

Written submission

From Tanya Petkova, Bulgarian citizen, a person with disability[[1]](#footnote-1)

to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

The statement is provided to Network of Independent Experts – NIE (NGO based in Bulgaria) as several e-mails some in Bulgarian, some in English. It had been translated by the organization with support from the Validity Foundation. No any editorial changes (except the translation) are made in the statement. .

First and foremost I would like to thank the people who let me share my opinion on this subject. This does mean a lot to me.

As a person with a mental disability in a country like Bulgaria with the good share of experience I have, I guess my words could be of use or at least I hope so. Let me start off with this- in Bulgaria, people with mental health issues are invisible or rather - next to invisible. The system- the country as an institution- notices us when we have to pay our bills. For the rest of the time we are non- existent, and, yes, I do mean it.

I have been living as a non- existent person for longer than I feel comfortable to admit. For a pretty long period of time- until a month or so, actually, I used to think that the was the worst- being unable to be noticed by anyone even if you stood on the street stomping your feet all the time.

I can give you an example on the stigma- my Mom and I were shopping while the Covid 19 pandemia was still raging and everyone was wearing masks at the stores. Two shop- assistants saw me but did not see my Mom and started talking to each other knowing I could her them: "Don't mind her; she's insane and delirious." My Mom turned to one of them to ask a question about a clothing item or something and the women then recognized both of us. "Is this beautiful girl your daughter?"- one of them asked her. "Yes, she is"- Mom said. "Oh, take a look at everything you might want to and have fun while at the store.” If this had happened, say, half a year ago, I would have rushed out of the store bawling my eyes out, but I finally know it is not worth it. People in Bulgaria are going to need decades to finally grow out of this. Such an attitude can hurt you almost to death, it can make you feel humiliated, but it won't kill you. Now, though, I do realise what could do that or at least put you in an institution for the rest of your life- a lack of a job. This is kind of personal, but I am still going to talk about it, and my goal is not to beg for pity or attention. I used to suffer from a very severe form of amnesia due to a treatment that I owe to a very incompetent psychiatrist. Many years later, a therapist helped me get a part of my memory back, and I remembered hw my mother's husband used to rape me while strangling me night after night for many years. Mom sent me to live with her Mom many years ago due to other reasons, but her Mom is very ill and started abusing me emotionally and physically, so my Mom rented a small place for me to live, thank God for which. But she is the one who is paying the rent, the bills, almost everything- I am only buying the some of the food- as much as I can with the benefits the country gives me. This is what I meant when I sad a lack of a job can kill you or put you in an institution. If Mom weren't paying for everything, I don't know where I would be now. Over the years I have seen many people who lived in the mental clinics, for they had nowhere to go, and I have been actively looking for a job for years. I have been approved for a lot of positions, but that only lasted until my employers found out I am mentally disabled. This is where I do not feel angry or furious. This is where I feel helpless. When the day of the month on which I have to pay my rent, my bills for the electricity, the water, the gas, the internet, the phone, etc, the country "finds"me and sends me a letter in which it says how much I owe, and I am ok with that- I am a citizen of this country and must pay my bills. But when I tell the country "Would you please give me a job or help me find a job or at least find a way to stop my future employers to stop sending me away because I am mentally ill because I am a human being and a citizen too and have the right to work and want to work, I don't want the country to pay my bills?", the country pretends it did not hear me, it doesn't do anything to help me get a job, but it still wants me to pay all of my bills. And if I can't, it sends me to live and die in an institution.

As conclusion, having in mind my experience, I would like to propose to the Committee to add some more points in the Guidelines:

-        To make sure the issues of domestic violence will be timely addressed, especially in case of sexual violence, especially against children;

-        To make sure that there will be measures for raising awareness of the society about the needs of persons with disabilities and especially people diagnosed with psychiatric illness. To make sure that the people will understand that the trauma may be expressed in a way recognized as mental illness symptoms.

