparts.

In conclusion, I would say blind people are just like everyone else. The education and jobs of visually impaired individuals are directly proportional to the expectations that people around them have of them and the degree of positive attitude they encounter. The more capable and able you believe they are, the more they will shine. Self-esteem, self-belief, and self-image are partially formed through social interactions, and it is important people encounter empowering experiences.

# The Journey Beyond Sight – Nguyen Thi Thu Uyen (Jessica)

Project Coordinator, Sao Mai Center for the Blind, Vietnam,



“I won’t let you go anywhere!” my father shouted, his voice drowned by the heavy rain pounding our metal roof and the thunder rolling outside, after which his hand slammed on the table between us. I had never seen him so furious.

“You’re blind … and you’re a girl … How dare you think of moving to the city alone?”

His words cut deep. Behind the harshness, I knew it wasn’t only anger, but fear - fear for me being alone in new territory. I could sense the fear for my safety, fear for my future, fear of the unknown world beyond our quiet village growing deep inside me. I wouldn’t let it chase me away from my dream. Day after day, I searched for the right words to convince my dad. All I wanted was a chance to continue learning to shape my future. With quiet support from my mother and my aunt, my father finally gave in, his final words left an echo in me “Don’t expect any money from me.”

I understood, life wasn’t easy for our family. My parents were farmers. They worked so hard to earn enough for our daily expenses of our five-member family. University years would be too much to afford, I wasn’t asking for money, I promised myself that I wouldn’t let my parents worry about my expenses in the city. Eventually, with my dreams tucked into my heart, I left for Ho Chi Minh City. I left behind my father’s anger, my mother’s worries, and everything familiar.

I know now my father didn’t mean to hold me back, his fears were real. For a blind girl from a village, the city was overwhelming. I didn’t want my life to be shaped by fear. From a young age, I believed education could change everything, that belief pushed me to study hard in school. I didn’t aim to prove others wrong; I just wanted to prove to myself that I was capable to achieve certain goals in life.

However, life brought its own challenges to me. My vision faded completely. The world around me turned to shadows and light. I had to leave medical college, and for a while, I felt lost. A hundred times, I wondered why me, and let the sadness settle in.

Fortunately, I wasn't alone; I had friends who were visually impaired, but strong and determined. They reminded me that this new path in life had just started. Seeing their courage and using their help, I slowly found my way back. I began learning and equipping myself with skills that a visually impaired person needed to live independently.

A new chapter of my life began when I received a full scholarship to study English at Van Hien University. With the help of my determination, assistive technology, my growing English skills, I discovered new possibilities I had never imagined. From a computer skills exchange in Malaysia, to an international conference on higher education in the Philippines, to a leadership program in the United States, each experience took me from strength to strength, and my belief that everything is possible.

Currently, I am working as a project coordinator at Sao Mai Center for the Blind, and this position gives me opportunities to become a companion of my visually impaired community, helping people to access inclusive education and employment opportunities.

An adventure of a journey, sometimes, was dark and uneasy, but after all, it created who I am today. Education shed a light on my way, guiding me through the most difficult time of my life. More than that, education bridged the gap to my family. After all arguments, doubts and fears, I realised how much my parents love and care for me. I would never forget my dad's words to me on a peaceful night two years ago, "I'm proud of you my child". Those were simple words, yet they carried so much warmth and trust. Now I tell my story for myself and for anyone who feels lost, just to say, "Believe in yourself, you are stronger than you think."

## Sight unseen: The Experience of Growing up Blind – Galit Marin

Disability Rights Coordinator, Ofek Liyladenu, Israel.

Imagine a five-year-old girl in kindergarten who already knows how to read and write. She writes a short story, but another girl from the class takes the page and destroys everything written on it.

The little girl who wrote the story was me, more than 30 years ago, and the story was written in Braille. As a woman who has been blind since birth, I had learned, by the age of five, how to read and write Braille. A classmate tore my very first page using her fingernails. She was jealous that I had a special teacher who came several times a week to teach me Braille, and she envied all the special tools and toys I was given.  Naturally, I was hurt and I cried. But that afternoon, her mother blindfolded her and let her play and walk around the house with her eyes closed. The girl then apologized and asked for my forgiveness. Don't worry—we later became good friends.



*Caption: Galit Marin reading in braille to a group of children.*

Incidents like that one were quite rare in my childhood. I grew up in a small community where everyone knew one another, and throughout my school years, that was just about the only time I was picked on because of my blindness. I've been completely blind for as long as I can remember. I can't point to the moment I realized I was blind, or say who told me, when, or how.

When I was about two years old, a neighbour my age asked me if I could see the airplane flying in the sky. "I can't see it, but I can hear the noise it makes," I replied. Even at a young age, I knew how to explain that while I couldn't see, I could still be a part of the world around me and make up for my blindness by using my other senses—in that case, my hearing.

In the fall, Israelis and Jews worldwide celebrate the start of the Jewish new year, called Rosh Hashanah in Hebrew. On that holiday, it is our custom to eat varied fruit and vegetables and recite blessings and hopes based on the Hebrew words for the produce of the coming year. One such fruit is the pomegranate. When I was 3 years old, we learned about the holiday and its customs in preschool. The teacher showed a pomegranate to all the children. Since I couldn't see it, I wanted to feel it. The teacher agreed, but then the other children also wanted to touch it. Thanks to me, all the children didn't just settle for seeing the pomegranate—they also learned to recognize its texture and feel the crown at its top. This anecdote demonstrates one subtle but important way in which children benefit from having a blind child in their class and gain an experience that is rich and multi-sensory.

My entire school education took place in the mainstream educational system in the town where I grew up.  I was successfully integrated into the educational system. As I noted, it was very rare that I experienced discrimination, and in those cases, it was the exception that proved the rule.

Over the years, and especially as an outcome of my work as a 'Disability Rights Coordinator for "Ofek Liyladenu" I've gain insight into the complexities of promoting inclusion in communities and Israeli society at large. There are many factors that influence the extent to which inclusion is successful. Many factors influence its success. I believe that my character and personality, the tools I received from my parents, and the

attitudes of my friends and the educational staff who guided me over the years—are all factors that contributed to the success of my integration: I was in the mainstream, in the schools I attended, our local youth movement, and the many community-based leisure activities in which I participated.

As a schoolgirl, I understood that if I wanted my friends to guide and assist me, I also needed to take into account that they needed their own time to run and play ball and other games in which I couldn't participate actively. I remained on the side as they released their energies, and the space that I gave them made them more willing to help me when I needed their help. They loved coming to play at my house because I had unique board games and card games for blind people that couldn't be found in any other home.

Today, I am the mother of Ma'ayan, a five-month-old baby girl, and time will tell how I will raise her in light of the life experience I've gained.



*Caption: Galit Marin with her guide dog and other parents.*

## The Role of Education in My Life as a Young Woman with Low Vision – Larasati Riskia Adiani

Incoming Master's student, Indonesia



I was diagnosed with low vision when I was in the second grade of elementary school. At the time, I did not fully understand what this meant. I just knew that I could not see things

as clearly or as easily as my classmates. Over the years, my vision gradually deteriorated. This progressive change brought challenges, confusion, and sometimes worry. But it also shaped me in ways I never anticipated—giving me strength, resilience, and a sense of purpose that continue to grow.

Growing up with a visual impairment in Indonesia was not always easy. Access to inclusive education was limited, and awareness about disability, especially among educators, was still evolving. When I was about to enter junior high school, I encountered one of the first major turning points in my life. My family and I hoped that I could attend a public school, like most children in our neighbourhood. However, I was rejected by several schools due to my disability. The only format for entrance exams was printed paper with small font sizes, which I could not read.

My parents, always respectful, tried to advocate for a simple accommodation—they asked whether the exam could be enlarged or read aloud by a teacher or a family member. Unfortunately, the school refused. I remember one principal who, with a firm tone, told us that “This school is only for students who are physically and mentally healthy.” At that moment, I was too young to fully grasp the implications of his words, but I could feel the pain in my mother’s voice when she tried to stay polite and composed. That memory stayed with me for a long time—not as bitterness, but as a reminder of how much work we still have to do to make education inclusive.

The same experience happened again when I applied to senior high school. Multiple rejections based on my condition left me discouraged. But my family never gave up on me. Eventually, I was accepted into a private school—one that not only welcomed me but also provided the accommodations I needed. During exams, the school arranged for someone to read the questions to me. I could finally participate in learning without being left behind.

However, private education came with a financial cost. The fees were much higher than public schools. My parents, who are not wealthy, made great sacrifices to ensure I could continue my education. They never made me feel like a burden. Instead, they constantly reminded me that I had every right to pursue my dreams and that education was my key to independence. Their belief in me became one of my greatest sources of strength. I realize now how lucky I am to have parents who not only supported me but also understood the value of education.

At school, I studied in the same classroom with students without disabilities. I did not receive special treatment in academics, and I worked hard to keep up with my peers. My parents believed that this kind of environment would prepare me for life beyond the classroom—where I would one day work and engage with people from all walks of life.

When I look back, those years were full of learning—not just academic learning, but life learning. I was learning how to adapt and how to believe in my own abilities even when others doubted them.

## University Life: Learning to Speak for Myself

When I entered university, I was filled with hope—and a bit of nervousness. I had been accepted into one of the top universities in Indonesia, based on my academic performance in high school. I was proud, and so were my parents. But this new chapter came with new responsibilities, and I quickly realized that university would require me to be more independent than ever before.

Until that point, it was usually my mother who communicated with my teachers about my needs. But as I stepped into adulthood, she gently said to me, “You’re old enough now to speak for yourself.” I did not fully realize it at the time, but that was my first real step into self-advocacy. I had to explain my condition to lecturers, request accommodations, and learn how to navigate a system that had not yet built the support structures for students with disabilities.

At that time, my university did not yet have a disability support unit. There were no official channels to request assistive technology or alternative formats for learning materials. So, I had to find my own way.

Because of my low vision, I couldn’t see the blackboard or PowerPoint slides during class. I could not read printed materials unless the font was very large and I was extremely close to the page. To overcome this, I used a handycam. I would zoom in on the board or screen and read through the handycam’s display. The zoom was so high that the screen could only show about one word at a time. I had to hold and manually move the camera constantly. This meant I couldn’t take notes during class. Later, at home, I would replay the recording on a large TV screen, sit very close, and take notes. This took much more time and energy than it would for other students.

I remember there was a moment when I felt misunderstood, but that very moment became a turning point in how I learned to advocate for myself and communicate better.

One day, I arrived in class just moments before the lecture began. I hadn’t yet had the opportunity to explain to the lecturer why I was using a handycam. As the class started, the lecturer noticed the device and asked me in front of everyone, “Why are you recording instead of taking notes like everyone else?”

I tried to explain. I told him that I had low vision, and that the handycam helped me read what was written on the board. I also added that I just using the zoom feature. My class leader kindly spoke up to support me and clarify further. I understood that not everyone would be familiar with assistive tools, and I didn’t take it personally.

However, in the following week’s class, the lecturer addressed me again, this time saying, “Don’t ask for pity.” In that moment, I felt a mix of surprise and confusion. I had never intended to seek pity. I simply wanted to be included—to learn in the way that worked for me. The words stayed with me, because they challenged me to reflect: How could I communicate my needs in a way that builds understanding without being misunderstood?

When I got home, I cried. Not from weakness, but from the emotional weight of feeling unseen despite my efforts to participate fully and independently. It was a quiet moment of release—one I now see as necessary in my journey toward resilience.

I chose not to let that experience define my university life. Instead, I kept attending the class. I reminded myself of why I was there and what I wanted to achieve. My mother said: “You’ll meet all kinds of people. This is part of your journey to becoming stronger.”

That experience taught me so much—the importance of preparation, clear communication, and the power of patience. I realized that not everyone will immediately understand what we need, but we can choose how we respond. I chose to respond with perseverance. I was also reminded that support is all around, often in quiet, everyday moments. Many lecturers, teaching assistants, and classmates were incredibly supportive. They shared notes, explained materials, and never made me feel like I was asking for too much. Their gestures, no matter how small, meant the world to me.

Looking back, what I carry with me is gratitude—gratitude for the lessons, the strength I discovered within myself, and the empathy I learned to extend to others. Every challenge became an opportunity to grow, and every moment of misunderstanding reminded me of the importance of building bridges through dialogue and compassion.

## The Power of Support and Community

Despite the difficulties, I never felt alone. My parents were always there for me. Before big exams, they often read my textbooks aloud, page by page. It was not easy for them—they had their own work and responsibilities—but they never made me feel like a burden. Instead, they reminded me that learning is worth the effort. There were times when I felt like I was behind, but I was fortunate to study with supportive friends and receive help from kind teaching assistants.

