**Module 10 Disabled Women and Girls Summary**

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# **i. Introduction**

It is estimated that more than one billion people in the world experience some form of long-term impairment which in combination with societal barriers limits their activities, 50% of the world population are disabled women and 80% of them are from rural areas. In Commonwealth countries disabled women and girls include those with multiple and intersecting identities, such as being from different ethnic, religious, racial backgrounds; refugee, migrant, asylum-seeking and internally displaced women; LGBTQI+ persons; women living with and affected by HIV 8; young and older women; and widowed women, across all contexts.

As a consequence of multiple identities, some disabled women and girls are pushed to the extreme margins and experience profound discriminations. Systemic barriers and exclusion lead to lower economic and social status; increased risk of violence and abuse including sexual violence; early and forced marriage discrimination, harmful gender-based discriminatory practices; barriers to access education, health care including sexual and reproductive health, information and services and justice, as well as civic and political participation.

Disabled women and girls who experience intersecting forms of discrimination also experience higher rates of unemployment and encounter other gender-based barriers, such as precarious livelihoods, unequal access to and control over assets and resources, childcare responsibilities and a lack of access to maternity protection. International and national laws and policies on the rights of Persons with Disabilities have historically neglected aspects related to gender equality. Similarly, laws and policies addressing gender equality have traditionally ignored the rights of disabled women and girls.

Systemic barriers including prioritizing collection of data on disabled women and girls, to disaggregate and report it accordingly continues to perpetuate their invisibility and marginalization. Disabled women and girls in all their diversity encounter challenges to participation that arise from an array of systemic barriers, including of a legal, physical, informational, communicational and attitudinal nature. These barriers include inadequate availability, implementation and resourcing of data and evidence, legislation, policies and governance mechanisms; the lack of design of accessible products, environments and processes; and inadequate access to justice, education, rehabilitation, habilitation and personal and assistive technology services.

**Disabled women are at greater risk because they are marginalized and face greater societal and institutional barriers to claim their rights. They are ‘particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence, including gender-based violence (GBV), but they may have difficulty accessing support and services that could reduce their risk and vulnerability. Disability inclusion appears not to have been prioritized by mainstream actors in the response to previous epidemics.**

# **ii. The language the CDPF uses**

**Disabled people:** Why we still choose to call ourselves ‘disabled people’. In the Commonwealth Disabled People’s Forum (CDPF) we call ourselves ‘**disabled people’** because of the development of the **‘social model of disability’.** In the C19th and C20th, a disabled person’s medical condition was thought to be the root cause of their exclusion from society, an approach now referred to as the **‘medical or individual model’** of disability. We use the **‘social model of disability’,** where the barriers of environment, attitude and organisation are what disable people with impairments and lead to prejudice and discrimination.So to call ourselves ‘persons with disabilities’ is to accept that we are objects and powerless.We also view ourselves as united by a common oppression so are proud to identify as ‘**disabled people’** rather than **‘people with disabilities. When we are talking about the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** we will use **‘people or persons with disabilities’.**

# **iii.The intersection of disability and gender[[1]](#footnote-0)**

**What is gender?**

**What people say about what girls/woman and boys/men can and cannot do, how they should behave, and what work they should do**

Historically, the terms “sex” and “gender” have been used interchangeably, but their uses are becoming increasingly distinct, and it is important to understand the differences between the two:

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed.  This includes norms, behaviors and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time[[2]](#footnote-1).

**Gender** is not the same as sex (biological characteristics of women and men) and it is not the same as women. Gender is determined by the conception of tasks, functions and roles attributed to women and men in society and in public and private life

This gender construction produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities.  Gender-based discrimination intersects with other factors of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others. This is referred to as inter-sectionality.

Gender inequality is based on the power imbalance between men and women, and is exacerbated by the inequalities, oppression and abuse of power associated with disability.

The community in general and families may differently treat persons with and without disabilities, men and women and this is rooted into cultural background.

