



Thematic Brief | Inclusion of Pacific women with disabilities

This Thematic Brief provides information and analysis about the inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in the Pacific Islands region. It has been developed by the Support Unit for Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development (*Pacific Women*), connecting more than 170 gender equality initiatives supported by the Australian Government and implemented by over 160 partners across 14 Pacific Island countries.

Pacific Women is one of the largest global commitments to gender equality. It partners with governments, local and international non-government organisations (NGOs), private sector, disabled people's organisations, coalitions and others to improve the political, economic and social opportunities of Pacific women and to end violence against women and girls. The emphasis for *Pacific Women* is on partnerships and locally-driven development. *Pacific Women* supported initiatives respond to the commitments in the 2012 Pacific Leaders' Gender Equality Declaration, while supporting Australia's Pacific Step-up and its Partnerships for Recovery approach of working together with Pacific partners to address COVID-19 impacts on women, girls and their communities.^{1 2 3}

Six Key Messages

The six key messages provide background about the importance of inclusion for women and girls with disabilities in the Pacific, particularly during the COVID-19 response, and why *Pacific Women* is supporting women and girls with disabilities to become more empowered to participate at all levels of society.

1. Women with disabilities experience multiple forms of discrimination (intersection of gender and disability) that are exacerbated during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Women with disabilities are much more likely to live in poverty.
3. Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to physical violence, rape and sexual abuse, with perpetrators rarely brought to justice.
4. Women with disabilities are skilled, capable and able to make decisions for themselves and care for their families, and to share equal rights with people without disabilities. They are parents, community members, workers and leaders.
5. Participation is central to effective disability inclusion and ensuring women and girls with disabilities participate in decisions that relate to them and reflect their aspirations, abilities and contributions.
6. There has been significant progress in the past decade on disability inclusion in the Pacific.

Introduction

Throughout the Pacific region, in both urban and rural communities, women with disabilities are far more likely to live in poverty and face multiple attitudinal, physical and economic barriers to full participation in political, economic and social life.⁴ Access to education, assistive devices, health care and community services are just some of the factors shaping the experiences of women with disabilities. In resource-poor settings with higher rates of poverty and less publicly funded social protection systems, women with disabilities and their carers are less likely to access the resources and support they need to fully and effectively participate in society.

Women and girls with disabilities are disproportionately affected by crises including climate-related extreme weather events and the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

Pacific Island countries have shown strong commitment towards disability inclusion, with 15 Pacific Island countries having signed or ratified the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with a Disability (CRPD). They have jointly adopted the 2016–2025 Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Pacific Women recognises the importance of disability inclusion. This is demonstrated in *Pacific Women's* overarching goal that 'women in the Pacific (regardless of income, ethnicity, disability, age or geography) participate fully, freely and safely in political, economic and social life.'

Recognising the intersecting discrimination and challenges experienced by women and girls with disabilities is critical to inclusive development and achieving 'development for all'.⁶

Message 1 Women and girls with disabilities experience multiple forms of discrimination (intersection of gender and disability) that are exacerbated during a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Why?

Women and girls with disabilities experience multiple forms of discrimination resulting from the interplay between gender and disability. The intersection between gender and disability creates new and potentially greater challenges and forms of discrimination, which often remain unrecognised in social protection schemes and development programming.

Women and girls with disabilities experience disability differently from men and boys due to discriminatory and unequal gender norms. Typically, women and girls have less access to education and employment opportunities. They can experience major discrimination from family and people from wider society.

In resource-poor settings, this inequality is likely to be heightened even further. Women with disabilities comprise three quarters of all people with disabilities in low and middle-income countries.⁷ Women are at increased risk of acquiring a disability due to poor health care, poor working conditions and gender-based violence.⁸ Disability also impacts the wider household, particularly female family members who are usually the primary carers of people with disabilities, or when a mother has a disability.

During times of crisis and hardship, such as the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, marginalised groups face increased vulnerabilities, from heightened health risks, through to hunger, neglect and violence. This is due to existing discrimination and inequality (which is heightened during a crisis) and lowered availability and access to public health information and services.

