

ActionAid Australia submission to the consultation on Australia's new International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy

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1. Introduction

ActionAid Australia commends the Australian Government on its decision to develop a new International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy and we welcome the opportunity to contribute to this consultation.

Women with disabilities experience some of the highest rates of discrimination and disadvantage, including human rights abuses, high rates of violence, economic insecurity, social isolation, stigma and widespread exclusion from decision-making. The intersection between gender inequality and disability discrimination results in women with disabilities experiencing higher rates of poverty and marginalisation than women without disabilities and men with disabilities.

The situation is amplified for women with disabilities in low-income countries because people living in poverty are more likely to acquire a disability and people with disabilities are more likely to experience poverty. Limitations in access to health care, disability services and assistive technology as well as women's exclusion from decision-making impact on the ability of women with disabilities in low-income countries to live a life of dignity. This situation is magnified in times of crisis.

Despite these challenges, ActionAid's experience shows that women with disabilities are powerful agents of change who are stepping up to dismantle the structures that disadvantage them and lead inclusive and effective solutions to the challenges in their communities. Australia should foster this leadership by scaling up support for gender transformative programming that is designed and led by women with disabilities and that supports their participation in decision-making at all levels.

Australia should also increase investment in social protection and public services and develop inclusive and intersectional strategies for responding to climate change and disaster risk reduction, conflict and humanitarian response that address the needs of women with disabilities. This is particularly important in a context where the world is likely to exceed 1.5 degrees Celsius of global warming at which point extreme flooding, drought, wildfires and food insecurity increase dramatically.

2. Priority issues

2.1 Climate change and disaster response

During times of crisis, such as cyclones and droughts women and girls with disabilities face specific challenges that put their wellbeing, safety, and livelihoods at risk.

The needs of women and girls with disabilities are often overlooked in climate change and disaster response. Women with disabilities' experience widespread exclusion from planning and decision-making processes and climate change responses, including adaptation, resilience building and disaster response. This results in the needs of women with disabilities being overlooked in climate change initiatives and humanitarian responses.

Disaster preparedness and early warning is one area where we see a profound impact of this exclusion. For example, emergency communications systems such as tsunami warnings can often be inaccessible for those with a hearing or visual impairment. Further, when disasters hit,

women with disabilities can face challenges evacuating on their own, or evacuation centres are inaccessible for those using wheelchairs or with other mobility impairments.¹

Inaccessible and non-inclusive emergency responses threaten the safety and security of women and girls with disabilities and place them at a greater risk of violence and exploitation.

Targeted interventions are needed that support the leadership of women with disabilities in climate change, disaster risk reduction and humanitarian response policy and planning.² Scaled-up funding for responses led by women with disabilities is also critical in meeting the needs of vulnerable communities. ActionAid's experience demonstrates that when resourced, women can lead more inclusive and effective responses, which is critical in ensuring that marginalised communities are not left behind.

WITTT Sunshine inclusive disaster response in Vanuatu

In Vanuatu, ActionAid works with the Women I Tok Tok Tugeta (WITTT) network to support gender-responsive disaster risk reduction, response and recovery, as well as gender just climate solutions. When twin cyclones Judy and Kevin hit Vanuatu in March 2023, WITTT Sunshine, the network's disability branch, initiated a women-led response to ensure that women with disabilities were not left behind.

In the lead up to the cyclones, ActionAid Vanuatu worked with members of WITTT Sunshine to facilitate disability leadership dialogues and disaster preparedness and response training. WITTT Sunshine leaders also joined the core team leading Women Wetem Weta (Women's Weather Watch), a women-led information and communications platform that provides early warning of disasters through SMS, reaching more than 40% of the population on the Digicel network. It also operates a phone tree network on five islands.

Complemented by their understanding of the diverse needs of women with disabilities, this training equipped WITTT Sunshine leaders with the resources and skills needed to undertake rapid needs assessment and ensure that when the cyclones struck, women with disabilities were located, transported to safe spaces, and had their needs prioritised in relief efforts.