Being surrounded by ambitious students pushed me to study harder and challenge myself. I wanted to keep up and grow alongside them. That motivation helped me stay focused. Group assignments, in particular, taught me how to work together with others, listen actively, and respect different points of view. These were not just academic lessons—they were life lessons. Eventually, I graduated with a satisfying GPA. But I knew that graduation was not the end—it was only the beginning of another chapter.

## Facing Rejections: The Reality of Employment as a Woman with Visual Impairment

After graduating from university, I was hopeful—but reality hit me hard. I submitted job applications to many places, yet rejection after rejection came. Some employers never responded. Others politely declined. The job-seeking process was not only exhausting; it was disheartening. Sometimes I wondered if my degree and years of hard work really mattered. I had thought that having a university degree would level the playing field—and to some extent, it did—but I soon realized that in many parts of Indonesia, there are still significant barriers to employment for persons with disabilities.

But I did not give up. I kept applying. I joined training programs to improve my skills. I volunteered. I helped my parents run our small family business. I took on internships whenever I could. Each of these activities gave me something valuable—whether it was new knowledge or practical experience.

As my eyesight gradually worsened, I found it increasingly difficult to read printed text, no matter how large the font. I began searching online to find out how other people with visual disabilities access books and information. That was when I first learned about screen reader technology, and I discovered a training program offered by Mitra Netra Foundation—an organization dedicated to empowering persons with visual disabilities in Indonesia.

I enrolled in their screen reader training, and for the first time in my life, met others who also live with visual impairment. It was eye-opening and deeply comforting. We shared stories, challenges, and practical tips with one another. It felt like finding a community—a space where I was not alone.

Through Mitra Netra, I also gained access to new experiences that helped build my confidence. These opportunities did more than enhance my skills—they helped me rediscover my voice, expand my network, and grow into someone who is not only learning but also beginning to contribute in new ways.

## A New Beginning: Working with an International Organization

After years of effort and persistence, I received some good news. I was accepted as an external collaborator, a communications consultant for inclusion, at an international organization that was open to working with persons with disabilities. It was a contract-based position, and the duration was limited. But it was a turning point in my life. This opportunity meant so much to me—not just because I finally had formal employment, but because I was seen and valued for my knowledge, skills, and perspective. I was welcomed by a team that respected diversity, and I felt safe being open about my condition.

Working in this organization gave me the chance to apply what I had learned. I contributed to content creation, reviewed materials to ensure they were accessible and inclusive, and provided insights from the perspective of someone with lived experience. It was empowering to be heard.  Looking back, I believe that my university education played a role in helping me get this job. Many organizations, list higher education as a requirement. My degree helped validate my capabilities—and my persistence showed my readiness to work hard.

This experience taught me that when the right opportunities are combined with inclusion and awareness, persons with disabilities can thrive and contribute meaningfully. We just need the door to be opened.

### The Next Chapter: Preparing for Postgraduate Studies

Around the same time, I received the job, I also got another piece of good news: I had been selected as a recipient of a competitive scholarship for a Master's degree program. This was not the first time I had applied for scholarships—I had submitted several applications in the past, most of which had been unsuccessful. But I never gave up. This particular scholarship is special. Not only is it competitive and well-regarded, but it is also inclusive of persons with disabilities. The program provides reasonable accommodations and support tailored to students' needs. That makes me feel hopeful—that I could pursue my studies without constantly having to explain, justify, or struggle alone.

Preparing for postgraduate studies is not easy, especially now that my vision has further decreased compared to when I was an undergraduate. But I believe the effort will be worth it. I know that continuing my education is not just about getting another degree—it is about deepening my knowledge and positioning myself to make an impact in my community.

### My Hope: Inclusive Education for All

I am deeply grateful to my parents, teachers, friends, and everyone who supported me along the way. Their belief in me carried me forward when I doubted myself. I also know there are many girls and women out there who are just as capable but still waiting for that same support—waiting for a chance. That is why I hope to see more girls and women with visual impairments being supported—not just to access education, but to thrive in it. With the right support, we can grow, contribute meaningfully to our families and communities, and help build a more inclusive world.

My journey has not been easy, and I know there will still be challenges ahead. But education has taught me that every obstacle holds a lesson. Every rejection can become redirection. And every step forward, no matter how small, is a victory.

## Who's that Girl? – Katrina Taylor

Social Worker, Writer, Tactile Artist and President, National Women's Branch, Blind Citizens Australia



*Katrina's comment about the photo: This photo was taken a year ago at the Bali Zoo. I had crouched down to get a closer look at the Lemurs, when one leapt up on my shoulder. After he had finished licking my hat, he spun down around my cane to the ground and walked off.*

Growing up we learn from the people around us, our families, communities including cultural groups. Here we learn about attitudes, cultural practices, and how to treat other people. We take note of the way that fully sighted people treat blind and vision impaired girls, plus their attitudes towards them. In addition to the way that blind and vision impaired girls and women act. Though some people have never met a blind or vision impaired person, let alone spent time with one, it doesn't prevent them from making assumptions about them.

For better or for worse we then copy these attitudes and actions. Unless someone or something challenges us to rethink our stance, causing us to make a conscious decision to act differently.

How do we as families, educators, blindness organisations, and communities support blind and vision impaired teenage girls to prepare for womanhood? To develop essential elements such as: build capability, have agency, foster resilience, encourage resourcefulness, develop social skills, and become streetwise? As families, educators, and communities we want fully sighted teenage girls to enter womanhood as well equipped as possible. Then the question is raised, why are our expectations often lower for blind and vision impaired teenage girls? What about the blind and vision impaired young women who were ill-prepared for womanhood? In what ways can we support and empower them?

I will endeavour to explore these questions by reflecting upon my experiences growing up in Australia during the 1970's and 1980's whilst navigating the mainstream education system. The integration of blind and vision impaired children into local schools was starting to happen more often.

## Where It All Began

I was born in 1971, in Carnarvon a small fishing town on the central coast of Western Australia about 900km north of Perth. From the moment I was born I was labelled as different. The doctor who delivered me told my parents that there was something wrong with my eyes, before they had even gotten the chance to say, "Welcome to the world little girl."

Three weeks later my mum and I were on a plane to Perth to see an ophthalmologist. The specialists couldn't tell my mum if I had any sight or not, it really was a game of wait and see. I don't know what age I was when the adults around me realised that I could see. It was later discovered that I inherited one eye condition from my mum and had one of my very own. What an over achiever! It gave me good usable vision in my right eye, and minimal usable vision in my left eye, until I was 25 when it started to change.

Mum and dad broke up when I was small, therefore mum and I moved to Queensland to live with her parents and one brother who still lived at home. We lived with my grandparents until a few months before my ninth birthday when we moved into our own place.

## Preschool

We had recently moved to just south of Brisbane. At kindergarten and preschool, I didn't know that I had a vision impairment I thought that what everyone else saw was the same as what I saw. Like the other kids I clambered over the play equipment, painted masterpieces, hammered bits of wood together with nails, rode the tricycles, dug in the sandpit, enjoyed water play, and made creations to take home to my mum. My teachers didn't exclude me from an activity because they thought it would be too dangerous for me. Nor did they stop me from trying something new because they couldn't figure out how a vision impaired child could do it.

Looking back, I am very thankful for this period of grace, as I was about to get a dose of reality, which didn't even come with a spoonful of sugar to help it go down. Primary school was coming!

## Primary School

Due to her experiences at the blind school combined with the shock of then going to a local high school where she was the only vision impaired student, my mum was determined that I would go to the local school.

The year I turned 6, I started grade 1. On my first day of school, I didn't cry, I was excited. Apparently, I told my mum that she could go. I don't remember doing this, but she does. I could remain at the local school as long as I did well academically. For if I didn't, I would have to go to the blind school. I didn't want to go there as it was far from where we lived, and I wanted to go to school with my friends. This was my sword of Damocles. It hung over my head until my first midterm report card in year 8 of high school. Looking back, this was a tonne of pressure to put on a child, and it gave me a skewed view of the kids who went to the blind school. On reflection, it also had an effect on how I saw myself, that is, I thought that being smart was the main thing that I had going for me. Subsequently getting lower marks was devastating, for if I didn't have brains, then what did I have?

Sometime during Grade 1 the grace period ended. I knew I had a vision impairment and that I was different, which made me stand out. I didn't want to stand out, as it frequently brought me negative attention. I just wanted to be like everyone else.

By the time I was 10, I had learnt to become a social chameleon, acting like the other kids, liking what they liked, etc. Even picking on other kids in my class if it meant that I didn't get picked on. I'm not proud of this, adopting the pack's mentality. To the kids I picked on, I say sorry. Blending in socially only worked for a while before something inside me told me to stop it, and to be myself, whoever she was?

Before starting school, mum and I met with the junior mistress to discuss what support I would need in class, given I wouldn't be able to read the blackboard and would have difficulty reading print. A visiting teacher from the blind school provided me with support a few times a year, by offering strategies to my teachers and assisting me with certain tasks.

Across my seven years of primary school, my teachers were generally supportive, though some more so than others. They probably did not have any special education training, so had to improvise ways to assist me. Despite being able to identify tasks that I found visually difficult or was unable to do, I didn't yet have the language or the knowledge to explain it to my teachers let alone tell them how they could best help me.

There were three events that had a lasting impact upon my primary school education and experience. In grade 3, I got reading glasses. I had a love hate relationship with my reading glasses as they were chunky, made my eyes look huge, which made me stand out more. Despite their benefits - being able to more easily write, read worksheets and read library books with smaller print, plus get less eye strain. Paradoxically, when I was older, my reading glasses gave me eye strain as I would read for much longer periods to keep up with the books we were reading as a class. My reading and writing speed was still slower than my classmates, but at least I now had a fighting chance of keeping up or at the very least not being so far behind.

Three years later my fighting chance was given a boost, with the arrival of a CCTV (closed-circuit television). I simply sat at my desk, scanned the camera around or fixed it in place to read maths problems or to write down the teacher's notes from the blackboard. No more frequent trips to the blackboard or getting in everyone's way. I could even read the blackboard at the other end of the open plan classroom without having to turn around. I really did have eyes in the back of my head!

I could also read small or faint print by focusing the camera on the book or worksheet on my desk. Even the faint purple ink looked dark and clear. My CCTV wasn't only for schoolwork, I often amused myself by changing the appearance setting so that as either of my teachers wrote on the board they went from having light skin and dark hair to dark skin and light hair.

The CCTV saw me through the last two years of primary school (grades 6 and 7), and into the first year of high school (Year 8). There was no way that my mum could afford to purchase my CCTV. It was paid for by donations from the local Lions Club, and a family friend. Making it solely mine to use however I chose.

The third significant event was not a positive one. Overall, most of my teachers did the best that they could to meet my vision needs and give me a good education. Some of whom did a better job than others, but there was one exception, my Grade 4 teacher. She didn't like me getting up to read the blackboard and complained if I breathed too heavily while copying maths problems from her workbook as apparently it made the pages damp. Often, she would call me by my last name instead of my first name. She

wasn't nice to the rest of the class, but for some reason I seemed to attract her ire. I started to dislike school, something I had never done before. One day in front of the entire class she told me I should be at the blind school! Being bullied in the playground was one thing, but being bullied by a teacher was another, it was irreprehensible and inexcusable. My teacher should have been disciplined for her actions, but to my knowledge, she was not.

It was no surprise that my marks that year were the lowest that I had ever gotten during primary school. Such experiences had the potential to do some definite damage to me as a 9-year-old, but thanks to the positive experiences I had during the remainder of primary school my marks increased, I enjoyed school once more, and was left with only a small psychological scar.

## High School

Prior to starting high school in 1984, my visiting teacher, mum and I met with the Headmistress to discuss what assistance I would require, what support the school could offer, and to tour the school grounds to help orientate me. From the beginning of high school, the unspoken agreement amongst my teachers was, "that of course Katrina would be doing the same activities as the other students, why wouldn't she?" I did woodwork, metalwork, graphics, cooking, sewing, and science experiments without injury. Note, in Year 11, it was not me who set the bench on fire in the science lab, but a fully sighted guy in chemistry.

I really wished that I could have gotten out of P.E. (physical education), as I was not very good at it. The only class I got out of was driver's education in Year 12 - big deal!  In P.E., I found the sports were often difficult for me to play with reduced depth perception and poor distance judgement. I had long ago learnt the phrase, "I can't play fast ball sports." Although, I did play backyard cricket with my neighbours without getting hit in the face by a cricket ball, unlike a certain Australian prime minister at the time.

In Year 8 we did orienteering, but I couldn't read a compass for nuts. The only reason I got through the orienteering course before the bell rang was that the Year 9 boys who had set up the course decided to give me a hand. I remembered one of them from primary school. I was surprised that he wanted to help me, because at primary school he had the reputation of being fairly rough.