The evidence

The reported disability prevalence in the Pacific ranges from 1.9 per cent (Samoa) to 14 per cent (Solomon Islands).⁹ This information is taken from national census and survey data, which can vary according to context, population characteristics and definitions.¹⁰

Research on women with disabilities from the Pacific indicates that despite some helpful laws and policies, women with disabilities are more disadvantaged than men with disabilities or women without disabilities. Women with disabilities are less educated, experience higher rates of unemployment, are more likely to experience violence, are poorer, are more isolated, experience worse health outcomes and have lower social status.¹¹

For the Pacific Islands region:

- In Solomon Islands, girls with disabilities attend school at half the rate of girls without disabilities.¹²
- In Fiji, 49 per cent of women and girls with disabilities do not attend school compared with 32 per cent of men and boys with disabilities.¹³

- In Fiji, women with disabilities have a lower labour-force participation rate (19.8 per cent) than men with disabilities (39.8 per cent).¹⁴
- Research from Tuvalu found that people with disabilities face multiple barriers to participating in family and community events.¹⁵
- Women with disabilities in Fiji spend, on average, only half the time of men with disabilities participating in social household activities. This increases their social isolation.¹⁶
- The lack of health services for women in Samoa has led to 49 per cent of women with physical disabilities not having their disabilities assessed. This has an impact on their own health needs and awareness. Women with intellectual disabilities are even less likely to receive support.¹⁷
- Research in the Pacific shows that women with disabilities are less likely to be married than men with disabilities. For example, in Samoa, 10 per cent of women with disabilities are married, compared with 22 per cent of men with disabilities.¹⁸

Globally:

- The prevalence of disability among women and girls is higher than for men and boys.¹⁹
- About 20 million women each year acquire a disability as a consequence of pregnancy and childbirth, mainly due to lack of access to appropriate health care services.²⁰

For women and girls with disabilities, COVID-19 brings particular risks.²¹ People with disabilities face barriers in accessing critical public health information which is not in accessible formats or does not use clear and simple language.²² The Pacific Disability Forum has highlighted that public health recommendations, such as social distancing or home isolation, may not be options for people who rely on assistance to eat, bathe and dress.²³ Furthermore, people with disabilities are very often unemployed and living in poor living conditions. This increases their exposure to the illness due to poor sanitation and infrastructure and reduces options for implementing recommended protective measures.²⁴

Message 2 Women with disabilities are much more likely to live in poverty.

Why?

There is a direct link between disability and poverty. This is because people with disabilities are less likely to attend school, receive skills training and have access to job opportunities. They may also have increased household expenditure on healthcare and reduced access to rehabilitation and treatment.

Living in poverty also increases the likelihood of obtaining a disability. Women and girls living in poverty are particularly vulnerable to complications during childbirth, lack of adequate nutrition and unsafe working conditions – all of which can cause disability.²⁵

Caring for a family member with disabilities also affects the wider household. If a family's resources are stretched and public health care services are not resourced, women are less likely to receive the health care they require. During a crisis such as a cyclone or the COVID-19 pandemic, reduced access to resources can be exacerbated. Caring responsibilities can also reduce social and economic opportunities for other family members, particularly girls and women, who are often the primary carers for household members with disabilities.

The evidence

Throughout the Pacific region, in both urban and rural communities, people with disabilities are far more likely to live in poverty and face multiple attitudinal, physical and economic barriers to full participation in society.²⁶

During a health crisis such as COVID-19, reduced employment and living in poor living conditions increases the exposure of people to the illness such as through poor sanitation and reduced capacity to implement protective measures.²⁷

Following is information and data about people with disabilities in the Pacific and globally:

- Of the world's population, 80 per cent of people with disabilities live in developing countries.²⁸
- Disability prevalence is higher for women than men and among rural populations, compared with urban residents.²⁹ Women with disabilities living in rural and remote areas face even greater challenges, including unavailability and inaccessibility of services, information, awareness and income. This increases the isolation and invisibility of women and girls with disabilities.³⁰
- Only 19.6 per cent of women with disabilities are employed, compared with 52.8 per cent of men with disabilities.³¹
- In Tuvalu, more than 20 per cent of people with disabilities live in hardship³² and women with disabilities are twice as likely to live in hardship compared with men with disabilities.³³
- In Samoa, 77 per cent of women with physical impairments need transport to health care services and 64 per cent need some form of mobility assistance.³⁴

Message 3 Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to physical violence, rape and sexual abuse with perpetrators rarely brought to justice.

Why?

Women and girls with disabilities are at greater risk from all forms of violence than men and women without disabilities.³⁵ Women and girls are particularly vulnerable to abuse by family members, carers and strangers due to social isolation, lack of public services, low self-esteem, communication challenges and discriminatory norms and stereotypes that perpetuate impunity for perpetrators.³⁶ Women with disabilities face substantial challenges reporting abuse to the police, accessing survivor services and navigating justice mechanisms.