1. How does the community in your country treat women and girls with disabilities? How does the community treat men and boys with disabilities?
2. What tasks or roles are women with disabilities expected to undertake in the community? What about men?
3. Is it expected that women with disabilities will also undertake the tasks expected of women without disabilities? Why or why not?
4. Is it expected that men with disabilities will also undertake the tasks expected of men without disabilities?
5. How might the spouse or family treat a woman with disabilities if they are unable to undertake these roles?
6. How might the community treat women with disabilities if they are unable to undertake these roles?
7. How would they treat men with disabilities if they are unable to undertake these roles?

**Double discrimination faced by disabled women and girls**: Women with disabilities experience double discrimination based on both gender and disability which makes more vulnerable and at increased risk of violence. They may be isolated in their homes, discriminated against by the community, unable to access services or protect themselves from violence. Also, they are expected by families, husbands and society to undertake duties and responsibilities, as well as access services, as other women without the support or adaptations they need. This results in inequality and power imbalances in their relationships with spouses, family and the community.

# **Iv. Gender-based violence against disabled women[[3]](#footnote-2)**

For many women and girls, their experience of violence based on their gender intersects with other inequalities (age, disability, geographical location, sexual orientation, educational background etc) which contribute to further marginalization and result in less power and status in relationships, households and the community for women and girls with disabilities.

**What is gender-based violence?**

Gender-based violence refers to any type of harm that is perpetrated against a person or group of people because of their factual or perceived sex, gender, sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

**Vulnerabilities of women and girls with disabilities**

There are many factors that increase vulnerability of women and girls with disabilities , but the root causes of GBV are always the same Abuse of power, Disrespect and Inequality based on gender and disability as explained below:

* **Stigma and discrimination**: Persons with disabilities experience negative attitudes in their communities, which leads to multiple levels of discrimination and greater vulnerability to violence, abuse and exploitation, especially for women and girls with disabilities. It may also reduce their participation in community activities that promote protection, social support and empowerment
* **Perceptions about capacity of persons with disabilities:** Perpetrators perceive that persons with disabilities will be unable to physically defend themselves or effectively report incidents of violence, which makes them a greater target for violence especially women with physical disabilities, and persons with intellectual disabilities, who experience more barriers to reporting violence
* Loss of community support structures and protection mechanisms
* Extreme poverty and lack of basic supplies
* Environmental barriers
* Isolation and a lack of community support
* Lack of information, knowledge and skills
* needs, adding to impunity for perpetrators of such violence

**Manifestation of violence against disabled women**

Women with disabilities experience the same forms of gender-based violence as women and girls without disabilities, such as intimate partner violence, family violence, sexual violence, and sexual[[4]](#footnote-3)

Women with disabilities also experience distinct forms of gender-based violence due to their disabilities including sexual abuse by a caregiver; withholding of medication or an assistive device; purpose fully substandard care; denial of necessities like food, toileting, financial control; restriction of communication devices; ‘virgin rape’; violence in long-term care institutions; and enforced isolation.

Guardianship and other formal or informal substituted decision-making regimes can deprive women with disabilities of their legal capacity and decision-making power, exposing them to a heightened risk of gender-based violence.

Other women with disabilities who belong to other groups that face heightened vulnerability to discrimination and violence—such as women with disabilities who are also immigrants, racial or ethnic minorities, indigenous, LGBTI, older women, or adolescents—may experience compounded forms of gender-based violence.

**Access to Justice for Disabled Women and Girls**

Disabled Women and girls have the right to seek and receive justice when they experience acts of gender-based violence. In order to ensure this, the justice system must be fully accessible to women with disabilities. This means that:

* Law enforcement, the judiciary, and other actors involved in the administration of justice must be trained to recognize and respond to gender-based violence against women with disabilities, and lawyers must be trained to provide them with effective legal representation.
* Information on obtaining orders of protection and other legal rights must be available in alternative formats to ensure that it is accessible to women with disabilities.
* States must recognize the legal capacity of women with disabilities and give equal weight to their testimony.
* Women with disabilities must have access to necessary support services to navigate and participate in the judicial process.
* Women with disabilities must not fear institutionalization or loss of custody of their children when seeking justice for gender-based violence.
* Police stations and courts (including witness boxes) must be physically accessible to women with disabilities.