In Year 11 theatre, as part of the Elizabethan Theatre Unit, we learnt basic fencing, which was very cool. We wore face and chest protection and were supervised. Whilst being able to see my opponent, I was unable to see the tip of my foil. I let my teacher know this, and he immediately ran off into the wardrobe department. Returning soon with a small fluorescent pink scarf in hand, which he proceeded to tie into a bow on the tip of my foil, problem solved! If only my other access issues could be solved so easily and without drama.

In Year 8 the majority of my classes were in a single storey building. My grandad built a desk on casters so my CCTV could be moved between classrooms. Unfortunately, this wasn't an option for all classrooms, so I had to use my newly acquired monocular, basically half a pair of binoculars instead.

From Years 9 to 12, all of my classes were scattered across the school grounds which were sprawled out on a hillside. As there were numerous cement paths and sets of stairs to traverse, my monocular became my aide of choice as it fitted neatly into my pencil case, unlike my CCTV which found a new home in my bedroom.

When choosing my subjects for Year 10, I had to let go of one of the subjects that I liked, art. I enjoyed art, it was where I was introduced to impressionism and found that I had some artistic ability. In Year 9, it became a struggle, as my teacher wasn't as good as my Year 8 teacher, and much of that year's curriculum was on visual art and was taught in a very visual way. Pottery and sculpture wouldn't be taught until Year 11, but I couldn't hang on until then. Despite loving art, I had to cut my losses, and selected subjects that I got better marks in. Thankfully as an adult I found my way back to art, discovering ways I could work as a vision impaired artist creating artworks that were both visual and tactile.

Since my reading and writing speed was still slow I was given extra time for written exams. No one seemed to have a problem with this, until in Year 11 one of my friends complained to me that it wasn't fair that I got extra time. She thought that I was getting an unfair advantage over everyone else. Was it fair that I had a vision impairment? I was shocked because she knew me, we had been friends since Year 8. Whereas another girl that I'd been friends with for a shorter time, thought that it was fair that I got extra time for exams, and that my other friend was being unreasonable.

After auditioning for a couple of years, I finally landed a role in the school musical. I was stoked! I was a dancer in my school's production of 'The Whiz', a pop stage version of the Wizard of Oz story. Aside from the lead characters, the dancers had the next most demanding role with specific dance numbers plus bolstering the chorus. I had never worked so hard physically in all of my life, but it was well worth it! As a dancer, I worked hard to be aware of the other dancers, cast members and the scenery around me, particularly on my left side so as not to accidentally whack anyone or thump a scenery flat. This wasn't always easy in dim lighting or when entering and exiting in the dark. My biggest challenge was exiting the stage mid number. The dancers had to run down the steps in the middle of the stage, down the aisle and out the backdoor of the hall. It made us all nervous, nobody wanted to trip, and we didn't, phew!

Before the opening night crowd arrived, the entire cast was called out on stage, where we each found a flower and a personal note from the Director. Mine was a white carnation and my note read, "it's not the critic that counts … but the man in the arena." It was a shortened version of a quote from Theodore Roosevelt.

This is the full quote:

“It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.”

I was blown away by these words, which I’ve carried in my heart ever since. The director who had also been my theatre teacher for the previous two years knew me well. As a girl with a vision impairment amidst a sea of sighted people, I felt the constant pressure to perform, to be the model minority, to not let my sight limitations hold me back, to not ask too much of others, and to always be grateful for all assistance even if it was unwelcome because it was well intentioned.

## Peer Contact and Connection

Growing up I had very little contact with other kids who were blind or vision impaired. At times I wasn’t sure that I wanted to be around them, because I tended to identify more with my sighted peers than with a group I didn’t really know or understand. Simultaneously I still felt like the odd one out, that I didn’t actually fit in. Without contact with my blind and vision impaired peers, I was isolated, and denied the opportunity to compare experiences, share strategies or normalise what was happening for me. This resulted in believing there was something wrong with me, that I was to blame. I definitely didn’t want to go to the blind school, but I certainly would have benefited from contact with other blind and vision impaired kids.

Aside from my mum, I had contact with a few blind and vision impaired women. This gave me a small sample of potential career options. None of them had a degree, with some of them leaving school before Year 12. I wanted to finish Year 12 and go to Uni, but didn’t know a blind or vision impaired woman who had done so. This small group of women also provided me with my first example of what it meant to be a blind or vision impaired woman. I am not sure that they always felt comfortable in their own skins, often internalising the negativity shown to them.

As a teenager I found that I could often pass myself off as having more sight than I actually did. This seemed to make me more acceptable to the sighted people around me, no one wants to be rejected. I swung from being ok with my vision impaired identity, to being far from ok with it. The appearance of my eyes still made me stand out for all of the wrong reasons.

It wasn't until sometime in my mid 20s that I started to become more comfortable with my vision impaired identity. Getting involved with Blind Citizens Australia (BCA), a consumer led organisation, in my 30's enabled me to become more at peace with my identity as I had contact with people my own age, as well as many other people who had already trodden the road I was on. Later on, I decided that if I was going to stand out that I may as well make it worth the ride, by finding ways to stand out on my own terms like putting green streaks in my hair.

Generally, my vision impaired identity and I get along, except for when someone makes a stupid or nasty comment, discriminates against me, treats me like I'm an idiot, or I struggle with the ongoing changes in my sight, then we are not friends.

## Heading off to University

It was January 1989, and I had a major decision to make, which of my two university offers would I choose? The Bachelor Social Science, University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales, or the Bachelor Social Work, James Cook University, Townsville, North Queensland? Either way I'd be moving out of home. I chose the James Cook offer as I wanted to be a social worker, and the New England offer wouldn't give me that qualification without additional study. I hated the cold, I would rather fry than freeze, so my choice was sealed.

In the late 1980's James Cook University didn't allow students to defer the start of their course for a year. Thus, I went straight from high school to Uni a somewhat immature 17-year-old with no idea what they were in for or of the significant challenges that lay ahead. Nevertheless, sporting my first perm and carrying two suitcases I boarded the Sunlander at Brisbane's Roma St Station for the 1340 km train trip to Townsville. I was looking forward to a new town and a new life. It was exciting but scary, I hoped that I had what it took, did I?

My first year of Uni was another world. I didn't know anyone and had to learn a whole new level of self-reliance. I possessed some organisational and personal management skills but quickly realised that school had been a sheltered environment in comparison to the adult world of tertiary education. I was timid and shy, but Uni forced me to have to talk to other people, even if it only was to check that I was in the right lecture.

## Young Women Now

As I meet and get to know more young blind and vision impaired women through my involvement in BCA, blindness services, and within the broader community, I wonder what preparation they have been given for womanhood?

Were they encouraged to:

- Try new things, and be allowed to fail?
- Learn new skills, or were they told that they wouldn't need them as support workers, family members or technology would do those tasks for them?

- Become independent, or were they taught to be dependant?
- Become mature, or were they babied or over protected?
- Did the people around them have high or low expectations of them?
- Who did they learn their skills and attitudes from?
- Who showed them what it means to be a blind or vision impaired woman?

After speaking with other blind and vision impaired people and from my own observations it seems that a number of girls and young women are not acquiring many fundamental life skills. How can this be, and in what ways are we failing them?

## Equipping and Supporting Future Generations

The foundational development that blind and vision impaired girls are given for womanhood ought not to be dependent upon: the family and time that they are born into, their cultural background, where they live, their birth country, parenting styles, their family's finances, and the education and other opportunities they have access to. Our preparation for womanhood should not be left to our individual life chances.

It shouldn't feel like a lucky dip, never being sure of what you'll get or in what way it will affect your life?

The playing field needs to be levelled out more so as to ensure that blind and vision impaired girls get a fair shot at life, instead of being made more vulnerable. It's not about us, becoming the model minority, succeeding in spite of all that we have had to overcome. Nor are we to be held up as a shining example and inspiration to the able-bodied world.

Then it is up to us, the families, educators, blindness organisations, and communities to fill the gaps, making the playing field fairer and more level.

We can achieve this by firstly, reaching out to blind and vision impaired girls and women where they are. In Australia not everyone goes through the special school system or has contact with consumer led organisations such as BCA. They might only have contact with their ophthalmologist and/or blindness service providers, whose main focus is not on peer support and contact. Also, depending on where they live, they may be the only blind or vision impaired young person in their community.

Consumer led organisations can reach out to and connect with these girls, women and their families by building relationships within, the education system, the ophthalmology and optometry communities, blindness services, women's organisations, and other community groups. Whereby the groups mentioned above actively promote peer contact and the consumer led organisations. For it is not about competing with other organisations or groups but working together, combining expertise and focus to enrich the lives of these girls and women.

What about the young blind and vision impaired women who have gaps in their life skills? How can we come alongside them to assist them? I believe that peer contact and support is crucial to the skilling up and empowerment of both women and girls. It's doing what we as women are good at, coming together to share ideas, resources, and problem solve. I have witnessed several examples of this at work within the national women's branch of BCA, of which I am the current President. We seek to foster connections and interactions between branch members through: the raising of questions on the branch's email discussion list, zoom hosted workshops where participants share their life expertise on a given topic, group BCA's national conventions. We believe that everyone has something to offer and seek out ways to encourage involvement at all levels of the branch's work.

On an individual level, committee and branch members attempt to connect members from alike situations e.g. mothers of teenagers, rural women, migrant women etc to help reduce isolation and build networks. Where possible formal or informal peer support is also facilitated.

Both personally and professionally I am keen to foster and promote the different forms of women's leadership: from supporting and encouraging other women in formal leadership roles. To, promoting the notion that a leader doesn't have to be in a formal role, but that any woman can step up and take leadership within a given moment or situation.

## It's Your Move

What are the ways in which you are supporting and empowering blind or vision impaired girls and young women to meet their future? What could you do differently? How can you draw in others to have a positive influence on the lives of these girls and young women? Never underestimate the power that a little piece of positive influence can have upon the life of a blind or vision impaired girl or young woman. It could be the start of something much bigger. The more positive influences we can surround blind or vision impaired girls and young women with, the better chance they will have in adult life.

Now it is over to you.

# Lost Sight, Not Vision: A Girl's Journey Through Blindness, Education, and Living as a Lady for Others – Ma. Bless S. Adriano

Higher Education and Industry Inclusion Program Assistant, Resources for the Blind Inc., Philippines



"They said I couldn't stay in the advanced class. They said I'd struggle to keep up with my sighted peers. But thanks to one voice that told me otherwise — my story was rewritten."

As a young girl who always brought home top honours, school was my playground, my refuge — the first proof that I could dream beyond the borders of poverty. But when I lost my sight at 15, everything collapsed. Lupus came suddenly, taking not only my vision, but also my confidence, clarity, and courage to imagine the future I once believed in.

Returning to school felt like chasing a life that had been taken from me. Teachers who once celebrated my potential now gently discouraged me from rejoining the advanced class — not out of cruelty, but out of fear. They feared blindness meant limitation. That I couldn't cope. That I no longer belonged.

But then came a different kind of voice — the one I needed most. Resources for the Blind Inc. (RBI) became my turning point. More than an organization, they were my compass. Through counselling, rehabilitation, and inclusion-focused services, I began to understand that my blindness didn't define my value. I learned to self-advocate — to face those who doubted me and explain, with clarity and courage, that with assistive technology and support, I could not only cope but thrive.

What made the biggest difference was that RBI didn't only equip me — they empowered my family too. My parents were guided to support me without limiting me. They learned how to encourage independence, not dependency — and, more importantly, to never hide me away or let fear shape what I could become. That family shift was life changing. From that foundation, I pursued a new kind of education — one not just about academics, but about reclaiming identity, developing resilience, and preparing to lead. In 2015, I joined RBI's Leadership and Computer Eyes Training. There, I learned to use

screen readers, sharpen my communication, and find my voice as a blind young woman with something to offer.

In 2016, I was selected for their College Preparatory Training, where I met “models of hope” — blind professionals succeeding in law, education, technology, and governance. Seeing them succeed allowed me to dream again — and dream bigger. That same year, we co-founded Youth as Advocates Philippines (YAP) — a grassroots movement of young leaders with disabilities across the country. Our mission: to influence change in education, IT, policy, and family systems. That was my first real step as an advocate — not just for myself, but for a generation.

In 2019, I returned to RBI for Soft Skills Training — this time focusing on tools like communication, teamwork, workplace etiquette, and emotional intelligence. These weren’t “extras” — they were essential. And in 2022, I came full circle, designing and facilitating Soft Skills Training for the next generation of blind students — paying forward what had been generously invested in me. These experiences gave me more than skills. They opened doors to opportunity, recognition, and purpose.

In 2022, I graduated *magna cum laude* with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and was honoured as the “Excellent Psychology Student of the Year”. I was a scholar of the Commission on Higher Education (2018–2022) and the Scranton Women’s Leadership Center in South Korea (2019–2022). In 2023, I became a Young Southeast Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI) Fellow in Civic Engagement, representing my country in the United States. Months later, we presented again our best practices in the ICEVI’s East-Asia Regional Summit in Indonesia, and in 2024, I received the Extraordinary Filipino with Disability Award (Youth Category) from the National Council on Disability Affairs.