The training enabled the WITTT Sunshine network to respond when the twin cyclones hit, and approximately 740 women with disabilities were supported by WITTT Sunshine in the aftermath of the cyclones.

2.2 Conflict situations

Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to human rights abuses during conflict due to the barriers they experience in fleeing violence, their vulnerability to sexual violence, and their lack of access to public services. Armed conflict is also a cause of disability and the number of people with disabilities increases during conflicts.

¹ CBM and Nossal Institute Partnership for Disability Inclusive Development (2017) Disability Inclusion in Disaster Risk Reduction: Experiences of people with disabilities in Vanuatu during and after Tropical Cyclone Pam and recommendations for humanitarian agencies, https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/2567576/WEB-DIDRR-Report-14112017.pdf

² For more information on Pacific demands on disability inclusion see Pacific Islands Forum and Pacific Disability Forum and Outcomes Document from the Seventh Pacific Regional Conference on Disability, https://pacificdisability.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Final_Outcome-Document_PDF-2023-7PRCD-Conference-Outcome-Statement.pdf

Women with disabilities are often left behind when others flee to safety or can face barriers in accessing safe spaces due to their reliance on external support. This results in women with disabilities facing a higher risk of injury or death. When women with disabilities do seek assistance, they often face difficulty in accessing services in emergency settings. This can be due to the lack of accessible transport, the inaccessibility of emergency shelters, as well as barriers to accessing information and specialised services, including psychosocial support services and sexual and reproductive health services.³

Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender-based violence during conflict and humanitarian situations, with the risk highest for those with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities.⁴ This is due to several factors including increased poverty and social isolation, the loss of assistive devices, separation from support systems and networks and mobility and communication barriers.

Australia should develop an inclusive and intersection strategy that ensures that conflict and humanitarian responses foster women's intersectional leadership, address the needs of women with disabilities and support responses led by women with disabilities.

2.3 Care, public services and social protection

Access to universal public services and social protection programs are critical for women with disabilities who experience high rates of poverty and economic insecurity due to social stigma and discrimination in the workplace. The marginalisation of women and girls with disabilities from education and skill building opportunities exacerbates inequalities and limits access to employment in comparison to other women or men with disabilities. Support for women with disabilities can also incur higher costs due to additional needs for treatment and rehabilitation, personal assistance, assistive technologies, or specialised transport, which can increase economic insecurity.

Women's traditional role as carers also means that women take on most of the responsibilities of caring for children or family members with disabilities. This further limits women's access to paid employment due to time constraints and the need for flexibility to manage caring responsibilities. These challenges are amplified for women with disabilities who are also caring for family members with disabilities. ActionAid encourages the Australian government to ensure that the new strategy also recognises and addresses the role of women's unpaid care work in supporting people with disabilities.

Access to well-funded public services and comprehensive social protections are critical in upholding women with disabilities' human rights and wellbeing and reducing women's unpaid burden of care work. This includes accessible and inclusive healthcare services, including sexual and reproductive health care. Education and childcare services are also critical in enabling women to enter paid employment.

Social protection schemes, including pensions, unemployment benefits and disability support are also vital in providing economic security for women with disabilities throughout their lifetimes. Australia can foster social protection through strategies to ensure an adequate public resource base through reform of global taxation and foreign debt.

³ International Review of the Red Cross (2023), The protection of women and girls with disabilities in armed conflict: Adopting a gender, age and disability-inclusive approach to select IHL provisions, doi:10.1017/S1816383122000765.

⁴ Women's Refugee Commission (2015) "I See That It Is Possible" Building Capacity for Disability Inclusion in Gender-Based Violence Programming in Humanitarian Settings, <https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Disability-Inclusion-in-GBV-English.pdf>

Supporting secure livelihoods for women with disabilities in Kenya

Kenya has recently experienced its worst drought in four decades after consecutive failed rainy seasons. For women and girls with disabilities the drought worsened existing inequalities and created new hardships such as loss of income and greater difficulties accessing healthcare.