The evidence

Women and girls with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be victims of violence, rape and sexual abuse than women without disabilities.³⁷ For women with intellectual disabilities, the risk of abuse is tenfold.³⁸

Some Pacific Island countries have the world's highest rates of violence against women and girls. There is evidence indicating that high rates of family violence result in women developing disabilities due to severe injury. In Papua New Guinea, 80–90 per cent of injuries of women presenting to health facilities are reported to be the result of family violence, many of which lead to permanent disability.³⁹ A study in Fiji found that 47 per cent of women who experienced violence in their lifetime were severely injured, with the impact that one in fifty are now living with a permanent disability.⁴⁰ However, there is very little data on women with disabilities in the Pacific, which likely serves to further disguise widespread and severe violence and abuse.

Message 4 Women with disabilities are skilled, capable and able to make decisions for themselves and care for their families, and to share equal rights with people without disabilities. They are parents, community members, workers and leaders.

Why?

It is important to recognise that women with disabilities have diverse abilities and requirements and to ensure they have access to the services they need to fully and effectively participate in society. This includes

ensuring women and girls with disabilities can make choices about their lives, including their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The evidence

Supporting women to exercise their agency is fundamental to empowering women with disabilities.

Widespread stigma and negative social stereotypes against women with disabilities work to prevent women with disabilities from participating in society.⁴¹ Negative and misinformed attitudes are one of the greatest barriers faced by people with disabilities, reinforcing their social marginalisation and isolation. A study conducted in Tonga, Solomon Islands and Kiribati found that women with disabilities engage in relationships, are parents responsible for their children and are sexually active yet have neglected sexual and reproductive health needs due to discriminatory attitudes and taboos.⁴²

Recognising the actual and potential contributions people with disabilities make to their communities has ongoing social and economic benefits for families, individuals and societies.

Message 5 Participation is central to effective disability inclusion and ensuring women and girls with disabilities participate in decisions that relate to them and reflect their aspirations, abilities and contributions.

Why?

‘Nothing about us without us’ is the central message of the disability-rights movement. This refers to involving people with disabilities and their representative organisations in all decisions that relate to them. Women and girls with disabilities are often left out of government and development decision making, including community, national and regional meetings and processes. If the presence and voice of women with disabilities are ignored, their interests, needs and contributions are not being considered. This lowers the inclusivity and effectiveness of development policy and programs.

The evidence

Participation is critical to promote inclusion but also recognises that people with disabilities are very often the best placed to address the issues and challenges which relate to them. Further, meaningful participation promotes more effective and sustainable development programming as it empowers people with disabilities to bring about positive change themselves.

In the Pacific, Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) have been the leading advocates for ratification and implementation of the CRPD. Strong participatory partnerships between governments, donors and DPOs have led to significant progress on areas including inclusive education, vocational training, disaster risk reduction and social protection. The ‘leave no one behind’ principle underlying the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been an important rallying point for DPOs to demand inclusion of people with disabilities. Disability is referenced in many parts of the SDGs, specifically relating to education, growth and employment and inequality. Disability also forms part of data collection and monitoring of the SDGs.

However, research indicates that women with disabilities in the Pacific participate at a much lower rate than men with disabilities and 28 per cent lower than women without disabilities.⁴³ They also face many challenges when seeking to have a voice in gender and disability-specific decision-making forums. For example, women with disabilities are likely to have less years of schooling than men with disabilities, which can limit their involvement DPOs and advocacy groups that represent their rights.⁴⁴

Message 6 There has been significant progress in the past decade on disability inclusion in the Pacific.

Why?

There has been strengthened commitment by Pacific Island country leaders to address the barriers faced by people with disabilities, but there is still a need for much more to be done.

The evidence

Pacific Island countries have shown strong commitment towards disability inclusion. There are 15 Pacific Island countries that have signed or ratified the CRPD. They have jointly adopted the 2016–2025 Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, for most countries in the Pacific (except for Fiji, Tuvalu and Kiribati), overall domestic resource allocation for the inclusion of people with disabilities is below 0.15 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).⁴⁵

The 2016–2025 Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises that women with disabilities are a particularly vulnerable group. It promotes women with disabilities through Outcome Four of Goal 3, which aims for women with disabilities appointed to leadership positions within government ministries, private sector organisations, DPOs and civil society organisations.⁴⁶

What can be done?