***.***

# **v. Rights of disabled girls and women**

Disabled girls and women’s rights are human rights.

Several international, national and regional norms and standards, including human rights treaties and outcomes of various global conferences, directly or implicitly call for the inclusion and empowerment of all disabled women and girls across their life course. These include the

**Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**

While CEDAW does not explicitly refer to women and girls with disabilities, the General Recommendation of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women No. 18 (a) notes that women with disabilities are doubly marginalized and recognizes the scarcity of data, and (b) calls on States parties to provide this information in their periodic reports and ensure the participation of women and girls with disabilities in all areas of social and cultural life.

**Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol (CRPD**),

The CRPD includes equality between men and women as one of its general principles and, article 6 on women and girls with disabilities recognizes the multiple forms of discrimination faced by them, and calls for the full development, advancement and empowerment of women. The CRPD further stipulates that States Parties should put in place effective legislation and policies with a focus on women with disabilities to protect them from exploitation, violence and abuse (article 16, paragraph 5), and should pay special attention to women and girls with disabilities in access to social protection programmes and poverty reduction programmes (article 28, paragraph 2(b)).

The General Comments on the Convention address issues that uniquely or disproportionately affect disabled women and girls, including General Comment No. 3 on Article 6: Women with Disabilities. The resolution calls for eliminating multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and all forms of violence, supporting women and girls with disabilities to exercise their legal capacity to have the freedom to make their own choices on an equal basis with others in all aspects of life, promoting their empowerment and leadership, as well as ensuring equal access to education, employment and health services, including sexual and reproductive health services.

**Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the rights of disabled children in Article 23. The Article states that children who have any kind of disability have the right to special care and support, as well as all the rights in the Convention, so that they can live full and independent lives.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action identifies specific actions to ensure the empowerment of disabled women and girls in various areas, bringing disability inclusion into the general efforts to address the multiple barriers to empowerment and advancement faced by women and girls. These areas include:

1. enhancement of the self-reliance of women with disabilities (paragraph 175(d));
2. equal access to appropriate education and skills training for their full participation in life (paragraph 280(c));
3. improvement of their work opportunities (paragraph 82(k)); creation of health programmes and services that address the specific needs of women with disabilities (paragraph 106(c));
4. promotion of equity and positive action programmes to address systemic discrimination against women with disabilities in the labour force (paragraph 178(f)); and
5. improvements in the concepts and methods of data collection on the participation of women and men with disabilities, including their access to resources (paragraph 206(k)).

**The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030** emphasizes the importance of disability-inclusive disaster risk reduction. The Framework calls for the inclusion of disabled people in the design and implementation of policies, plans and standards on disaster risk reduction, and promotes the leadership of women and youth in the process. In 2016, commitments made during the World Humanitarian Summit included the achievement of gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls, and disability inclusion in humanitarian action.

**The Charter on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action** endorsed by Member States, UN agencies, including UN Women, and human rights networks and organizations made specific reference to disabled women and girls. The Charter calls for the empowerment and protection of disabled women from physical, sexual and other forms of violence, abuse, exploitation and harassment and commits to collecting data on disabled people disaggregated by age and sex.

The Article 27 of the **protocol to the African Charter on Human and peoples ‘rights on the rights of persons with disabilities** provides more guidance about how tackling the intersecting factors for girls and women with disabilities. Sate parties and other stakeholders should ensure for example

* Women and girls with disabilities participate in social, economic and political decision-making and activities
* Barriers that hinder the participation of women with disabilities in society are eliminated
* Women with disabilities are included in mainstream women organizations and programs
* Women with disabilities are protected from discrimination based on disability and enjoy the rights to be treated with dignity
* The sexual and reproductive health rights of women with disabilities are guaranteed, and women with disabilities have the rights to retain and control their fertility; and are not sterilized without consent
* Disability inclusive gender perspective are integrated in policies, legislation, Plans, programs, budgets and activities in all spheres that affect women with disabilities
* Specific measures should be developed and implemented to facilitate full and equal participation for women and girls with disabilities in sports, culture and technology.