ActionAid Kenya has supported women with disabilities who have lost their livelihoods as a result of the climate-induced drought, by providing trainings on women's rights and farming techniques.

The trainings have built women's knowledge about climate-resilient agriculture practices, including transitioning from the use of fertilizers and chemicals towards the use of kitchen waste which results in healthier and more organic produce.

For one of the participants, Jane, the trainings strengthened her confidence and supported her to establish small farming businesses.

"Through ActionAid training, I have learned that...I can be independent too and earn a living without waiting on my relatives and friends."

Since the trainings, Jane has felt empowered to raise her voice and amplify the demands of women with disabilities within her community. She has since supported 15 women, including five women living with disabilities, to plant kitchen gardens and sell their produce at the local market.

3. Women's leadership and transformative change

Transformative programming that targets the social, cultural and economic systems that disadvantage women with disabilities is critical to progressing both gender equality and disability rights. Targeted investment can realise a powerful double dividend. ActionAid urges DFAT to strengthen its investment in initiatives that foster women with disabilities' leadership and decision-making at the local, regional and global level and across all programs.

Women with disabilities' widespread exclusion from decision-making and leadership roles results in them being overlooked in policy decisions that impact their lives, including service provision, social protection schemes, climate change and emergency and humanitarian response plans. Women with disabilities' participation, leadership and influencing of policy and decision making will result in the development of more inclusive and equitable services, and policy approaches. It also reframes the discourse to focus on the abilities that women with disabilities have to offer, rather than their limitations.⁵

Aid investments should also tackle social norms change, including by assessing how gender norms and disability stigma result in compounded disadvantage for women with disabilities. There is also an opportunity to provide targeted and accessible interventions to respond to women with disabilities' unique and varied experiences of violence and their sexual and reproductive health needs, including those in conflict settings.

Internal capacity development and guidance is needed within DFAT and implementing partners to enable the implementation of transformative approaches to the rights of women with

⁵ For more information on the demands of Pacific women with disabilities see the Women Deliver Oceanic Pacific Region, Women with Disabilities Statement, <https://awhn.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Women-Deliver-2023-Women-with-Disability-Oceanic-Statement-PDF.pdf>

disabilities and the integration of intersectional feminist analysis across key thematic areas and at DFAT post-level.

4. Scaling access to assistive technology

Assistive technology is critical to the realisation of the rights of people with disabilities. Access to assistive technology is enshrined as a right in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and is a pre-condition of equal opportunities for people with disabilities for the enjoyment of full human rights, dignity, and wellbeing. Existing gender inequalities results in women being less likely to access assistive technologies. Barriers include assistive products not being designed in a gender-sensitive way, a lack of gender-aware support services, as well as other financial and cultural barriers.⁶

Targeted support for initiatives aimed at increasing women with disabilities' access to gender sensitive assistive technologies as well as addressing the structural barriers that restrict their access to both technologies and health and disability support services is critical to ensure women with disabilities are not left behind in the context of a growing gap global between the need for assistive technologies and access to these technologies.

The inclusion of people with disabilities, including women, in decision-making around the use of technology is also critical. For example, the leadership of people with disabilities in humanitarian response and action is vital in ensuring that emergency early warning systems are disability friendly and targeted to diverse needs, and that technology needs of people with disabilities are consistently budgeted for and supported. This would ensure, for example, that early warning systems include flashing lights to ensure they do not exclude people with hearing impairments.

5. Funding for organisations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), including women led organisations

Scaled-up funding for initiatives and organisations that are working on the rights of women and girls with disabilities is critical in enabling women with disabilities to drive their own agenda and foster a transformative and intersectional approach to gender equality and disability rights.