*Caption: Bless attending the graduation ceremony for her Bachelor of Science in Psychology, dressed in academic gown and holding her degree.*

Today, I work full-time at RBI — the very organization that once gave me back my hope. As the Higher Education and Employment Program Assistant, I design programs, mentor young leaders, and collaborate with partners to promote education-to-employment pathways for persons with visual impairments.

When I reflect on The Girl Child, I think not only of the child I once was — full of fear, shaken by loss, and surrounded by doubt — but also of the woman I've become: empowered through education, supported by family, and committed to creating change. I was never the problem. The system just wasn't ready for a blind Filipina girl to succeed. But education, paired with compassion and inclusive support, changed everything.

To every educator, policymaker, and program designer: girls with disabilities don't need pity or lowered expectations. We need tools placed in our hands, spaces that welcome us, and the belief that we, too, can lead.

## Personal Reflection – Mrs. Cheryl K. Cobbler-Adams

President of Voice of the Disabled, Inc., Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Email kereencobbler@gmail.com



In the late 60s, a beautiful baby girl was born in a village named Chester Cottage in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. She was raised by her aunt in a two-bedroom wooden house, along with many cousins and siblings. Suddenly, she was plunged into total darkness, as the light went out from her eyes. She became blind at the age of 2. No cause was ever given for her loss of sight.

Being blind did not prevent me from enjoying childhood, but my learning suffered. There was no school for the blind or special institutions in St. Vincent at that time. I was often left at home alone. My aunt went to work in the field, and my cousins and siblings went to school.

At age 5, I had the opportunity to attend Byera Anglican School in Byera, St. Vincent. A Canadian missionary trained one teacher to support my unique needs. Sadly, that experience was short-lived. My father was not supportive. I believe he was embarrassed about my disability. Back then, many persons would hide their family members who were differently abled, for fear of being judged. He was a government worker. I suspect he wanted to maintain a certain image. I was pulled out of school.

From age 5 to 12, I stayed home. I was lonely and sad. I fell behind academically and was not prepared to take the Common Entrance Examination (CEE), which was required to attend secondary school in the Caribbean. Fortunately, a youth empowerment organisation, the St. Vincent Jaycees (presently, Junior Chamber International), sponsored my attendance at the School for the Blind in Santa Cruz, Trinidad. This is where my educational journey began. I learned Braille, studied math, was taught social studies and explored many other subjects. I went on to the Comprehensive Business Training College in Woodbrook, Trinidad. There, I received typing lessons on a manual typewriter, studied communication and learned clerical skills.

I returned to St. Vincent in 1987. In 1995, I got married and gave birth to a gorgeous baby girl. In 2002, I was assigned to the School for Children with Special Needs in Georgetown, St. Vincent, in the role of Office Clerk. It was my first job. In 2006, I became a teacher for the visually impaired at that same institution. I taught Braille, Information Technology, general subjects and music. While working as an educator, I continued to pour into my community. Voice of the Disabled (VOD) was established in 2016, by myself and sixteen other persons with disabilities, to provide advocacy, community outreach, education, training and support to persons living with disabilities in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

After nearly 20 years of serving as a Teacher One (entry-level position), I submitted requests to the Ministry of Education for an upgrade. All requests were denied. Despite not having a college degree, I felt that my time, commitment, experience and specialty in the field, qualified me for a higher appointment. After much prayer and reflection, I decided to leave the school. I maintained Teacher One status, but advocated for myself to be moved to VOD, through the Ministry of National Mobilization, which is responsible for persons with disabilities in St. Vincent. This move changed my life.

It is my God-given purpose to use my voice as a tool and create an inclusive and accessible environment where persons who are differently abled feel safe, seen, heard, empowered, inspired, loved and accepted. Today, VOD is thriving, actively engaging the community, and partnering with local, regional and international stakeholders to improve the lives of persons with disabilities in St. Vincent and the Grenadines.

# Educating Together: Service Providers Supporting Inclusion

## Two Girls' Stories: How Inclusive Education Made an Impact on Their Lives – Sabah Zuraiqat

Headmistress of Arab Episcopal Secondary School, Irbid, Jordan

It is now an essential concept that inclusive education is believed to be one of the key necessities for people with disabilities. In this report, we will be highlighting two stories of two girls from our school, Arab Episcopal Secondary School.

In our school, we are familiar with the importance of inclusion in everyone's lives, and girls must be addressed in this context. We know that inclusion can enhance a girl's social abilities, support her educational development, improve her psychological and emotional well-being, and lead her toward greater self-independence. And here we will present the stories of two girls who experienced inclusive education in Arab Piscopo School.

Our first story speaks about Dima, a 10$^{th}$ grade student in our school. Dima was born and raised in another country, studying in international schools where she stayed in the classroom just as a listener without having any facilities to help her develop her education. At the age of 11, she joined the Arab Episcopal Secondary School (AES), and we noticed that Dima has special abilities, especially in languages.

In our school, we provide students with all the equipment and materials they need for a better education. We also provide teachers who serve as shadow teachers to help students first learn braille and then support them with their curricular activities in the classroom. In addition, our students participate alongside their peers in extracurricular activities.

Dima, as a blind student, says "I never imagined that one day I will be living equally like my friends. People have been always judging me for something that was never my fault. I used to sit in the classroom, just listening in the corner doing nothing. Now in AES, I know what it means to really blossom. All my principals, teachers and friends, with the help of my family, help me become a better person to follow my dream. My dream is to become an author. With the support of my principals and teachers at AES I could participate in competitions where I wrote show stories in both Arabic and English languages. I won many awards for best writing. I remember one time when I won the award for the best English short story, I got 100. I can never describe how great that feeling was. Everyone there was shocked how I can speak English with self-confidence. This could never be without the encouragement and the support of every one of my principals and teachers with all the facilities they provide me to be who I am and to become a better addition of me."



Our second story is one that we feel deeply proud of. It is our student Sarah, who came to the school when she was five years old. Refused by her father who left her just because she was blind, Sarah needed to be raised with her mother only without a father. We know how important it is for any girl to be living as a child in the middle of a loving and supporting family. This is true for any girl in the world, and this is definitely true for Sarah. In our school, we were another home for her, not just a school that taught her. Sarah lived between her friends, knowing that she is equal and loved by everyone.

Sarah left the school to continue her university education, and now she is back as a teacher in our school. “I will never forget the day when I came to the school again. This time I was not a student - I was a teacher. I will never forget how Mrs Sabah welcomed me as if I was still the little girl who left the school. I now know what independent living is. I can rely more on myself and stand by my mom who always loved me. I am also working to develop abilities for my students exactly the way I got them in my beloved school.”

In Arabic Episcopal Secondary School, we believe that girls with disabilities have the right to equal education, inside and outside the classroom. We also believe that women with disabilities have the right to live independently, relying on themselves for their living. As an inclusive school for blind and visually impaired students, we took the responsibility of helping each blind girl to live a normal life because we believe that this is what everyone deserves.

We were born to live equally. Peace, education, living in harmony, equity, and economic empowerment are all key concepts of daily life in our school. We aim at making the school a home for each student.

# Against Odds: How Ananya is Rewriting Her Future – Saumya Tripathi and Salome John

Saumya Tripathi: Director - Program Development and Expansion, and Salome John: Chief of Staff, Ek Kadam Aur Foundation for Education and Health, India

In Panhar, a small village tucked into Uttar Pradesh's Auraiya district of Uttar Pradesh (Northern Province) State of India, a nine-year-old girl named Ananya is proving just how far early support and inclusive education can take a child born with blindness, in a family with few resources, and in a place where children like her are often left behind.

Ananya's story didn't begin with possibility. Her father works at a roadside dhaba (roadside eatery in India, typically found along highways and in rural or semi-urban areas), her mother is a homemaker, and the family struggles to make ends meet. Ananya was born blind and spent the first seven years of her life at home, with no school, no learning, and no idea that education was even an option. Like many families in rural India, her parents held onto hope for a cure. That hope brought Ananya's grandmother to a free medical camp in March 2022, run by Ek Kadam Aur Foundation.

When the doctors explained there was no medical solution, the family was devastated. What they didn't expect was an entirely new path opening before them, one paved with transformative possibilities.

Ananya became the first girl in her district to enroll in Ek Kadam Aur Foundation's Arunodaya (Sunrise) for Children with Blindness Program, a home-based, one-on-one, inclusive education model designed to reach children who are blind and do not go school. Trained mentors of the foundation began visiting Ananya six days a week. They started with basics: how to move safely, how to understand space through sound and touch, how to manage simple daily tasks. Her grandmother, once unsure, quickly became her biggest supporter - walking Ananya to the government school (that the Foundation admitted her to) every morning and learning alongside her.

In a month's time, Ananya began using Braille and tactile materials. Then came a turning point: The foundation introduced her to a smartphone and an external keyboard. With a little training and a lot of determination, she picked up screen reader navigation and educational apps in under two months. She could type in English, use a calculator, read aloud from her phone, and complete her schoolwork, on her own. For a child who hadn't known the alphabet a few months before, this was a quiet revolution.

Through Ek Kadam Aur Foundation, Ananya first encountered yoga, another world waiting to be explored. She embraced it with the same quiet determination and curiosity that fuelled her learning, bending not just her body, but boundaries too. The Foundation helped arrange formal training on Yoga in her village. Soon, she was competing, and winning, at both the block and district levels. Her teachers and peers started to cheer her

on. She wasn't "the blind girl" anymore. She was just Ananya, the one who worked hard and kept surprising everyone.

Behind her quiet strength stood her family. Her grandmother, always nearby. Her younger siblings, watching and learning. A home that had once been unsure how to support her became a place of shared growth and confidence.

In early 2024, Ananya began asking bigger questions. "Can I study somewhere else? Are there schools with more books? More students like me?" With help from the Foundation, she sat for the entrance exam at the National Association for the Blind (NAB), New Delhi. She passed and was off to the capital city of India.



Today, Ananya lives in New Delhi and studies at one of the country's well-known institutions for children with visual impairments. She's thriving, learning, growing, and building a life that once felt out of reach.

Her story reflects what the Arunodaya Program stands for:

- Starting early,
- Teaching children in their own homes,
- Equipping families, not just students,
- Leveraging simple digital tools to unlock literacy and confidence, and
- Always believing that inclusion means more than access - it means belonging

The Arunodaya (Sunrise) for Children with Blindness Program now runs in seven Indian states and has reached over 550 children. In Panhar, Ananya is the one everyone remembers. Ananya has inspired other families to send their children, especially their daughters, to school. She's shown that blindness is just a different road, and with the right support, kids like her can walk it with pride.

# Inclusive Futures: Global Reports and Submissions on Education, Equity and Wellbeing

## Call for written submissions on the draft guidelines on addressing multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities – Issued by Treaty bodie, UNCRPD

United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

**Deadline:** 15 October 2025

**Purpose:** to further guide states parties and other duty bearers to address the implementation gaps and to collect a repository of good practices in addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities.

### Background

Since it was established, in 2009, the Committee has considered more than 150 reports submitted by States parties to the Convention. The Committee has identified the following gaps in the implementation of article 5 (non-discrimination), article 6 (women with disabilities) and article 16 (protection against violence, exploitation and abuse):

- Limited understanding and awareness about the concept of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities.
- Anti-discrimination legislative and policy frameworks do not often recognize multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities.
- Disaggregated data is not collected regularly and systematically, limiting the possibilities for influencing action-oriented policies and strategies on addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination.
- Limited identification of instances of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against women, limited availability of redress mechanisms and broad impunity of perpetrators.
- Limited understanding about gender-based violence and disability-based violence as forms of discrimination.

### Objectives

The Committee has decided to prepare Guidelines on addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities in law, policy and practice. The objective is to further guide states parties and other duty bearers to address the implementation gaps and to collect a repository of good practices in

addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities.

## Key questions and types of input and comments sought

The Committee calls all interested stakeholders to provide written contributions on the content of the Guidelines.

Written contributions shall address the following topics, or at least one of the following topics.

