# **Water for Women submission for DFAT’s Disability Equity and Rights strategy development**

## **About Water for Women**

The [Water for Women Fund](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/index.aspx) is funded by the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The Prime Minister of Australia announced the Fund in September 2016, in recognition of the critical role that improvements to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) play in addressing poverty and contributing to economic and human development. Originally funded for a period of five years, from 2018 to 2022, and with a budget of AUD118.9 million, in November 2022 the Minister for International Development and the Pacific [announced](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/news/water-for-women-fund-extended-to-2024.aspx) the Fund’s extension for an additional two and a half years (2023 to 2025) and further funding bringing the total investment to AUD159.9 million for the seven year period (2018 to 2025).

The Water for Women Fund supports climate-resilient, socially inclusive and sustainable WASH services and systems, which contribute to safeguarding water security in our region. Equitable access to WASH is a building block for a climate-resilient future. The Fund’s focus on inclusion is critical to equitably addressing climate risks as the Fund strengthens its focus on addressing climate change impacts and building resilience through inclusive WASH across the region. Building on its work in the initial phase (2018 – 2022), the Water for Women Fund responds to evidence that gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) can contribute to more effective and sustainable WASH outcomes. The Fund builds on the premise that WASH improvements are critical to women’s and girls’ well-being and offers an entry point to facilitate discussions in communities around gender inequality and harmful social norms. In addition to gender, the Fund has been exploring approaches to improve social inclusion more broadly to ensure other marginalised groups, such as those with a disability and from sexual and gender minority communities have improved access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene services. The Fund covers the South Asia, Southeast Asia and South Pacific geographical regions and is based on Australian Aid priorities.

The Water for Women Fund is currently partnering with eight civil society organisations (CSOs) to implement 15 [WASH projects](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/project/projects.aspx) in 15 Asia Pacific countries, with the aim of improving the delivery of climate-resilient, inclusive WASH. Simultaneously, four research organisations (ROs) are leading seven [research initiatives](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/research-and-innovation/research-projects.aspx) across nine Asia Pacific countries to address knowledge and practice gaps for climate-resilient, inclusive WASH.

The goal of the Fund is ‘Improved health, gender equality and well-being of Asian and Pacific communities through climate-resilient, inclusive and sustainable WASH’. Contribution to this aim falls into four end-of-program outcomes (EOPOs):

1. Strengthened national and subnational WASH sector systems with greater emphasis on climate resilience, gender equality, disability and social inclusion, safely managed WASH, and water security (EOPO1).
2. Increased equitable, universal access to and use of climate-resilient, sustainable WASH services, particularly for marginalised communities and community members (EOPO2).
3. Strengthened climate resilience, gender equality, disability and social inclusion in households, communities and institutions (EOPO3).
4. Strengthened use of new evidence, innovation and practice in climate-resilient, sustainable, gender-sensitive and inclusive WASH by other CSOs, national and international WASH sector actors (EOPO4).

In the lifetime of the Water for Women Fund (now close to six years), partners across the Asia-Pacific region have developed a wealth of evidence (breadth and depth) of what strong gender equality, disability and social inclusion practice in and through WASH looks like. The following questions for the purpose of this submission will be answered through that lens.

## **What should Australia prioritise to advance disability equity and rights internationally?**

Disability equity priorities should reflect targeted and sustained investments that support the following principles.

1. Disability equity must be central to global and regional initiatives aimed at climate-related decision-making and solutions. This means supporting the diverse voices and agency of people with disabilities in all their diversity (women, Indigenous and marginalised people, people with diverse impairments, disability over life span) who are disproportionately affected by climate-related impacts, and therefore, hold important knowledge for locally led solutions.
2. Multi-stakeholder recognition of SDG 6 – ‘clean water and sanitation for all’ – as foundational for the achievement of all other SDGs, and therefore it’s acceleration, is critical for creating climate-resilient communities and institutions and advancing broader social equality for people with disabilities. Clean water and safe sanitation are significant contributors to the well-being, health and resilience of people with disabilities, and support their access to education and broader opportunities at all levels of public, social and economic life.
3. Meaningful collaboration with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs) and supporting cross-movement building among diverse rights holder organisations that represent people with disabilities, paying attention to intersectionality of disability across different marginalised groups (women, Indigenous people, sexual and gender minorities, people from disadvantaged ethnic groups) is paramount to find and support sustainable, locally led solutions. Particularly important is supporting women’s organisations to have a strengthened focus on disability, so that women and girls with disabilities are part of women’s empowerment initiatives and supporting OPDs to have a strengthened gender lens in their disability advocacy initiatives.

## **What are the most effective approaches to progress these priorities?**

Over the last six years, Water for Women has learnt that the following approaches are most effective in addressing systemic inequalities:

* A twin-track approach to investments - i.e. intentionally resourcing initiatives for mainstreaming [gender equality, disability and social inclusion](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/learning-and-resources/gender-and-social-inclusion.aspx) (GEDSI) into sectoral programming to support equal access to services and resources, and targeted initiatives that focus on a systems approach to support the leadership and empowerment of people with disabilities, with robust Do No Harm strategies in place.
* Supporting investments with a focus on [shifting harmful social norms](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/learning-and-resources/resources/KL/Publications/Water-for-Women-TT-Shifting-Social-Norms-for-Transformative-WASH_Guidance-web.pdf) that perpetuate the exclusion of people with disabilities.
* Working with OPDs and other rights holder organisations on empowerment initiatives with a [Do No Harm](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/learning-and-resources/resources/GSI/WfW-SNV-Learning-Brief_Systems-Strengthening_Do-No-Harm_FINAL.pdf) lens and supporting their ongoing engagement with relevant government departments.
* Working with government duty bearers to support their commitment to disability inclusion and equity in their policies and programs.
* Supporting and resourcing implementing and research organisations to have strong commitments to GEDSI capacity building of their own staff and GEDSI reflective practice in their programming and research initiatives.