This is also vital in a context of severe underfunding. In 2021, only 3.8 percent of global ODA was targeted at people with disabilities, and only 0.22 percent was principal funding. Global funding targeted at women with disabilities is extremely limited, with only 0.03 percent of global ODA in 2021 having a principal focus on gender equality and disability inclusion.⁷

Australia and support women with disabilities to drive their own priorities and influencing policy and service provision by scaling up investment in women led OPDs. Support for coalitions and movements led by women with disabilities is also vital as these play a critical role in addressing social isolation and stigma. Women led disability organisations often have limited staff, rely on unpaid and volunteer work, and are chronically under-resourced with limited organisational capacity. To address this, accessible, flexible, core and multi-year grant-funding is critical, and should be administered directly through DFAT post, or feminist and OPD intermediaries.

⁶ WHO and UNICEF (2022) *Global report on assistive technology*, <https://iris.who.int/bitstream/handle/10665/354357/9789240049451-eng.pdf?sequence=1>

⁷ ActionAid calculations based on data OECD DAC data for 2021, <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>

Recommendations

1. The International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy should be underpinned by an intersectional feminist analysis and a rights-based approach to disabilities, with a strong focus on the experiences of women with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ peoples with disabilities and other marginalised groups.
2. Australia should prioritise transformative approaches to the rights of women with disabilities, including:
 - Recognising the agency and capability of women with disabilities and fostering their participation in leadership and decision-making roles, including in relation to climate change and conflict.
 - Ensuring strategies for responding to emergencies and conflict are intersectional and disability inclusive to ensure that:
 - Women with disabilities are involved in planning and response efforts,
 - Communication and emergency services are gender and disability inclusive, and
 - Specialised psychosocial support and sexual and reproductive health services are available and accessible.
 - Resourcing responses to climate change, disaster risk reduction and humanitarian response that are led by women with disabilities.
 - Scaling up access to gender-sensitive assistive technologies.
 - Recognising the traditional gender role of women as carers of people with disabilities and supporting comprehensive social protection and universal and accessible public services to reduce this unpaid burden of care.
3. Scaled up funding should be provided for Organisations of People with Disabilities (OPDs) that are working with women with disabilities, with a prioritisation of women led OPDs, as well as women's collectives and movements that are led by women with disabilities.
4. DFAT should strengthen its technical expertise in gender equality and disability rights and inclusion, to enable the integration of intersectional feminist and disability inclusive analysis across new investments and Development Partnership Plans.
5. DFAT should ensure meaningful consultation with women-led OPDs and disability coalitions and networks in the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of disability investments.

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Appendix 1. Working at the intersection of gender inequality and disability discrimination: WITTT Sunshine and ActionAid Vanuatu

In 2015, ActionAid Vanuatu supported the establishment of the Women I Tok Tok Tugeta (WITTT) network to advance Ni-Vanuatu women's rights, safety and resilience in a context of increasing climate impacts and disasters. As part of the network's commitment to leave no one behind, a chapter for women with disabilities was established in 2018, known as WITTT Sunshine. The goal was to end the double discrimination faced by women with disabilities and to ensure that women come out of the shadows and into the sunshine around the country. Today the WITTT network brings together over 9000 women in five provinces across Vanuatu, Over 720 women with disabilities are part of WITTT Sunshine's efforts to tackle the challenges faced by its members.

Five years on, WITTT Sunshine has been recognised by the Global Centre on Adaptation as a finalist for the 2023 Local Adaptation Champions Award for Women in Leadership. This global recognition is for the transformative work of WITTT Sunshine to ensure women with disabilities are not passive recipients of aid but are leading responses to climate change and disasters. This groundbreaking work is reducing the vulnerability of women with disabilities to climate change by providing them with the training and tools to lead disaster preparedness for themselves and other people living with disabilities in their communities. This work is data-driven, gender transformative and at the forefront of driving inclusive response.