- Do the anti-discrimination legislation and/or policy frameworks in force in your country recognize disability and the denial of reasonable accommodation as prohibited forms of discrimination against persons with disabilities?
- Do the anti-discrimination legislation and/or policy frameworks in force in your country recognize the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination affecting women with disabilities on account of their disability and other factors, such as sex, gender, ethnicity, migration status, origin, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, etc.?
- Do authorities in your country collect data reflecting intersectionality between disability and other factors such as sex, gender, ethnicity, migration status, origin, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, etc.
- Which groups of women and girls with disabilities face the greatest risks of multiple and intersectional discrimination? For example: - Women and girls with disabilities living in rural or remote areas; - Women and girls with disabilities from ethnic or racial minorities; - Indigenous women and girls with disabilities; - Migrant, asylum-seeking, or refugee women and girls with disabilities; - Older women with disabilities; - Young girls with disabilities; - Women and girls with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities; - Women and girls with disabilities living in institutions.
- What are the main intersectional risks and forms of discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities? Do you consider that the violence and discrimination against women and girls with disabilities is due to two or more of personal characteristics, or that is colored by these characteristics? For example: being a woman with a disability and indigenous; being a woman with a disability and living with albinism; being a woman with a disability and also an elderly; being a woman with disability and also a child or teenager; being a woman with a disability and a migrant or an asylum seeker, or a person seeking international protection or a refugee; a member of the LGBTIQ+ community; or being someone with diverse sexual orientation or gender identity. Please specify.
- Describe the areas of life in which women and girls with disabilities exposed to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination are more excluded from the

access and enjoyment of their rights. (examples: in housing, access to justice, employment, political participation, etc.)

- Indicate which remedies are available to women and girls with disabilities facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Are these remedies accessible, available, and effective?
- Describe any example of positive initiative, plan, programme, strategy or piece of legislation addressing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities.

### How inputs will be used?

Inputs will be published in the public webpage and used by the Working Group to formulate the guidelines

### Next Steps

Input/comments may be sent by e-mail. They must be received by 15 September 2025. Email address: jorge.araya@un.org

Email subject line: RE: CRPD-Call for written submissions on the draft guidelines on addressing multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination against women and girls with disabilities.

Word/Page limit: 3500 words (10 pages); Accepted file formats: Word, PDF

Accepted Languages: English, French, Spanish

## Blindness has no Boundaries – Carey Phillipps

Vice President ICEVI North America and Caribbean Region and Caribbean Representative

April 28, 2025, was another special day in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. For some, it was Election Day, a day for Citizens to make their choice in who they thought was best to lead the country. For others, it was just another day and for many children, it was another holiday. When you are a child, there is never such a thing as too many holidays. April 28, 2025, was not only Election Day, but also marked the beginning of a series of events that would go on to make history in the twin-island Republic.

On May 23, 2025, Alicia Lalite-Etienne became the first Independent Senator who is blind in Trinidad and Tobago. This was a proud moment not only for Trinidad and Tobago but also for the wider Caribbean, as Ms. Etienne now joins Dr. Floyd Morris, a blind Senator in Jamaica who was first appointed to the Senate in Kingston in 1998.

"Ms. Lalite-Etienne lost her vision at a very early age due to a diagnosis of Retinitis Pigmentosa, but she overcame many social and academic challenges. After completing

high school, she pursued further studies in the United States, earning both a bachelor's degree and a Master's in Business Administration. She graduated *summa cum laude* from Monroe College.

Senator Etienne has held many professional roles, several of which have involved advocacy for persons who are blind, have sensory impairments, or live with other disabilities. A dedicated member of the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association, she has contributed ten years of valuable service as a Librarian, Computer Literacy Teacher, and Adaptive Technology Instructor. She has also lectured at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, and completed an internship with the United Nations. These experiences have placed her in excellent stead for her appointment as an Independent Senator. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Business Administration, with a specialisation in Human Resources. Her doctoral thesis is titled *"Investigation of Attitudes and Perceptions Towards Persons with Disabilities within Organisations in Trinidad and Tobago and the USA."*

Mr. Kenneth Seurat, Executive Director of the Trinidad and Tobago Blind Welfare Association, speaks with pride about his colleague: "Alicia's journey embodies the spirit of resilience and the pursuit of equality." He added, "Her voice in the Senate will undoubtedly foster a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, paving the way for more informed and compassionate policy-making."

We wish Senator Lalite-Etienne all the best and look forward to following her political career.

*Special Thank you to Mr. Kenneth Seuratt for his input in this article for The Educator.*

## The ONCE School Contest: Over Four Decades Inspiring Equality and Inclusion in Spanish Classrooms – Fernando Riaño Riaño

Director of Institutional Relations and Sustainability of the ONCE Social Group



*Caption: Group of students completing the competition activities*

The ONCE School Contest is one of the longest-running and most beloved educational programs in Spain. It began in 1984, when just 5,000 students expressed through drawings and essays how they perceived blindness. Today, it has had more than six million participants over the course of its history, sowing ideas that have become projects and even municipal accessibility policies.

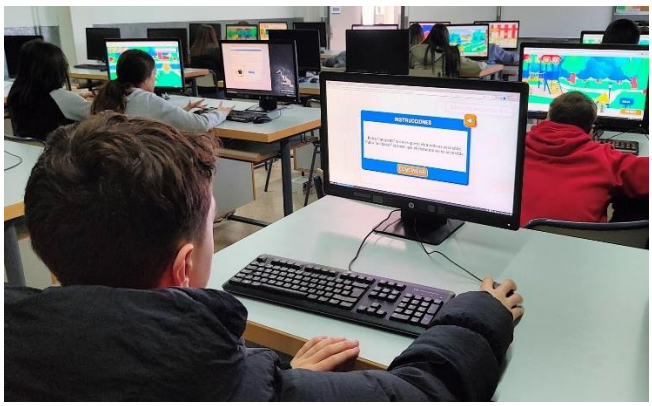
Since its inception, each edition has tackled a different social challenge related to the inclusion of all people (respect for differences, inclusive recess, bullying, universal accessibility...) and has grown in scope and ambition.

## Latest Edition of the ONCE Contest: “League Against Unwanted Loneliness”

In the 2024–25 school year, the 41st edition returned to classrooms with the theme *“League Against Unwanted Loneliness. Join Our Team!”*

A total of 140,747 students (ages 8 to 18) and 2,768 teachers from 2,512 educational centers across Spain joined this ONCE Contest initiative, aiming to combat this social issue that affects all stages of life, including childhood and adolescence.

Maintaining the cooperative work philosophy of previous editions, which avoids internal competitiveness, classrooms were invited to create their team crest for the “League Against Unwanted Loneliness” and propose inclusive leisure activities for all people, with and without disabilities. To support this, teachers were provided with a methodology structured in three steps: prevent, detect, and intervene.



*Caption: Students completing the video game contest*

From all the proposals received, the jury (composed of prominent figures from various fields such as culture, politics, education, and inclusion) evaluated aspects such as the creativity of the crest, the accessibility of the proposed activities, and their ability to strengthen bonds inside and outside the classroom.

After the national phase, the winning classrooms in each category enjoyed a prize called an “Emotional Gym” at their schools: a space filled with gamified activities to train empathy, self-esteem, and cooperation. Additionally, the winning teams in the regional phase and the finalists in Special Education received the official league t-shirt and competed for the Popular Vote Prize—a smartwatch—while four teachers especially committed to the contest were awarded a tablet.




*Caption: Students participating in the braille workshop*

## The ONCE School Contest: An Exportable Model of Education and Awareness in Inclusion

More than forty years after its first edition, the ONCE School Contest proves that values education is not a passing subject but a continuous process that evolves with society. Its combination of play, critical reflection, and collective action offers an inspirational model replicable outside Spain for any organization working in disability or inclusion, both by teachers and students.

The contest's trajectory supports its impact: it transforms social issues into engaging curricular content through high-quality educational resources and rewards the educational community with experiences that go beyond the classroom. Following the "League Against Unwanted Loneliness," the ONCE Social Group is already preparing the 42nd edition with the same goal it started with four decades ago: to raise awareness among new generations, give them the opportunity to express themselves, and become agents of change in their society, inviting them to imagine and build a more accessible, fair, and inclusive world.

# TouchingMaths+ - A European Project That Makes Learning More Accessible for All! – Annemiek van Leendert, Aukje Snijders




TouchingMaths+ is an Erasmus+ project dedicated to developing a tailor-made mathematics curriculum for Braille readers. The project's mission is to make mathematics not only accessible, but understandable and meaningful for blind and visually impaired students.

In primary education, children learn to read and write using familiar tools, such as pencils and paper. But mathematics requires more: a different way of thinking and interacting with symbols, structures, and layouts. For Braille readers, this interaction involves not just reading, but engaging through touch, tactile graphics, Braille, and speech technologies. For instance, when adding fractions, one must first examine the denominators to find a common denominator—a process that requires a different approach than reading from left to right. As students advance into secondary education, mathematical expressions grow more complex, and the tools they use, like Braille displays and screen readers, require equally advanced teaching approaches.

That's why collaboration is essential. In this project, math teachers, Braille specialists, tactile graphics experts, and ICT professionals worked together with the goal of bridging gaps between content, form, and experience. Together, they created tools and resources that help Braille readers to understand and truly experience mathematics.

The project brings together three leading national organizations in the field of special education and visual impairment: *Koninklijke Visio* (The Netherlands), *Statped* (Norway), and the *Swedish National Agency for Special Needs Education and Schools – Resource Center Vision* (Sweden). These institutions hold decades of combined expertise in supporting blind and visually impaired learners.

This is what Touching Maths is about: combining expertise with a focus on user needs, to create inclusive, well-structured learning journeys for Braille readers. For Braille readers, the intersection of Braille, tactile perception, and technology requires a collaborative approach among educators to provide an inclusive and effective learning environment.

Discover more and find all the available resources, meet the team, and get in touch on the project's website at www.touchingmaths.eu or scan the QR code.

*Touching Maths is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union.*



# Beyond Access: Ensuring the Continuity of Education for Adolescent Girls with Disabilities – Ndeye Khady Fall and Arielle Goubert

Ndeye Khady Fall, Inclusive Education and Professional Training Project Manager, Humanity & Inclusion; and Arielle Goubert, Inclusive Development Advocacy Officer, Humanity & Inclusion

Despite progress in global education over the past two decades, millions of children and young people remain excluded, particularly adolescent girls with disabilities. These girls face overlapping discrimination due to gender, disability, and age, which places them at the highest risk of being denied their right to education.

*Beyond Access*, a 2025 advocacy factsheet by Humanity and Inclusion, is based on qualitative research with adolescents and families in Nepal, Rwanda, and Senegal. It explores the barriers that girls with disabilities encounter and presents strategies to ensure they can remain in school and succeed. The factsheet is accompanied by an animated video that illustrates the key messages and recommendations.

Although global frameworks such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the UN Summit of the Future promote inclusive education and gender equality, the lived realities of girls with disabilities still fall far behind these commitments.

## The Educational Exclusion of Adolescent Girls with Disabilities

Children with disabilities are overrepresented among out-of-school populations. In low and middle income countries, 40 percent of children with disabilities are not in primary school and 55 percent are excluded from lower secondary school (UNICEF, 2021).

Gender-based discrimination intensifies this exclusion. Only 41.7 percent of girls with disabilities complete primary school, compared to 50.6 percent of boys with disabilities

and 52.9 percent of girls without disabilities (World Health Organization and World Bank, 2011). Adolescence is a turning point when risks of dropout increase sharply.

## Key Barriers to Access and Retention

*Social and Cultural Norms*

Gender roles and harmful beliefs about disability reduce the perceived value of girls' education. Many are withdrawn from school to take on domestic chores or are married early, especially in rural or low-income areas.

A 16-year-old boy in Nepal from a religious minority group explained that his family had already arranged his sister's marriage for when she completed secondary school, saying: "This is the practice in my community. Even though I wish my sister could study more, if my parents are planning a marriage for her, I must agree."

*Stigma and Family Attitudes*

Families may internalise stigma and limit their daughters' freedom, fearing judgement or violence. In some cases, girls are made to believe that they are incapable of success, reinforcing low self-esteem and dependency.

A mother of a girl with disabilities, from Nepal, recounted a painful experience: "Whenever my daughter leaves the neighbours' place, they instantly clean the place where she was sitting with water. That makes me feel bad. My daughter doesn't have any communicable diseases to be treated in that way."

*Economic Constraints*

Families with low income often prioritise sons or children without disabilities for school-related expenses. Assistive devices, transport, and extra support are often unaffordable.

A deaf girl from rural Nepal expressed her disappointment, saying, "I really want to continue my studies, but my family isn't willing to support me once I pass grade 8, which is available in my local school. My parents want me to prepare for marriage even though I'm only 15. They want me to work and earn money to support the family."

## Education Systems That Fail to Include

*Unprepared Schools*

Many teachers are not trained to teach inclusively. They often lack the training, resources and continuous support to adapt materials or use alternative communication methods for learners with disabilities.

Deaf girls in Nepal said they struggled in subjects like mathematics because teachers only showed pictures and offered no alternative explanations.

*Inaccessible Infrastructure*

Physical accessibility remains a major barrier for girls with disabilities. Many schools have steep stairs, narrow doorways, and uneven floors that make movement difficult or impossible. This extends to classrooms, toilets, and playgrounds, reducing girls' ability to participate fully.

Most schools lack accessible, gender-separated toilets, leading to discomfort and humiliation, especially during menstruation. Without private facilities, girls may avoid school altogether.