# **vi. Disabled women within the 2030 Agenda**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes that systematic mainstreaming of gender-based perspectives is crucial to making progress across all the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets and calls for the empowerment of disabled people. The 2030 Agenda has a standalone Goal on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls and includes disabled people in the SDGs related to poverty, hunger, education, washing, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), economic growth and employment, inequality, accessibility of human settlements, climate change, data monitoring and accountability. The effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda will further contribute to the inclusion and empowerment of disabled women and girls.

**What does SDG 5 mean for women and girls with disabilities?**

The SDGs and particularly Goal 5, which focuses on Gender Equality and the empowerment of women and girls, has a key role in creating opportunities for women and girls with disabilities to fulfill their full potential. Goal 5 includes a number of targets. The bullet points below highlight how some of these targets are equally relevant to women and girls with disabilities.

On the basis of available data and information in relation to key areas of the SDGs, including poverty and hunger, access to health-care services, education and employment, the situation of women and girls with disabilities regarding several Goal 5 targets is underachieved. This includes available data on exposure to violence (target 5.2), child marriage (target 5.3), unpaid work (target 5.4), opportunities for leadership (target 5.5) and use of the Internet (target 5.b).

* **End discrimination against all women and girls everywhere**: This is particularly relevant to women and girls with disabilities. In comparison to men with disabilities and women without disabilities, women and girls with disabilities have lower education completion rates (on average only 69 per cent of women with disabilities ever attended school, compared to 72 per cent of men with disabilities); are less likely to be employed and are more at risk of living in poverty. National policies and frameworks that are developed as a result of the SDGs must include women and girls with disabilities if discrimination against all women and girls is to be achieved.
* **Eliminate all forms of violence and harmful practices against all women**: Women with disabilities are at heightened risk of violence, exploitation and abuse compared to women without disabilities. Women and girls with sensory or intellectual disabilities often experience higher levels of abuse as communication challenges mean that they are perceived to be less likely to be able to report abuse. Measures taken to implement this target must be inclusive of women with disabilities.
* **Recognize and value unpaid care work:** This is an important point for both women and men with disabilities who require personal assistance/care assistance and needs to be adequately resourced by governments. Women who make up the majority of the caring/personal assistance workforce providing this support should be paid fairly for their work.
* **Reform legislative and policy blocks that prevent women having equal rights to economic resources**: Linked with the above statement about women with disabilities at risk of living in poverty, some of the factors that contribute to this include; laws and policies that prevent women with disabilities having control over their resources. For example, outdated legal capacity laws and prejudicial attitudes which deny women with intellectual and psychosocial disabilities to access judicial proceedings as witnesses, victims to have their own bank accounts or prevents them from getting access to micro-credit for livelihood opportunities. Measures taken to reform laws to enable equal rights to resources must also include women with disabilities.
* **Enhance the use of enabling technology**: Technology and assistive devices are key enablers for women and men with disabilities. Access to assistive aids and devices can make a difference in the lives of women and men with disabilities, technology also has a key role to play in creating inclusion
* **Ensure participation and leadership in decision-making** : Women with disabilities typically have not been in leadership positions within, the government and public sector, the private sector, disability or gender movements
* **Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights** : Women and girls with disabilities face negative attitudes by society related to the intersection of disability and gender and these impact on the enjoyment of sexual and reproductive health and rights, and the right to found a family.

Further to the bullets above,

**Access to health care:** Among 37 countries, 13 per cent of women with disabilities, on average, cannot get health care when they need. In Austria, Cyprus and Slovenia, the health-care needs of women with disabilities are largely met: only 1 per cent of women with disabilities are unable to meet their health needs – the lowest values among the 37 countries. This suggests that overall, barriers for persons with disabilities are a major factor impeding access to health care for women with disabilities.

