**WBU statement for International Women's Day 2018**

The World Blind Union has voiced concern over slow progress towards full inclusion of women with visual disabilities in global development agendas.

In a world where an estimated two-thirds of blind people are women, the WBU is commemorating this year's International Women's Day on March 8, with a strong call-to-action urging governments to implement effective mechanisms that guarantee full participation and leadership roles to women with visual disabilities. This year's UN International Women's Day theme is “Time is Now: Rural and urban activists transforming women’s lives”.

"I firmly believe that to build a fully inclusive, sustainable and resilient society, it is essential to address the unique needs of women and girls with disabilities and undertake measures to ensure their full and equal participation" said Dr. Penny Hartin, the Chief Executive Officer of the World Blind Union.

While addressing the UN at the opening ceremonies of International Day of Persons with Disabilities held in New York recently, Dr. Hartin observed that many women and girls with disabilities face barriers such as lack of access to education, healthcare and productive employment. They are also more subject to violence and abuse; and those who face disaster or humanitarian emergencies are particularly vulnerable due to lack of accessible infrastructure, information and insufficient planning to understand and meet their needs.

"It is critical that women with disabilities be engaged in the planning and delivery of all programs and services. For that to happen in a meaningful way, they must be encouraged and facilitated to assume leadership roles" said Dr. Hartin.

Recently, the World Blind Union's Women’s Committee launched a survey on empowerment of blind and sighted women to establish a better understanding of barriers to women assuming leadership roles. An action plan to deal with barriers and discrimination preventing women from becoming leaders will be developed following the survey results.

"The WBU Women's Committee is pushing for the empowerment, equality and transformation of women and children especially in developing countries where there is a great deal of work to be done" adds Ms. Cathy Donaldson, Chair of the Women's Committee. One of the reasons why there is slow progress in those countries is lack of funds to train women, said Ms. Donaldson from South Africa. However, she acknowledged notable progress in countries such as India and South Africa towards empowerment of women.

The World Blind Union is pushing forward collective action among its members to ensure equality and transformation of women’s lives at all levels of societies.

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**The World Blind Union's Second Vice President, Ms. Donatilla Kanimba from Rwanda,** **reflects on the significance of the International Women's day theme**

**1. What is the relevance of the International Women's day theme to the WBU work and specifically for blind and partially sighted women and girls?**

Since the 1970s starting with CEDAW (The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), several other legislations and conventions have been passed aiming at improvement of conditions for women. In many countries affirmative actions are taken to speed up women’s development or to enhance their position in decision making.

However, without the necessary push to strengthen the capacity of women and their mobility in development, their situation will remain as one still requiring the affirmative action.

When talking about persons with disabilities the trend seems to be, to consider them as one generic group without consideration for gender or age. It is indeed true that just as women throughout the world have been disadvantaged in many ways, women with disabilities and especially those with visual impairment have a greater disadvantage in society.

It used to be the case in our associations that leadership would be left to the men. When things began to change, the presidencies were left to the men. Today we are proud that we have had two women presidents in the World Blind Union. This however must not be taken to be the end. We still have a majority of male leaders and even many women will have more faith in men leaders not because they have greater leadership capacity but because they are men.

There is still need to enhance the leadership capacity of visually impaired women and girls and to build their self-confidence. The WBU as the world organization of the blind still has the important task of pressing for more support and education of girls and women with visual impairment to have more of them in meaningful employment and decision-making positions.

Another issue of concern is that in organizations worldwide, when benchmarks have been reached in the most successful countries, the less successful will be forgotten. We must learn to consider where the country is coming from in trying to attain the set objectives. This is to say, for example, African countries cannot expect to reach the desired goals with as much ease as America or Western Europe. The unfortunate situation where women with visual impairment go out to beg with their children because they have no employment; or in richer nations where a large number of women with visual impairment survive on the disability and welfare allowances, must be addressed.

Governments, in their aims to reach the SDGs (UN Sustainable Development Goals), must consider how to support girls with visual impairment to be properly educated. Governments must also ensure equality for women with visual impairment is a reality and not just talk.

 **2. What are some of the challenges that women with visual disabilities encounter as they push for progress and transformation of women's lives especially in developing countries?**

Women and girls with visual impairment in developing countries face many issues which must be dealt with from country to country. Some examples of these issues are:

* Forced marriages, or the opposite of that, being denied the opportunity to marry and have a family, because family members take it upon themselves to determine her life.
* Inability to escape Female genital mutilation, because those who decide to escape it are often excommunicated from their families
* Being forced to be single mothers often with men not of their own choice, because family members think this to be a sure way of ensuring that the visually impaired woman has a caretaker in old age.

The list can be endless. Women’s organizations and governments must now come forward and bring out the women with disabilities, including those with visual impairment and set them on the path to realizing the fulfillment they worked hard to achieve over the decades.

 **3. What is your personal reflection and experience on this year's women’s day theme?**

We have spent more than five decades talking about women’s rights and have made many important strides. We have however ignored the fact that as long as women with disabilities are not educated, children with disability are easily left out in education, they are denied family inheritance and in cultures where infanticide is silently practiced, it is those with disability who are done away with. We need to pool our efforts together to strengthen the position of girls and women with disabilities and we must remember to consider each disability separately, because the needs of each disability are different.

**4. Are there any successes in pushing for progress and transformation in your many years of work for the blind and partially sighted?**

I must not seem to paint a break picture of the situation for girls and women with visual impairment. There are things which can be done to help them come to same level with other women in society. This however will only be possible when women with disability are specifically targeted. In 1990s when the WBU committee on the status of blind women was established, it helped women with visual impairment in Africa to quickly come to the fore and participate actively in national organizations.

In organizations where women are invisible they quickly become visible when they are targeted. I therefore propose that programmes be established to support girls with visual impairment in education, women with visual impairment in employment, and for those who may not be able to attain formal employment; programmes to help them engage in self-employment and home making should be established. This is not a task or a problem for the WBU alone. It should concern governments, the UN and the entire world. If we want to think of a better world we must mitigate problems before they occur. We must also think of how to help those who are now suffering difficult living conditions because nothing was done when they were young or perhaps because the wrong things were done for them.

An example of wrong things being done is where people are kept in institutions without being taught any life skills and then being abandoned to fend for themselves at a later age. Such will very often end up in difficult life situations.

It is necessary to push towards positive growth that will enable women with disabilities to be independent and lead successful lives.