

Distinguished Delegates,

I would like to thank you for the opportunity you have given me to speak to you. I am very happy to talk about the Raising the Voices Training Project and what I and the other survivors have experienced so far.

One of the most important aspects of Raising the Voices is the simple aspect of finding myself in the company of landmine survivors from other countries. Sharing experiences has been very important for me. I want to thank Raquel Willerman who first established communication among us eight survivors via the internet a few weeks prior to coming to Geneva. I am sure we will maintain this communication after Geneva. I have learned that the commonalities among people with disabilities goes beyond national borders, racial distinctions, political and religious differences. The most important thing for us as survivors and people with disabilities is to demonstrate that we are useful beings. Our struggle in this is the same no matter what country we are from. We all struggle to be reintegrated into society, into our jobs and into the entire range of activities that any person does.

I want to give you some examples of one of the activities we have done in this training. First we did a listening exercise. We divided into pairs and one person spoke for 5 minutes while the other listened without interrupting. The listener had to focus only on the speaker and not think about other things, like what they would eat for lunch. The listener also had to remember about the goodness of the speaker, that no matter what the speaker said, the speaker was always doing the best they could at the time. The listener then had 2 minutes to summarize what the speaker said. It is such a simple exercise, yet it is the basis for everything that we are trying to do here this week. Basically, it feels very good to be heard. It is also impossible for anyone to respond to our needs without listening to us.

For the training we also did an exercise where we imagined a society that was responsive to all of our needs. With our minds free of the constraints typically imposed on accommodating people with disabilities, we wrote down our ideas and dreams for ourselves and others. Then, we examined the 22 UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for People with Disabilities to see if our ideas fell within their scope. To tell you the truth, some of our dreams of a responsive and accommodating society did not correspond to a Standard Rule. But we were so happy to see that many of our dreams indeed corresponded to norms that already exist, as stated in the Standard Rules. So in the majority of cases, we don't have to think of new regulations, we just have to implement existing ones.

We, people with disabilities, want very much to work on the implementation of these Standard Rules. They are written for us and need to be implemented with our active participation.

Now I have the honor of introducing my companions for the Raising the Voices training, the other landmine survivors:

Nelson Castillo from Ecuador
José Miguel Mahn from Chile
Jesús Martínez from El Salvador
Edgar Moreno from Colombia
Alonso Cardozo from Colombia
Danis Hernandez from Nicaragua
Uriel Carazo from Nicaragua
and myself, Porfirio Gomez from Nicaragua

Thank you for your gracious attention. I hope that other people with good hearts become inspired by your efforts and noble cause and that God is with you always.

Thank you,
Porfirio Gomez