**Literacy rates** - Evidence from 35 countries around 2010 shows that, in the majority of countries (32), women with disabilities have lower literacy rates than men with disabilities. Among the 35 countries, on average, 45 per cent of women with disabilities are literate compared to 61 per cent of men with disabilities, 71 per cent of women without disabilities and 82 per cent of men without disabilities.

**Employment** - A direct result of limited access to education among women with disabilities is their significant disadvantage upon entering the job market, in comparison with men with disabilities and also with women and men without disabilities. According to evidence from six regions, women with disabilities are less likely to be employed than men with disabilities and persons without disabilities in all regions. The employment-to-population ratios for women with disabilities are lowest in Northern Africa and Western Asia (14 per cent) and highest in Europe (42 per cent). In Northern Africa and Western Asia, women with disabilities are five times less likely to be employed as men without disabilities.

# **vii. Disabled women movement building**

**<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4XKFtRiVd_c>**

Every change starts from understanding both individual and collective journey of life for therefore creating paths of dreams for expected changes. This should start with self and or collective reflections about:

* What is the place of disabled women in women and disability movements in your respective countries and communities?
* What are the challenges and barriers for women with disabilities gaining access to and talking with the gender and the disability movements?
* What do you think needs to change to remove these negative attitudes and barriers?
* How important is it to work with others (men with and without disabilities, women without disabilities etc) to create change?
* What are the strategies for disabled women to build a back safer inclusively in your country?

Disabled Women across the world share common concerns that can only be addressed by working together and in partnership with women’s rights organizations and men towards the common goal of gender equality around the world. They should collectively work to claim respect and values to the full diversity of women’s situations and conditions and ensure the gender and disability movements recognize that disabled women face particular barriers to their empowerment, participation and agency.

The gender and disability movements are not necessarily including disabled women. They generally address gender, disability but not including disabled women. They cannot accomplish their goals for all women, all persons with disabilities equally if disabled women are not included as well. Disabled girls and women with disabilities lack place within both women and disability movements. Even when involved they lack voice and leadership to influence policies and decisions for the best of all disabled girls and women

Disabled women need to change the way people view the expected roles of disabled women. Some people still have ancient beliefs that women should stay at home, girls should not go to school for the purpose of accomplishing traditional roles of caring. There a need to change mind-sets, respect disabled women and their roles, so that their roles in society can be changed as well. Disabled Women are intentionally denied opportunities to contribute to families and society and this impacts the entire

Disabled women need to come together, organize themselves at community, national and global level for a collective voice against the issues affecting their life. This should start “me”, “you “and then “us” as individual and collective change makers. While organize empowerment initiatives building self-confidence for disabled women, self-advocacy , agency and economic independency is also critical for building disabled women’s movement

One single individual or organization of disabled women cannot lead change alone. Disabled women have to collaborate and communicate at all levels with different stakeholders- local, national and global levels.  It is critical to reach out to other movements as well – those of gender and disability especially, and work together with other organizations to accomplish disabled women’s common goals. The UN CRPD, agenda 2030, is fantastic accomplishments. However, disabled women cannot accomplish it without collaboration with other groups

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# **ix. Conclusion**

The United Nations says to fully achieve gender equality and empower all disabled women and girls, efforts should focus on the following:

• Address the needs and perspectives of disabled women and girls in national strategies or action plans on participation in society.

• Support the empowerment of disabled women and girls by investing in their education and supporting their transition from school to work.

• Raise awareness on the needs of disabled women and girls and eliminate stigma and discrimination against them, especially Gender Based Violence.

• Enhance the collection, dissemination, and analysis of data on disabled women and girls with disabilities and disaggregate and disseminate data by sex, age and disability.

CDPF add build strong Disabled People’s Organisation where women and their issues supported by male members play a leading role.

1. Watch the video Women with Disability **<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SYmuneqoHXM>**  [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender" \l "tab=tab_1) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBwQHsgoUbw> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Women Enabled: The Right of Women and Girls with Disabilities to be Free from Gender-Based Violence [↑](#footnote-ref-3)