Distance adds another challenge. In Nepal, girls reported walking up to an hour each way to school. During the rainy season, flooded paths make the journey even harder, particularly for those with mobility difficulties.

*School-Based Violence*

Girls with disabilities are more vulnerable to both general and gender-based violence. Some face bullying or abuse from teachers and peers. Without protection systems in place, they may drop out to avoid harm.

In Rwanda, a girl with intellectual disabilities was repeatedly beaten for not answering questions correctly. The school eventually told her mother to keep her at home.

## Pathways for Change

*Changing Harmful Beliefs on Disability and Gender*

Public awareness campaigns should challenge discrimination and highlight the rights and potential of girls with disabilities. School curricula and teacher training should include inclusive, gender-sensitive content. More women with disabilities should be encouraged to enter education and leadership.

*Creating Accessible and Inclusive Educational Settings*

All school environments must be physically accessible and equipped with inclusive teaching materials, assistive devices, and menstrual hygiene facilities. Disability-inclusive sexual and reproductive health education is also essential for retention.

*Ensuring Protection and Safety*

Schools need safeguarding policies that address the specific risks girls with disabilities face. Staff must be trained to prevent and respond to violence. Reporting mechanisms must be accessible, confidential, and trusted by students and families.

*Supporting and Empowering Families and Communities*

Caregivers, especially mothers, play a key role in enabling education. They must be supported through financial aid, peer support, and counselling. Communities and local leaders should promote positive attitudes about the rights and capabilities of girls with disabilities.

### Conclusion

Education is a human right for every girl. Yet without systemic change, adolescent girls with disabilities will continue to be denied that right. The *Beyond Access* report shows that inclusive, gender-transformative solutions are both possible and necessary.

Education stakeholders must commit to bold, sustained reforms, and international solidarity must support these efforts where resources are limited and challenges persist. Every girl deserves the chance to learn, grow, and lead, regardless of ability.

### References

UNICEF. (2021). *Seen, Counted, Included: Using data to shed light on the well-being of children with disabilities.*

World Health Organization and World Bank. (2011). *World Report on Disability.*

## Girls Get Equal: Supporting Girls with Disabilities to Stay in School and Say No to Child Marriage – Jasson Chandhla

Project Manager, Plan International Malawi

From 2020 to 2024, Plan International Malawi ran the **Girls Get Equal (GGE)** project in Mulanje, Lilongwe, and Phalombe districts. The project worked to end child, early, and forced marriage by addressing the deeper reasons that girls are pushed into marriage-especially lack of education, poverty, and harmful social norms.

At its heart, GGE aimed to make sure that all girls including girls with disabilities and those with visual impairments could grow up with choices. It reached over 7,000 children and young people (more than half of them girls) aged 10 to 24 across 90 communities and 189 schools.

### Making schools more inclusive for girls with disabilities

One of the clearest signs of change was the drop-in school dropout rates among learners with disabilities. By the end of the project, 22.6% fewer girls with disabilities had left school compared to the start.

What helped? GGE supported schools to build disability-friendly toilets and install ramps, so students with physical or visual disabilities could move around more easily. Teachers were trained to support students with different needs, including how to teach children with low vision or blindness. This meant that more girls with disabilities felt seen, supported, and able to learn in a classroom where they were once left out.

The project also encouraged schools to follow a national code of conduct for teachers that banned corporal punishment. Girls who used to stay away out of fear were now returning to class, feeling safer and more welcomed.

### Community support made the difference

Change did not just happen inside classrooms. The project worked closely with school committees, mother groups, and parents to raise awareness about girls' right to education-especially for those with disabilities. Communities helped raise funds to build menstrual hygiene rooms and improve school buildings to make them more accessible. In some schools, local leaders and Members of Parliament joined in, showing that inclusive education can be a shared effort.

### Bringing girls back to school

The project also helped schools and families understand and apply the national school re-admission policy. This meant that girls who had dropped out, whether because of pregnancy, disability, or poverty, were welcomed back. Over 7,500 out-of-school children returned to the classroom, including nearly 100 girls with disabilities. Many joined accelerated learning classes or received extra support to catch up and stay in school.

### Creating real change

GGE showed that when schools are inclusive and communities are supportive, girls with disabilities-whether they are blind, have low vision, or face other challenges can thrive. Keeping girls in school does more than delay marriage. It gives them the chance to build their own futures, speak up for their rights, and take part in the world around them.

The project brought together different approaches: gender transformative programme, better teaching, safer schools, improved household economic status, and community action. Together, they created real and lasting change for girls who are too often left behind.

## Adolescent Girls and Maternal Health: Review of UN Reports on Progress and Persistent Gaps – Compiled by Frances Gentle

Editor, ICEVI Publications Committee

As the global community approaches the halfway mark of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a series of recent reports released by United Nations agencies paint a complex picture of progress, stagnation, and regression in advancing the rights and well-being of women and girls, particularly adolescent girls and mothers. Drawing from key findings in four major UN publications, this article offers an overview of the reported gains made and challenges that remain in areas including education, gender-based violence, maternal mortality, child survival, and adolescent health.

### Girl Goals: What Has Changed for Girls? – UNICEF, UN Women, and Plan International, Released 6 March 2025

*Three Decades Since Beijing: A Mixed Report Card*

Thirty years after the landmark 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, the *Girl Goals* report highlights both transformative progress and enduring inequalities in the lives of adolescent girls. While school completion rates have risen and legal protections have expanded in some regions, millions of girls are still being left behind.

- Education Access: Out-of-school rates for girls have dropped by nearly 40% since 2000, yet 122 million girls remain out of school today. Among adolescents aged 15–19, girls are still more likely than boys to be neither in education, employment, nor training.
- Gender-Based Violence: Alarmingly, nearly 1 in 4 ever-married or partnered adolescent girls has experienced intimate partner violence. Even more concerning is that over one-third of adolescents—boys and girls—still believe that such violence can be justified under certain circumstances.
- Harmful Practices: Child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) have declined, but not at the rate needed to meet SDG targets. Nearly 1 in 5 girls is still married in childhood.
- Health and Nutrition: The report notes a doubling in the rate of overweight adolescent girls in the past three decades, while the rate of underweight girls has seen only a modest decline from 10% to 8%.

Perhaps most sobering is the finding that no country with available data has met even half of the 16 SDG targets that are critical to the well-being of adolescent girls. With just five years left to reach the 2030 deadline, the report calls for accelerated, equity-driven investments in education, sexual and reproductive health, legal protections, and girls' leadership.

## Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000-2023 – WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group, and UN DESA, Released 2025

*Progress Made, Momentum Slipping*

The global maternal mortality ratio (MMR) has declined by 40% since 2000, yet the rate of progress has slowed significantly since 2016. Globally, in 2023 alone, approximately 260,000 women died from preventable pregnancy and childbirth-related causes. This is equivalent to one death every two minutes.

Key findings include:

- Sub-Saharan Africa's Disproportionate Burden: Almost 70% of all maternal deaths occur in sub-Saharan Africa, where conflict, poverty, and health system fragility persist.
- Global Disparities: A woman in sub-Saharan Africa is 400 times more likely to die in childbirth than a woman in Australia or New Zealand.

- Conflict Settings: In fragile or conflict-affected countries, maternal mortality ratios are more than five times higher than in stable environments.

Despite these grim statistics, the report offers hope through innovation and targeted interventions. Countries like Rwanda and Sri Lanka have significantly reduced maternal mortality by investing in midwifery and rural healthcare services. New tools, such as a low-cost 'drape' used in postpartum haemorrhage treatment, have reduced bleeding by 60%, saving countless lives.

Yet, as Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus of the World Health Organization asserts in his foreword, "The question is not whether we can end preventable maternal deaths, but whether we will." The solutions are known. What remains is the political will and financial investment to act.

## Levels and Trends in Child Mortality 2024 – UN Group for Child Mortality Estimation (IGME): UNICEF, WHO, World Bank Group, United Nations, Released 2024

*Child Mortality in Decline—But at Risk*

Since 2000, global under-five mortality has more than halved, representing one of the most significant public health achievements of recent decades. However, this positive trend is now under serious threat due to funding reductions and health system disruptions.

- Slowdown in Progress: The annual rate of reduction in under-five mortality is now 42% lower than during the era of the Millennium Development Goals.
- Regional Inequities: Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia continue to bear the highest burden of child deaths, particularly among the poorest and most marginalised populations.
- Vulnerabilities in Fragile States: Health service disruptions in conflict-affected areas are undoing years of gains. These include shortages of health workers, interrupted vaccine programs, and facility closures.

The report urges governments and global partners to reverse funding cuts, invest in resilient health systems, and improve data collection for targeted interventions. Without this, the lives of millions of children under five, and the future of their communities, are at risk.

## Standing Up for Stillbirth: Current Estimates and Key Interventions 2024 – UN IGME, Released 2024

*Stillbirths: The Silent Tragedy*

Stillbirths, often hidden in statistics and conversation, are declining globally, with a reduction of more than a third since 2000. Yet, progress in stillbirth prevention has slowed even more dramatically than for child mortality.

- Slow Progress: Since 2015, the stillbirth rate reduction has decelerated by 53% compared to the era of the Millennium Development Goals.
- Preventable Causes: Many stillbirths result from preventable factors such as untreated infections, inadequate antenatal care, and intrapartum complications.
- Marginalised Mothers Most at Risk: The highest stillbirth rates are concentrated in the same regions that experience high maternal and child mortality—further evidence of the deep systemic inequities that jeopardise the health of women and children.

As recommended in the maternal mortality report, the *Standing Up for Stillbirth* report published by the UN IGME calls for better access to quality maternal healthcare, improved monitoring systems, and equitable service delivery in hard-to-reach areas.

## A Call to Action: Equity, Investment, and Leadership

The four UN reports reviewed in this article share a common thread: meaningful progress for adolescent girls and mothers is possible, but it is not guaranteed. While education levels are improving and maternal and child mortality have fallen, the pace of change is slowing, and many gains risk reversal.

The solutions, including proven interventions, legal protections, education, sexual and reproductive health care, data-informed planning, already exist. What is required now is leadership, equity-driven financing, and the elevation of adolescent girls' voices in policymaking.

This is particularly important in fragile and conflict-affected settings, where the intersection of poverty, gender inequality, and weak infrastructure exacerbates every indicator of health and well-being. As the world edges closer to 2030, sustained investment and inclusive governance must be prioritised if we are to meet the promises of the SDGs—not just in principle, but in practice.

## Note for Readers of The Educator

ICEVI encourages our readership to explore these landmark reports in full and to share the insights of the authors with peers, students, and policymakers. As professionals dedicated to the rights of learners with disabilities and the broader inclusion agenda, your advocacy matters. The global challenges facing adolescent girls and mothers intersect with disability, poverty, geography, and gender in profound ways, and the time to act with urgency, equity and evidence is now.

## Recommended Resources

- Girl Goals: What Has Changed for Girls?
- Trends in Maternal Mortality 2000 to 2023
- Levels and Trends in Child Mortality 2024

- Stillbirth Estimates and Interventions

*ICEVI is grateful to the contributing global agencies for their commitment to rigorous data, collaborative action, and the protection of rights for girls and women worldwide.*

## From Exclusion to Leadership: Advancing the Rights of Women and Girls with Disabilities through Inclusive Systems and Global Solidarity – Dr. Shawn Piantoni

International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment

### Introduction

Over 700 million women and girls worldwide live with disabilities (World Bank, 2022; UNDESA, 2018). Despite the diversity of their experiences, they remain systematically excluded from global progress. As highlighted in UNICEF (2023), girls with disabilities remain among those most excluded from progress toward gender equality. They confront persistent barriers, from exclusion in classrooms and workplaces to limited access to healthcare and leadership roles. Their voices remain underrepresented in data, policy design, and decision-making at all levels.

The 2025 Global Disability Summit (GDS), held in Berlin, Germany, served as a vital platform to help change this reality. It amplified the voices of women and girls with disabilities, strengthened accountability, and promoted inclusive development grounded in human rights. Aligned with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the 2030 Agenda, the GDS fostered collaboration among governments, international agencies, civil society, and organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) to advance leadership, protection, and full inclusion.

The GDS also highlighted the distinct challenges faced by young women and girls with disabilities, who often experience compounded discrimination based on age, gender, and disability, and who have limited access to technology, civic spaces, and leadership opportunities. Addressing these disparities requires amplifying the voices of those most affected, starting with girls and young women with disabilities.

### 1. Including the Voices of Girls and Young Women

Despite their potential, young women and girls with disabilities—including those with visual impairment—are frequently excluded from education, advocacy, and decision-making. This limits their opportunities to help shape policies that affect their lives. To shift this reality, youth leadership must be actively nurtured through mentorship, accessible civic engagement, and dedicated funding for youth-led initiatives (UNFPA & Leonard Cheshire, 2018). As one delegate at the GDS shared, “We are not the leaders of tomorrow—we are leading today.”

