Good morning. My name is Ana Peláez and I am chair of the European Disability Forum (EDF) Women’s Committee and a member of its Executive Committee. EDF is the umbrella organisation representing the entire disability movement in Europe, which means approximately 80 million European citizens with disabilities. Women make up sixty per cent of this population.

On behalf of EDF, I would like to offer thanks for three reasons. First of all, I must thank Soraya Post MEP for inviting us to take part in this hearing. Secondly, for putting an important subject like ‘Domestic violence against people with disabilities’ on the agenda. And thirdly, for allowing us to hear the testimonies we have just witnessed; testimonies from women with disabilities who, on behalf of EDF, we congratulate for bringing these issues to the table and giving voice to them. I would especially like to thank these women for this courageous gesture.

This is a very important year for us as EDF is marking its 20th anniversary. By the way, February also marks the 20th anniversary of the first European manifesto of women and girls with disabilities. These commemorations could be a reason for celebration, but we want to make this a year in which we step up our activism in favour of full recognition of the rights of all Europeans with disabilities. Violence, exploitation and abuse constitute one of the greatest areas for concern in EDF and violation of the rights of Europeans with disabilities, so you can imagine how important this gathering organised by Soraya Post MEP is for us.

As I mentioned, violence against persons with disabilities is one of the key issues on our political agenda. It is also on the European Parliament agenda, and especially considering the recommendations issued by the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to the European Union in its concluding observations. It is a subject that concerns all people with disabilities: adults, many of whom are segregated in institutions; children, who are often subjected to corporal punishment in order to correct their behaviour; and so on. However, it is a topic that, as we have seen this morning, affects mostly, disproportionately and tragically women and girls with disabilities. When I say that this violence is tragic, I have reasons to do so: just in Spain, where we do have data which is disaggregated by gender and disability, around 20% of all women who lose their lives as a result of gender-based violence every year have a disability, either because they were already women and girls with disabilities, or as a result of a disability acquired due to the violence they suffered.

This topic is largely invisible. More and more, we have all managed to raise awareness and include violence against people with disabilities, which is in fact the subject of this hearing: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES. But what we are as yet incapable of seeing is that we are really talking about violence against WOMEN AND GIRLS WITH DISABILITIES; just think about all the testimonies we have listened to today.

So the first thing we need to say is that violence against women and girls with disabilities is structural violence that arises from the mere fact that when we talk about their specific situation they are not recognised as women or girls. This non-recognition means they are excluded from policies aimed at providing assistance and recovery for women victims of violence. (Another related topic is the accessibility of these services, but today we don’t have time to go into this.)

A second structural aspect of violence against women and girls with disabilities is that in many cases they are victims of legal incapacitation which takes place due to their gender. This incapacitation is part of the process to enable these women to be subjected to forced sterilisation without their consent, or without their realising what is being done to them. This practise is another type of domestic violence in some ways, because it is the families who, in violation of the CRPD and even article 39 of the Istanbul Convention, choose to sterilise their daughters to protect them against unwanted pregnancies. I don’t mean to blame the families; they are also victims of the healthcare system, which very often suggests this type of practise. Sterilising a woman means mutilating not only her reproductive capacity, but also her civil, political and economic rights. In addition, the only thing sterilisation achieves is to leave girls and women with disabilities even more exposed to sexual abuse and rape. Even worse, they are also unable to access justice to report the perpetrators or seek remedies, because they have been deprived of their legal capacity.

A few months ago, we in EDF tried to arrange a hearing here in the European Parliament to publicly denounce the forced sterilisation of women and girls with disabilities and present a report we have prepared on this topic. However, we were unable to move forward with our plans because our interlocutors were not personally convinced in this regard, and I do not blame them either, but it does show how society views the rights of women and girls with disabilities, without exclusion.

Allow me to conclude my brief thoughts by putting forward four recommendations:

1 EDF, along with other sister organisations such as the European Women’s Lobby, calls on the European Union to ratify rapidly the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, an agreement we worked hard together to secure and which contains key references to disability. We also call upon the European Union to adopt a strategy to fight against the violence that women suffer.

2 EDF demands the full implementation of all the recommendations made by the CRPD Committee. Many of these concern violence.

3 The European Union should conduct studies and collect data on women and girls with disabilities in all EU research and statistics on violence against women and in all other studies on violence.

4 We call upon the European Commission to ensure funding is available to set up and maintain structures and programmes for women with disabilities, led by women with disabilities themselves. This is needed to make sure the concerns of women and girls with disabilities are truly taken into consideration. It is a disgrace that there are only around ten to twelve national organisations of women with disabilities, and not one European organisation of women with disabilities.

Sisters, our voices must be heard, and for that to happen we need all of you to be involved. Thank you very much for your attention.