Leaders of WITTT Sunshine have described the transformative journey that they and others in the network have gone through. Like many people with disabilities who face widespread stigma in the community, Ellen Tamata stayed inside her house for six years, before she finally decided "I have to do something not only for me but for my sisters and come out from the dark corner into the light". Today she is leading the WITTT Sunshine network and bringing women with disabilities out of their homes, out of their communities and into new environments where they are building a collective agenda and influencing for change.

There are number of principles that lie at the heart of WITTT Sunshine and its powerful model for gender transformation and disability inclusion. At its core is an intersectional feminist, human rights-based approach that recognises the agency and leadership of those most impacted, builds awareness of rights and supports the organising and collective action among women with disabilities to drive their own agenda. This has been enabled through the following:

1. **Challenging stigma and discrimination:** Supporting women to get out of their homes and into the community has been a core principle from the start of WITTT Sunshine to challenge the stigma and shame that sees many women trapped in their homes. It has helped to normalise people with disabilities in the community using moments like World Disability Day to bring together people with disabilities alongside able-bodied people to show solidarity and build community acceptance and support.
2. **Care and support:** At the heart of WITTT Sunshine is relationships and caring for one other. Within the disability community people face challenging conditions and sometimes lose loved ones, and the love and care among the network helps carry people through difficult times. This network is relational not transactional. It is a space for carers as much as it is for women with disabilities.
3. **Safe Spaces:** For women with disabilities safe, supportive and non-judgmental spaces within WITTT Sunshine provide the opportunity for women share common experiences of violence, discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion. Through this, there is the realisation that the personal is political and part of a pattern of systemic exploitation and

abuse against women with disabilities that needs to be addressed. Safe spaces also offer healing and psychosocial support among peers with shared lived experience.

4. **Rights Awareness:** WITTT Sunshine provides a space for women with disabilities to understand their rights under the law and commitments that their government has made to support people with disabilities and advance women's rights. Building this common understanding has helped the network to build a collective rights-based agenda and advocate for their specialized service and support needs, including in times of crisis.
5. **Agency & Leadership:** Building the skills and confidence among women to speak up and voice their priorities and concerns is core to the WITTT model and ensuring that women with disabilities are driving their own agenda. Women who have been excluded from public life and decision making need an empowering and supportive environment where they can build their leadership skills and find their voice as activists and agents of change.
6. **Resilience Building:** For women with disabilities to be able to protect their rights in emergencies, access to and control over resources gives them the power to make choices. Through women's economic hubs, women with disabilities are establishing collective enterprises that help to build sustainable livelihoods and economic empowerment. The hubs are designed by the women for the women so they can all contribute with the skills, knowledge and capabilities they have.
7. **Access to Technology & Assistive Devices:** Women with disabilities require access to assistive devices aligned to their disability that are often unavailable, unaffordable or non-existent yet essential to fully participate in society and to lead. This is a core lobbying agenda for WITTT Sunshine, who through access to technology are already leading targeted early warning efforts to the disability community to ensure no-one gets left behind in disasters. Technology can be catalytic for increasing the reach and capability of women with disabilities to lead.
8. **Data Driven, Targeted Approaches:** One of the cornerstones of the WITTT Sunshine work is to spotlight that people with disabilities are not a homogenous group and to build the data and evidence that supports more targeted and inclusive responses rather than a one-size fits all approach. Data captured by the network highlights specific needs of the disability community in times of crisis including food, medicines, assistive devices, evacuation support, family and living environment. This data enables the network to advocate to the government for improved humanitarian assistance and support that targets the most vulnerable in the most appropriate way.

"I remember this one woman who was moving around in her house on a bucket because she did not have access to a wheelchair. When we arrived at her home and gave her food and other items, she started to cry. She told us it was the first time she had ever received any support in a cyclone, and she was shocked to see women like her delivering aid."

– Ellen Tamata, WITTT Sunshine Community Mobiliser following the twin cyclones Kevin and Judy in 2023