Youth voices must be prioritized in future policy development, and their participation must be supported through inclusive, rights-based systems. Beyond youth participation, ensuring meaningful leadership across all ages and identities is essential for lasting change.

## 2. Empowerment and Representation

Women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals with disabilities must be represented not only as participants but also as leaders and agenda-setters. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women, 2018) and the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2017) emphasize that leadership is both a right and a driver of inclusive development. CRPD Articles 6 and 29 affirm that full and effective participation in political and public life is essential.

Effective leadership must be built on shared decision-making, mutual respect, and the full inclusion of diverse lived experiences. Advocacy and governance systems must evolve to increase the visibility and influence of women and gender-diverse persons with disabilities in decision-making. As one speaker reminded us, “Nothing about us without us” is not a slogan—it is a demand for space, power, and resources. This requires moving beyond tokenism and investing in the structural changes needed to ensure that women with disabilities can hold real decision-making power.

Some individuals may identify as feminine persons with disabilities rather than solely by binary gender terms. Recognizing this diversity reinforces the importance of inclusive and identity-affirming language in all advocacy spaces.

Within this broader context, women and girls with disabilities, such as those with visual impairment, may face additional barriers to leadership, including limited access to information, communication tools, and inclusive platforms**.** Their participation is essential for co-creating solutions that reflect diverse lived realities (Equal Measures 2030, 2022). One key pathway to building such leadership is ensuring equitable access to education and economic opportunities.

## 3. Inclusive Education and Economic Empowerment

Access to inclusive education and economic opportunity is essential for the empowerment of women and girls with disabilities. Yet globally, they remain among the most excluded from formal schooling, vocational training, and decent work due to systemic discrimination, inaccessible environments, and harmful social norms. These challenges are even more pronounced for those with specific disabilities, such as visual impairment, who may face additional barriers to accessible materials and communication tools.

The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) Disability and Development Report found that women with disabilities have lower rates of school enrolment and employment than either men with disabilities or women without disabilities (UNDESA, 2018). Recent analyses indicate that women with disabilities can earn up to

40% less than their peers (UN Women, 2023). For many, this means struggling to afford basic necessities, secure safe housing, or access healthcare. In response, the GDS encouraged expanding access to inclusive education and employment pathways. These programs must be rights-based and tailored to local contexts.

To reduce systemic barriers and prepare girls with disabilities for a competitive workforce, digital accessibility and assistive technologies must be prioritized**.** These include screen readers, AI-based learning tools, braille displays, tactile graphics, and accessible communication interfaces (ITU & UNESCO, 2023).

Learning environments must offer accessible materials, personalized supports, and mobility training. For learners with visual impairment, this includes braille, large print, screen-reader-compatible content, and career guidance. UNICEF (2024) reports that girls with disabilities remain the least connected demographic worldwide, intensifying barriers to education, civic engagement, and employment.

As Ana Peláez Narváez (2025), President of the CEDAW Committee, notes, barriers girls face are not inherent to disability but are imposed by discriminatory norms and inaccessible environments.

Schools must also ensure emotional and physical safety. This includes gender-sensitive sanitation facilities, clear violence prevention protocols, and affirming curricula. Without deliberate investments in safety and inclusion, even accessible schools may remain out of reach. Alongside inclusive education and economic participation, digital inclusion has emerged as a critical enabler of rights and opportunities.

## 4. Digital Inclusion and Connectivity

Digital access is no longer optional; it is essential for education, employment, civic engagement, and healthcare. Still, women and girls with disabilities, including those with visual impairment, continue to face digital exclusion due to cost, inaccessibility, and lack of training.

Governments can close the digital divide by investing in inclusive tools, training, and affordable technology. In low-resource settings, inclusive design and affordability are critical.

Access to screen readers, audio-based learning platforms, and braille-compatible devices must be treated as core infrastructure, not luxury.

To be effective, digital strategies must be co-created with women and girls with disabilities, ensuring tools are empowering—not just accessible. Integration into national and global action plans aligned with the CRPD and SDGs is essential. In addition to digital barriers, women and girls with disabilities face profound challenges related to health, safety, and bodily autonomy.

## 5. Health, SRHR, and Protection from Violence

Women with disabilities face heightened risks of gender-based violence and reduced access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). They are up to four times more likely to experience violence (OHCHR, 2012). Barriers include forced sterilization, denial of bodily autonomy, and inaccessible services (UNFPA, 2018; Women Enabled International, 2022).

Health systems should deliver inclusive, consent-based care grounded in dignity. Providers need training in rights-based care that respects the autonomy of all women, including those with specific disabilities. According to the WHO (2019) and the IAPB Vision Atlas (2021), approximately 139 million people worldwide experience vision loss, of whom about 55% are women. They face disproportionate obstacles to healthcare, including lack of accessible information and communication. These risks often culminate in extreme forms of violence and harmful practices.

## 6. Combating Violence and Harmful Practices

Roughly 38% of female homicides globally are committed by intimate partners, and 140 women and girls are killed daily by family members (UNODC, 2023). For women with disabilities, particularly those with vision loss, reporting mechanisms and protective systems often fail to meet their needs (CBM & Handicap International, 2021).

Inclusive care requires accessible materials, preventive health, and services informed by lived experience. A study in Spain showed that women with visual impairment faced higher rates of abuse than those with other disabilities (ONCE Foundation, 2023).

GDS commitments included criminalizing all forms of gender-based violence against women with disabilities, banning forced sterilization, and expanding accessible services. These must include hotlines, shelters, legal aid, and survivor-centered justice responses.

Prevention efforts in schools, self-protection training, and clear accountability mechanisms are essential. Beyond protection from violence, social systems must recognize the unique economic and caregiving realities faced by women with disabilities.

## 7. Social Protection and Caregiving

Inclusive social protection is essential for reducing poverty and recognizing the dual caregiving roles of many women with disabilities. They often care for others while needing support themselves.

Support systems must be inclusive by default and offer targeted interventions where needed. For women with specific disabilities such as visual impairment, this could include accessible application forms, trained personnel, and community-based assistance.

Social protection must be framed as an investment in equity.

## 8. Data and Accountability

Women and girls with disabilities are routinely excluded from national surveys and monitoring systems, weakening the effectiveness of development programs. UNDESA and UNICEF confirm the persistence of major data gaps (UNDESA, 2018; UNICEF, 2013).

Governments must invest in disability-disaggregated data that captures gender, age, and impairment type. This includes tracking the participation of women with visual impairment in education, leadership, healthcare, and access to justice. Data gaps remain significant for LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse women with disabilities. Their specific needs and experiences are often invisible in national surveys and global reports (UN Women, 2023).

Partnering with OPDs in data collection ensures ethical practices and meaningful indicators. Participatory approaches build credibility and accountability. Accurate data is also crucial in planning for emergencies, where women and girls with disabilities often face the greatest risks.

## 9. Inclusive Disaster Preparedness and Humanitarian Response

In emergencies and natural disasters, women and girls with disabilities—including those with visual impairment—face heightened risks due to inaccessible systems and increased exposure to violence. Early warning systems must use accessible formats like audio alerts and tactile maps. Emergency personnel must be trained in disability inclusion, and women must be involved in planning and decision-making.

Humanitarian responses must address disruption in care services, risk of displacement, and exclusion from relief. Coordination with OPDs is essential to close gaps and uphold rights. Innovative solutions, driven by those most affected, are key to achieving this transformation.

## 10. Inclusive Innovation and Systems Change

Inclusive development requires innovation driven by those most affected. Across sectors, the GDS showcased how community-led design and targeted investment can produce sustainable, inclusive systems. Examples include accessible digital tools, inclusive education models, and context-specific service delivery designed by women with disabilities.

Sustaining progress means scaling up effective models, embedding inclusive practice in governance, and aligning innovation with human rights frameworks. Finally, none of these changes are possible without solidarity and sustained investment.

## 11. Feminist Solidarity and Investment

Transformative change depends on feminist solidarity and sustained investment in women-led disability organizations. This includes funding leadership training, supporting intersectional movements, and ensuring space in global governance.

The GDS affirmed that funding must reach the most marginalized, including LGBTQ+ and gender-diverse people with disabilities. For women with visual impairment, this includes accessible environments, inclusive communication, and support networks. During the GDS, women raised purple bandanas in unison—a visual declaration: “We are here. We have survived. And we are building something better.” Their message echoes the overarching goal of this work.

## Conclusion

The rights of women and girls with disabilities—including those with specific impairments such as visual impairment—must be central to human rights and development agendas. The GDS reaffirmed that exclusion is a product of policy failure, not inevitability.

Women and girls with disabilities are not passive recipients—they are leaders, advocates, and change agents. Their demands for recognition, inclusion, and justice must guide our shared future.

As ICEVI, we commit to amplifying their voices, supporting leadership, and championing disability-inclusive systems. We call on policymakers, international agencies, and communities everywhere to act — not tomorrow, but today — to ensure that women and girls with disabilities are recognized as leaders and equal partners in building a more just world.

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# ICEVI: Regional Highlights and Global Leadership

In this section, we share reports on the regional conferences and general assemblies of ICEVI Europe and ICEVI Latin America, held during 2025. These reports, authored by Dr Shawn Piantoni, highlight the benefits of regional collaboration, local advocacy, and community engagement in advancing the rights of learners across diverse contexts.

We are also pleased to introduce the Clovernook Center for the Blind and Visually Impaired as the newest member of ICEVI's global Executive Committee. We look forward to partnering with Clovernook's leadership in planning and implementing the global ICEVI-WBU Braille Literacy Campaign, which will be launched in 2026.

## Clovernook Center for the Blind & Visually Impaired: Our Story – Samuel Foulkes

Director of Braille Production and Accessible Innovation

Although the history of our campus dates back to the early 1800s, the story of Clovernook begins almost a century later. Four sisters – Effie, Georgia, Florence, and Louise Trader, were born in Xenia, Ohio in the late 1800s. As a young child, Georgia was diagnosed with congenital cataracts. Determined that all her children would receive an education, Mrs. Trader relocated the family to Cincinnati, and Georgia was the first blind student admitted into a Cincinnati Public School.

Cary Cottage, on the grounds of the former Clovernook Farm, became available for sale in 1903 and was identified by the Trader sisters as the perfect location for a home for blind women. Well-known for their networking abilities and affable nature, Georgia and Florence approached William Procter of Procter & Gamble regarding a donation to purchase Cary Cottage. As a result of their efforts, on May 8, 1903, Cary Cottage at Clovernook Center became the first home for blind women in Ohio. Training in knitting, crocheting, beading and basketry was provided to the residents of Cary Cottage.

A visit to a nearby Shaker colony in 1907 resulted in the gift of a carpet loom and the introduction of woven items like rugs, pillow covers and blankets which were sold throughout Cincinnati. The ability to produce quality knitted and woven products provided a modest income and financial independence for the women.

At this time in the early 20th century, Cincinnati was the second-largest printing market in the U.S, and as a result, many of Clovernook's early donors and benefactors were

connected to the printing industry. In 1910, Clovernook was gifted a printing press capable of printing the tactile New York Point System, once the most widely used code in the United States. The gift launched a new industry at Clovernook as the women in residence learned to operate the press. Early projects included the embossing of playing cards and holiday messages for wounded servicemen in World War I field hospitals.

By 1922, Clovernook was the second-largest producer of embossed materials in the US. Since operations began, and through to the present, employment of people who are blind or visually impaired has been a significant part of Clovernook's mission - to empower people who are blind or visually impaired to lead active, productive and independent lives. This applies not only to what we make, but how we make it, and presently just over 50% of the staff in Clovernook's Printing House are blind or have low vision.

As of 2025, Clovernook is believed to be the highest volume producer of braille in the world –approximately 30 million pages of braille are shipped to libraries and global consumers each year. Approximately 75% of Clovernook's production work is on a contractual basis with the National Library Service for the Blind and Print Disabled (NLS), a division of the Library of Congress. Other major clients include McDonald's, the National Federation of the Blind, American Action Fund, and American Council of the Blind. Clovernook's production environment is somewhat unique, continuing to utilize zinc plates and printing presses for its bulk printing, while also embracing modern technology and innovation to streamline other braille production lines. Fun Fact – Clovernook was Duxbury's second ever customer!

Despite the scale of Clovernook's operations, for most of its history it has been somewhat anonymous - braille production has historically been on behalf of other organizations and publishers, and not for Clovernook-designed programs. But in the last decade, Clovernook has launched a number of signature programs and initiatives that utilize inclusive design principles and tie into the organization's key pillars – production expertise, manufacturing capacity, and inclusive workforce. These include:

- A nationally recognized *Arts & Accessibility Initiative,* that has provided over 200 cultural institutions across the US with braille, tactile graphics, 3D models, audio, access auditing, and more. This program is grant-funded, and provides many of these materials for free, allowing organizations the opportunities to try inclusively prioritized and designed materials in their spaces, and to see how it impacts their visitors.
- *Accessible Print Initiative,* that produces commercial print materials with accessible features – such as tactile QR codes and braille. This initiative began as an attempt to integrate access into everyday print items such as mailers, business cards, and invitations. This effort has grown into its own commercial enterprise within the organization.