-        To offer proper and sustainable support, including psychological support for the victims of domestic violence and especially sexual violence;

-        To ensure widely education and training for the teachers, doctors, psychiatrist, judges, prosecutors and whole society about the domestic violence, sexual violence and how it affects the victims;

-        To ensure proper measures for stopping any kind of violence, including harassment, bulling, emotional neglect and violence against people with psycho-social disabilities.

Something else that, in my own personal opinion, is a huge problem, is giving people - I am talking about a particular on about which I was personally mislead about facilities I was placed during the years. I was told that it was a place that was next to a heavenly place, it offered so many different kinds of art treatment, there were places to reside in the yard of very hospital, it was so nice and fun to be there, like I was almost lucky I was about to live in a mental facility instead of at my home. Let me start off with the fact that I was misplaced in a ward where it was so dirty and it stank so bad I could barely breathe. I managed to get in touch with my doctor who had sent me there, he realized someone had made a mistake, and I was moved to another ward which was full of unpleasant surprises, too, but at least the air was breathable. When I got discharged, I checked the website of the facility, the only picture that was available was one of the entrance to the yard- it showed the door and a few bushes. The information posted online didn't say the building was so old that it could have buried all of its residents alive at any second- one of the walls in the ward where I lived was tilted towards the floor. The website didn't say there was warm water available only twice a week for two hours and good personal hygiene was a dream. There was no running water in the bathroom, so we all took turns to fill plastic buckets with water to flush the toilets. In that one institution, I met a very brave woman. She never really argued or fought with anyone. She just smoked a lot all day long, taking deep drags from her cigarette. "What are you doing here?" I asked her once because I knew some of the patients spent more time there to recover and get more stable. Staying completely calm, being fully aware of her situation and clearly realizing she could not weasel out of it, she just took another deep drag of her cigarette, smiled at me and said "I am living here, waiting for someone to die in a nursing home for mentally ill people, so I can take their place and die there, too."

I think the country should be held responsible for the misleading information posted online or on the media and reality in the different institutions where people go or get sent for treatment.

I think, first of all there must be work for everybody, for all people with psycho-social disabilities.

There is a need of regular support. A supporter must go in the person home at least one in the month and to check whether the person takes medication. And here I have no trust to everybody, no matter of his or her education. Social workers – no one, several, must be engaged in the support of the person. They must check whether the person keeps the house in order, whether the clothes are clean, whether he or she is wear according to the season. The social works must to support person to go outside – for shopping, for example, in a café, cinema, etc. The people engaged with support of the person must work together, as a team. It will prevent isolation.

In terms of mental illness the problem with accessibility is quite complicated. It is not so visible as in case somebody has physical disabilities. In our case the places can be inaccessibility because of the rough comments of the people around, the stereotypes and discrimination, but I already said enough above.

And as the problem related to the available jobs for persons like me, I want to come back to this issue again. The workplaces must be adapted for persons with psycho-social disabilities. This means, there must exist special place and programs for reducing the stress-level. It can be a specific area (like a room) where a person can spend some time practicing sport or art for a while. But also the atmosphere must be positive, without conflicts. And it is relevant also for universities, education settings – everywhere.

It is important not because of the stress. Some people (including me) suffer from severe side effects of the medicine. In my case it comes as a dramatic physical condition, which comes unexpected and people who don’t know what is this may be terrified. It is a painful spasm, which some time require a calm space, but in some cases leads to more serious medical intervention. Here is the place of the psychologist – he/she must be on the spot to support not only the person but the rest of the team as well, to ensure them there is nothing wrong and scary. But the psychologist must be aware for this condition, its effect and the way how to calm down everybody in such situation.

In other words, the accessibility of the working places can be understand as a combination of measures – physical conditions, presence of a competent psychologist, workplace climate, and understanding. The persons with disabilities must lead the process of adaptation of the working places. The experts have an important role, but they must be train to understand the real needs of persons like me and not to blame us for our needs.

1. The author prefers not to reveal her full name, as the statement is very personal. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)