Women and girls with disabilities experience multiple forms of discrimination (the intersection of gender and disability). To address this issue, there is a need to recognise the gender dimensions of disability and consider the specific gendered experiences of women and girls with disabilities and their right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. There is also a need to: ensure that disability-related programs and services involve and consider women and girls with disabilities during design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation; make sure that women and girls with disabilities are included as key stakeholders in gender equality policies, strategies and programs; and consider the needs of carers of people with disabilities and the impact disability has on a household.

Given women with disabilities are much more likely to live in poverty, it is critical that women with disabilities have access to physical and mental healthcare, education, training opportunities and income generation opportunities that meet their requirements. Economic empowerment initiatives should include women with disabilities, accommodating learning requirements such as education materials in braille/sign, accessible infrastructure and flexible timing. Skills development training can be adapted to complement the skills and capabilities of women with disabilities. The skills and capabilities of women with disabilities must be recognised in both formal and informal sectors to enable participation in training and income generating initiatives.

Development programming and public services should respond to and, where possible, include women with disabilities and family members in the design and implementation of programs. This involves responding to the needs of carers and families of people with disabilities, including specific financial assistance, accessible and funded public health care, and income generating opportunities which align with caring responsibilities.

Women with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to physical violence, rape and sexual abuse, with perpetrators rarely brought to justice. For prevention and service delivery programs to benefit women with disabilities, there must be clear understanding of the links between violence and disability. There is a need to ensure the rights of women and girls with disabilities are recognised and respected on an equal basis by families, carers and the wider community. It is critical that there is increased awareness of the risk of abuse to women and girls with disabilities and social and legal condemnation of perpetrators. Services, such as counselling and shelters, must be accessible to women with disabilities. This includes training for staff and first responders on how to respond to the risk of violence faced by women and girls with intellectual and mental disabilities.⁴⁷ Further, women must be supported to pursue justice through legal support and advice.

Women with disabilities are skilled, capable and able to care for their families. They share equal rights with people without disabilities. Women with disabilities must be supported to access formal opportunities to share ideas, learn and lead, and be included in learning forums, research and events, ensuring that they have the opportunity to participate as trainers, facilitators and researchers, and their voices are heard. Public participation and visibility of women with disabilities is important to ensure that civil society action for legal and social change includes and incorporates the aspirations and requirements of women with disabilities.

Women with disabilities should be supported to pursue their rights through the implementation of national laws and regional rights instruments such as the Pacific Framework on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

It is critical that women and girls with disabilities are able to access inclusive sexual and reproductive health education and services.

Participation is central to effective disability inclusion and ensuring women and girls with disabilities are part of decisions that relate to them, to reflect their aspirations, abilities and contributions. Women with disabilities should be supported to lead and participate in all decision-making forums, including within the disability movement and the women's movement.

Recognising the added value women with disabilities bring is central for meaningful inclusion. It is important to actively encourage the involvement of women with disabilities in leadership programs, including through participation at international forums, on panels and boards, leadership training opportunities, and mentorship.

It is important for governments, civil society groups, the private sector and donors to consult and collaborate with DPOs and support the involvement of women with disabilities. They should be encouraged to support the establishment of women with disabilities organisations. It is important to be aware that DPOs are often overstretched and under-resourced. They have many competing priorities, including advocacy and resource mobilisation and may be run by volunteers and few staff members.

There has been significant progress in the past decade on disability inclusion in the Pacific. While most Pacific Island countries have signed or ratified the CRPD, the translation of the CRPD's provisions into domestic policies and regulations and budget allocation have not been consistent.

In July 2018, the Pacific Disability Forum produced the 'Pacific Disability Forum SDG-CRPD Monitoring Report' outlining regional progress towards the SDGs and the CRPD.

In relation to CRPD Article 6 (Women with Disabilities) and SDG 5 (Gender Equality), the report made the following two recommendations:

- Furthering inclusion and involvement of women with disabilities in all regional and national initiatives, policy, programs and services for gender equality and empowerment of women with disabilities, including sexual and reproductive health and rights.
- Ensuring that disability-related program and service are gender sensitive and contribute to women with disabilities empowerment.⁴⁸

Overall, the SDG-CRPD report found that there has been strengthened commitment by Pacific Island leaders to address the barriers faced by persons with disabilities, but there is a need for much greater domestic resource allocation, more effective regulation across sectors and development of comprehensive support services 'to enable significant improvement in the life of persons with disabilities and their families'.⁴⁹

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