

UNICEF Executive Board first regular session of 2024

Item 4: UNICEF programme cooperation: Country programme documents

Statement by Fatoumata Keita at the UNICEF Executive Board session

Growing up, the idea that I could make it this far in life was not only unlikely; it was impossible. I was born deaf and lost my father when I was three years old and my mother when I was 10. For most children like me, that is the end of their story. They are often cast aside in the shadows of statistics and terminologies. I am lucky. Unfortunately, I am amongst the very few who can say that in this part of the world.

Today, I want you to see, through me, the incredible potential of children with disabilities, like all children, to inspire hope and change when they are treated with dignity and allowed to dream and pursue their dreams. I want you to imagine the possibilities of a world where every child is seen, heard and included – not as indicators of diversity and inclusion, but as humans with rights, dreams, and potential.

Across Africa, children with disabilities face multiple and overlapping challenges. For most children with disabilities, the basic services simply don't exist or are limited to cover their needs. Our society is restrictive to children like me.

We refuse to be held back. With determination, I have found my voice, and today, I am not only an advocate for girls with disabilities but for all vulnerable and excluded children, including girls who face violence and abuse.

My dream is to be a nurse to help others, but I am aware of the challenges ahead – how I will interact with my patients, share a joke, or counsel them.

Now, if you are wondering what you can do for us, it is simple. Just deliver on the promises you made in the international conventions and treaties.

1. First, ensure that children with disabilities are seen and counted to include our needs in policies and programmes. We also want to be included in decision-making on all policies and programmes meant for us.
2. Invest more in the development of children with disabilities. Mobilize all partners, including communities, civil society, and the private sector, to create equal opportunities for us to learn, develop and pursue a career.
3. Take urgent action to protect children with disabilities from sexual violence and abuse. We are hardly listened to even when we break all the beautiful records. Often, we live in a cycle of violence in silence.
4. Finally, please don't leave us behind as you innovate and adopt new technologies such as AI. Work with us to use the power of technology to solve some of our problems and ensure that we are included.

We are not outsiders. We are a part of humanity worthy of rights and dignity.

Thank you.