- *Clovernook Press* – a publishing arm of the braille printing house, that prints original titles in print/braille and accessible print formats. These books are paired with tactile add-ons, such as 3D models or embossed graphics.
- *Tactile Literacy Initiative* – an international program that places 3D printers in various locations around the world, utilizing commonly available inexpensive emerging technologies to positively impact classrooms and learning outcomes. The program's emphasis is on the support of local community production, and the co-design of all learning materials. Clovernook provides equipment training, and designs model files in sync with the local curriculum. The initiative also produces culturally relevant braille and print/braille storybooks in local languages. A small production office was opened in Nairobi in late 2023, and the majority of the initial program has been implemented in East Africa. In the near future, model files will be freely available online in a database.

Other services that Clovernook provide include a free paediatric low vision clinic, robust year-round adaptive sports programming, a variety of summer camps, and the hosting of the annual Braille Challenge Ohio Regional event. Clovernook has also operated a distribution facility for the Library of Congress since 1978 – Multi State Center East (MSCE).

Clovernook is a founding member of the Braille Authority of North America (BANA) and is thrilled to be joining ICEVI this year!

## Celebrating the 104th ICEVI European Conference and General Assembly

The 104th ICEVI European Conference and General Assembly, held in Padova, Italy, brought together a global community committed to advancing inclusive, equitable, and quality education for people with visual impairment. With participants from over 30 countries, the event came at a pivotal time, offering an opportunity to share learning, strengthen partnerships, and support the growing global movement for inclusion.

### Convene: A Community of Shared Purpose

The conference opened in one of the most historic rooms of the University of Padova, the same space where Galileo Galilei once gave his lectures. This powerful setting symbolized the enduring legacy of inquiry and discovery that continues to shape inclusive education today.

More than 200 presenters and attendees gathered from across Europe and beyond, representing academic institutions, service providers, family organizations, and advocacy groups. The programme was structured around four thematic areas: Individual Development and Assessment; Education and Learning; Habilitation and Rehabilitation; and Access, Participation, and Engagement in Society.

Keynote speakers—Professor John Ravenscroft (President, ICEVI Europe), Professor Maria Elisa Fazzi (University of Brescia), and Dr. Els Ortibus (KU Leuven)—opened space for reflective, evidence-based dialogue across disciplines and borders. Topics ranged from early intervention to inclusive curriculum design, assistive technology, and urban accessibility.

## Connect: Linking Research, Practice, and Lived Experience

Workshops and poster sessions encouraged active participation and peer exchange among educators, researchers, families, and individuals with visual impairment. Practical sessions explored inclusive teaching strategies, tactile resources, cerebral visual impairment (CVI), and new models of collaboration across sectors.

Several featured initiatives, including SeeMyLife, a platform highlighting the voices of young people, demonstrated the impact of projects that blend research, creativity, and lived experience. These examples reinforced the importance of co-designed, locally adapted solutions to strengthen inclusion in schools and communities.

To recognize the wealth of knowledge shared, the full list of presenters and research abstracts is available on the conference website: www.icevieurope2025-hollman.it.

The event also marked 10 years of ICEVI European Conferences, celebrating a decade of ongoing collaboration in advancing inclusive education across the region.

## Influence: Advancing Inclusive Policy and Systems

Plenary sessions provided space for shared reflection on how inclusive practices can influence education systems and policy development across Europe and beyond. A key moment of the conference was the presentation of the Key Principles for Inclusive Education of Learners with Visual Impairment**,** a set of practical, evidence-based recommendations co-developed through expert workshops held in the lead-up to the event.

These principles are designed to support decision-makers, practitioners, and institutions in strengthening inclusive education systems. They provide clear guidance on topics such as early intervention, curriculum accessibility, teacher preparation, transition planning, and collaboration with families and communities. The principles are not prescriptive; instead, they offer a flexible framework that can be adapted to national contexts while upholding the rights of learners with visual impairment.

By highlighting these principles at the conference, ICEVI Europe and its partners encouraged dialogue on how countries and institutions can move from intent to implementation, ensuring that inclusion is not only a policy goal but a lived reality for every learner.

Discussions throughout the conference also explored related themes, including multisensory learning, vocational pathways, inclusive assessment, and the role of

technology in education. These conversations reinforced the importance of creating systems that value diversity and promote participation at every stage of learning.

The Key Principles are available online and may be shared widely with ministries, teacher training institutions, service providers, and advocacy groups.

To read the full document, visit: www.fondazionerobertholIman.it/keyprinciples

### Re-election of Professor John Ravenscroft

At the recent ICEVI European Regional Conference and General Assembly, Professor John Ravenscroft was re-elected to serve as Regional President for the 2025 to 2028 term. Based at the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom, Professor Ravenscroft is recognized for his expertise in childhood visual impairment and inclusive education, and he continues to guide the region with dedication and insight.

Throughout his leadership, Professor Ravenscroft has worked closely with national partners, organizations, and international allies to strengthen support for individuals with visual impairment. His commitment to connecting research with practical solutions has helped improve education and rehabilitation services across Europe. The General Assembly's decision to reaffirm his presidency reflects trust in his ongoing vision and leadership.

The General Assembly underscored the region's commitment to collaboration, innovation, and inclusive growth as it continues under Professor Ravenscroft's leadership.

Learn more about ICEVI Europe and regional opportunities:
www.icevieurope.org

Explore the conference programme, abstracts, and contributors:
www.icevieurope2025-hollman.it

Engage with ICEVI Global and learn about international initiatives:
www.icevi.org

Access the *Key Principles for Inclusive Education of Learners with Visual Impairment*:
www.fondazionerobertholIman.it/keyprinciples

## Celebrating the III ICEVI Latin America Regional Conference and General Assembly

From 30 May to 1 June 2025, the III ICEVI Latin America Regional Conference took place at the Brazilian Paralympic Training Center in São Paulo, Brazil. Under the theme "Transformative Pillars for a More Inclusive Society: Perspectives and Challenges in the Region," the conference gathered professionals, educators, advocates, policymakers, and families dedicated to fostering inclusive societies where people with visual impairment can fully participate and thrive.

The event centred on the guiding principle:
“Responsible Governments + Empowered Families + Committed Professionals = Included Children, Independent Adults”.

Over three days, participants explored three key pillars:

- Inclusive Policies
- Inclusive Education
- Rehabilitation of Adults with Visual Impairment

Each pillar was addressed through keynote presentations, panel discussions, and country-level examples of promising practices. These sessions encouraged open and forward-looking conversations, highlighting both progress and ongoing challenges in different regional contexts. Roundtable discussions facilitated collaboration and the strengthening of regional partnerships.

A particularly impactful session featured young people with visual impairment sharing their personal experiences, underscoring the importance of incorporating lived experience into the development of inclusive systems and policies.

In addition to plenaries, practical workshops offered guidance on:

- Early intervention for children with visual impairment
- Strategies for autonomy and independent living
- Support approaches for individuals with low vision

These workshops equipped professionals and families with tools to enhance services and improve quality of life across age groups.

The conference fostered a rich exchange of pedagogy, policy ideas, and practical approaches. Attendees left with renewed motivation, deeper connections, and a shared commitment to advancing inclusion.

## ICEVI Latin America General Assembly

The conference also hosted the ICEVI Latin America General Assembly, bringing together representatives from national member organizations to reflect, plan, and make decisions aimed at strengthening collaboration and leadership across the region.

## Welcoming Gladys Viviana Correa as ICEVI Latin America President

Gladys Viviana Correa of Argentina was welcomed as the new President for the 2025–2029 quadrennium. With extensive regional experience, including her previous role as Southern Cone Coordinator, Gladys has worked closely with national organizations, ministries, and family networks to promote inclusive education across Spanish-speaking countries. Her leadership is characterized by a strong commitment to collaboration and advocacy for inclusive practices that address local realities.

### Tribute to the Leadership of Julio César Cañizález

Appreciation was expressed for Julio César Cañizález of El Salvador, who served as President from 2021 to 2024. Julio's tenure was marked by a focus on strengthening inclusive education systems, expanding access to resources, and encouraging cross-country cooperation. His leadership contributed to increased regional coordination and unity.

As ICEVI Latin America moves forward, it builds on the foundation established during Julio's leadership and looks ahead with confidence under Gladys's guidance. The region continues to uphold its commitment to ensuring that no learner with visual impairment is left behind.

## Invitation to Contribute to Future Issues

The Educator is published biannually to foster "connection" within the global disability community—facilitating knowledge exchange, resource sharing, and emotional connections through case studies and personal stories. The Publications Committee welcomes submissions of articles, reports, reviews, and position papers, as well as contributions on VI education programs and models. These submissions are intended to engage ICEVI members and partners, parents and caregivers, leaders and administrators, researchers and higher education students, technology suppliers and consumers, and practitioners in the education, health, and rehabilitation sectors.

### Themes and submission deadlines for upcoming issues

**January 2026 issue:** Physical Activity (including O&M, sports, recreation, etc.) – submissions due by December 31, 2025

**July 2026 issue:** Technology and AI – submissions due by June 30, 2026

### Submission Guidelines

Please send your submissions to Publications@icevi.org.

- Language: English
- Author information: Include your name, title, country location, and contact details
- Format: MS Word, Arial 12-point font, double line spacing, left-aligned paragraphs
- Style: Avoid complex jargon; define acronyms, abbreviations and technical terms.
- Length:
    - Scholarly manuscripts up to 5000 words, must comply with ethics requirements for original research and include permission to use the material.

    - Reports, reviews, program descriptions, position papers, etc.: Approximately 600 words
- Figures and tables: Must be numbered and clearly labelled
- Media: Photos and videos are welcome
    - Please obtain permission from parents/caregivers for photos of children aged under 18 years, or verbal permission for photos of adults.
    - The ICEVI Consent Form may be downloaded from the Publications section of the ICEVI website: https://icevi.org/educator/
    - Include a brief description or caption with each photo

## Introducing the ICEVI Executive Board, 2025-2028

With commencement of the 2025-2028 quadrennium, we are pleased to introduce the global Executive Board of ICEVI. For contact details, and the details of the seven ICEVI regional Boards, please visit the ICEVI website, https://icevi.org/.

Ms Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame – President

Ms Susan LaVenture – First Vice President

Mr Akhil Paul – Second Vice President

Dr Frances Gentle – Immediate Past President

Dr Praveena Sukhraj-Ely – Treasurer

Ms Ana Peláez – ONCE (Spanish National Organization of the Blind)

Mr Todd Reeves – Overbrook School for the Blind

Mr Craig Brown – Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)

Mr Andrew Griffiths – Sightsavers

Mr Samuel Foulkes – Clovernook Center for the Blind

Ms Diana Stentoft – World Blind Union

Mr Peter Holland – International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness

Mr Komivi Ayassou – President, ICEVI Africa

Mr Silatul Rahim Bin Dahman – President, ICEVI East Asia

To be confirmed – ICEVI Europe

Ms Gladys Viviana Correa – President, ICEVI Latin America

Dr Michael Bina – President, ICEVI North America and the Caribbean

Dr Emily White – President, ICEVI Pacific

Dr Birendra Raj Pokharel – President, ICEVI West Asia

# Join ICEVI: Expand Access to Inclusive Education for People with Visual Impairment

*Convene ideas. Connect people. Influence change.*

Globally, 2.2 billion people live with visual impairment, with many children—especially girls and those with multiple disabilities—facing serious barriers to education. For over 70 years, the International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment (ICEVI) has united a global network of educators, advocates, and policymakers to advance inclusive, equitable, and quality education.

## Why Join ICEVI?

Becoming a member of ICEVI means joining a movement to remove barriers and expand educational opportunities worldwide. Members benefit from:

- Engagement with global leaders and decision-makers
- Collective impact through multi-sector collaboration
- Influence on education policy, research, and funding
- Opportunities to share knowledge and participate in global advocacy

## Membership Opportunities

ICEVI offers various membership levels for organizations and individuals—from global leaders in inclusive education to small institutions, researchers, and advocates. Members contribute expertise and shape ICEVI's global strategy while benefiting from high-level networking, recognition, and shared learning.

## Partner with Us

ICEVI welcomes partnerships and sponsorships for key global initiatives, including the ICEVI Braille Literacy Global Campaign, in partnership with the World Blind Union.

Join us and help create a world where education is accessible to all.

## Contact Details

For information about ICEVI membership, publications, and initiatives:

Email: publications@icevi.org; info@icevi.org ; Website**:** www.icevi.org

QR code for ICEVI website