## **How can DFAT support the role of, and partner with, organisations of persons with disabilities?**

Water for Women developed an RHO partnerships guidance paper [Water-for-Women-TT-Partnerships-for-Transformation-Guidance-for-WASH-and-RHOs-web.pdf (waterforwomenfund.org)](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/learning-and-resources/resources/KL/Publications/Water-for-Women-TT-Partnerships-for-Transformation-Guidance-for-WASH-and-RHOs-web.pdf), of which there were a number of key learnings from the engagement of OPDs in the WASH projects being implemented by Fund partners. The key drivers for seeking meaningful partnerships identified by WASH organisations and OPDs alike have been:

* Understanding disability as a core approach in sector programming
* Setting mutual objectives for leaving no one behind in access to WASH services
* Removing barriers to access and raising voices in decision making forums
* Learning from “Both ways” specialist and technical knowledge
* Supporting capacity development of OPDs for the improvement of WASH outcomes for people with disabilities, as well as the advancement of their broader rights based agenda

Drawing on the learning from Fund partners across the Asia Pacific region and their in-country OPD partners, the Guidance paper identifies 10 guiding principles for effective partnerships with RHOs, including OPDs. Inclusive of point 3 made under the first question, these principles can inform DFAT investments on how best to support OPD partnerships, all of which require intentional planning and resourcing. The most relevant to mention here are:

1. Value their time and expertise
2. Remain open to different processes and ways of working
3. Understand each other’s mandate, context and constraints
4. Maintain clear, open and regular communication
5. Support mechanisms for two-way accountability
6. Focus on mutual skills building and capacity development
7. Adopt reflective practices and a shared commitment to learning

## **What are the biggest challenges to and opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights?**

Some of the most significant challenges are related to overcoming barriers in participation, which in turn affects access. The following barriers were listed in the afore mentioned guidance paper:

* **Developing the partnership with an OPD at a late stage in the project.** This can mean missed opportunities for OPDs to influence and increasing the risk of people with disabilities being left behind.
* **Increasing the participation of the most marginalised.** People with disabilities are not a homogeneous group, with some facing intersecting forms of disadvantage. Multiple strategies are required to ensure representation and access for all.
* **Overcoming socio-cultural barriers to participation.** Such barriers include families not wanting their members with disabilities to participate in community discussions, workshops and meetings (likely out of a desire to protect that family member). But other barriers may relate to systems and norms that do not prioritise resourcing and support for reasonable accommodation measures to enable their participation outside of the home.

In light of the above, some key opportunities to take forward are:

1. Investing in multi-stakeholder approaches, partnerships and cross-sectoral collaborative efforts at different levels - government, private sector, civil society and rights holder organisations.
2. Investing in locally led organisations and networks that represent people with disabilities to strengthen disaggregated and qualitative data collection that helps to inform fit-for-purpose, climate-risk-informed and equitable policy decision-making.
3. Ensuring that investments support strong, intentional, twin-track approaches to gender equality, disability and social inclusion – mainstreaming in sector programming, alongside targeted interventions that support people with disabilities, in all their diversities. Locally informed and led social norms change, with a strong anti-stigma focus, and Do No Harm approaches, should be in-built into these interventions.
4. Retaining a strong focus on inclusive WASH for climate-resilient and sustainable solutions, particularly in relation to sanitation and hygiene means that Australia can help to ensure that people with disabilities are not further disadvantaged by the climate crisis and are part of, and valued for, co-creating locally led solutions to build community resilience.

For more information on the lessons learned on disability inclusion across Water for Women projects, including strategies that have contributed to meaningful participation and equality of outcomes, please refer to our practice brief [Disability-inclusive WASH: Practice within Water for Women - Water for Women Fund](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/news/disability-inclusive-wash-practice-within-water-for-women.aspx)

## **Other relevant Water for Women Resources:**

[Towards Transformation in WASH: Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Self-Assessment Tool – Water for Women Fund](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/news/towards-transformation-in-wash-gender-equality-and-inclusion-self-assessment-tool.aspx)

[Towards Transformation: Shifting Social Norms for Transformative WASH - Water for Women Fund](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/news/towards-transformation-shifting-social-norms-for-transformative-wash.aspx)

[Partnerships for Transformation: Guidance for WASH and Rights Holder Organisations - Water for Women Fund](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/news/partnerships-for-transformation-guidance-for-wash-and-rights-holder-organisations.aspx)

[Water-for-Women-Systems-Strengthening-LN1-web.pdf (waterforwomenfund.org)](https://www.waterforwomenfund.org/en/learning-and-resources/resources/KL/Publications/Water-for-Women-Systems-Strengthening-LN1-web.pdf)