



## TCI at COSP 18

### **Numbers Don't Lie – Disability, Autism, Sexual Abuse and Bodily Integrity**

I am Richa, I am with an organization, TCI Global, post CRPD global membership-based organization of persons with psychosocial disabilities and we work towards ensuring full realization of article 19 of the CRPD.

Exercising legal capacity is essential because it's what makes us visible in the eyes of the law and society. Without legal capacity, we are treated as someone who cannot make decisions, not just about finances or housing, but about something as personal as our own body, our relationships, and our safety.

Women with psychosocial disabilities know this firsthand. We've experienced what it means to have our truth questioned, our discomfort dismissed, and our consent overlooked because everyone else assumes they know what's best for us. We are subjected to substituted decision making regimes. Families, guardians, doctors, even the State can make decisions on our behalf, whether it's about marriage, child custody, healthcare, or reproductive rights. Many women with psychosocial disabilities have shared that they were forcibly sterilized, put on contraception without their consent, or denied basic information about their bodies and intimate relationships or just put away in institutions.

When formal systems deny us the right to make our own decisions, we turn to what has always held us, our informal support systems like our peer networks or our circle of care. For us, support often looks like someone who can hold space and listen to us, remind us that our feelings are valid, that we have the right to say no, or simply that we don't need to rush any decision.

We are more at risk of sexual violence because the systems around us normalize control and silence. If the law says we are "unsound," if families get to decide where we live or who we see, if institutions can isolate us on someone else's request, if mental health laws allow for involuntary detention, then everyone know there's no one to believe us, and nowhere for us to turn. When we talk about this violence and abuse, our testimonies are dismissed and we are taught to start doubting ourselves, before other even get a chance.

I would share something deeply personal here. As a child, I didn't know what "bad touch" was. I remember being in public spaces, markets, crowded streets and feeling a hand where it shouldn't be. Or hearing whispers that made my skin crawl. But I didn't understand it, I didn't

have the language. I didn't even know I was allowed to say something. That silence stayed with me for years. I am an adult, and I have found my voice now, BUT I find myself scanning rooms, staying hyper-aware of who is around me, who is watching me, who is following me, because that fear and that memory of bad touch never really leaves. And when I try to explain that vigilance or anxiety, I'm told I'm "too sensitive," or "paranoid," or that "not everyone is bad." But here's the thing, when society doesn't acknowledge our rights, doesn't believe us when we speak, and treats us as unreliable narrators of our own bodies and experiences, that fear becomes part of our daily survival.

This is not just my reality. But the reality of many other women and girls with psychosocial disabilities. These experiences are not separate from the discussion on legal capacity, but they are at the heart of it. Because without the legal and social recognition of our personhood, our voices are easily dismissed, our rights are withheld, and our safety is constantly compromised.

So, when we talk about legal capacity, we're not talking about a technicality. We're talking about our safety, our dignity, and our right to be heard and believed.

That's why it mattered so much when, in a recent research project on legal capacity and SRHR led by WEI and where we partnered, we were not just participants, we were engaged as knowledge partners and thought leaders. Women with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities led every stage of the process, from shaping the tools, collating desk literature, to facilitating the FGDs, to reviewing the findings. It was a project in which the methodology was rooted in faith, mutual respect, and shared knowledge.

What made it different was that our expertise and experience was trusted, not overseen. There was no top-down approach. We decided when and how we wanted to be involved.

This is what it looks like when partnerships are ethical, inclusive, and bottom-up. When people most affected are not asked to fit into rigid formats, but are met with flexibility, care, and space to lead.

We don't need more protection through control, we need more leadership through trust. That's how we begin to dismantle the systems that invisibilize us and build ones that centre our voices instead.

We urge policymakers to repeal discriminatory legislations that take away our legal capacity and abolish substituted decision-making. Let's stop talking about legal capacity as a checkbox. And start treating it as what it is, a human right, a safety net, and the foundation of our ability to live, love, resist, and heal. Thank you.

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