

Submission: Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific

CBM Australia
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Globally, an estimated 19 per cent of women have a disability, compared to 12 per cent of men.¹ In every country with available data, more women than men are recorded to be living with a disability.² Just as the issue of disability rights must consider the impact of gender, explorations of women's and girls' rights must consciously take into account the prevalence and lived experience of disability.

This need is compounded by the experience of poverty: 22.1 per cent of women in lower income countries have a disability, compared to 14.4 per cent in higher income countries.³ Women living in poverty are also more likely to acquire disabilities. Women are 1.8 times more likely to contract trachoma than men,⁴ but are four times more likely to need eye surgery due to unequal access to health services,⁵ and every minute, more than 30 women are seriously injured or acquire a disability during labour.⁶

In the Pacific, data is scarce but leaders in the disability rights movement know that our region is no exception: women and girls are overrepresented in the numbers of people with disabilities, yet are often underrepresented in the disability and women's rights movements.

This submission, informed by CBM Australia's ongoing relationships with the Pacific disability rights movement, will seek to make women and girls with disabilities visible and recognised in the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's inquiry into the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific.

¹ World Health Organisation and World Bank, 2011. *World Report on Disability*. p. 28

² Mitra, S., Posarac, A. and Vick, B. 2011. *Disability and Poverty in Developing Countries: A snapshot from the World Health Survey*. SP Discussion Paper No. 1109, World Bank. p. 34.

³ World Health Organisation and World Bank, 2011. p. 28.

⁴ The Carter Centre, 2009. *Women and Trachoma: Achieving Gender Equity in the Implementation of SAFE*. Available from www.cartercenter.org/resources/pdfs/health/trachoma/women_trachoma.pdf.

⁵ Cromwell, E., Courtright, P., King, J., Rotondo, L., Ngondi, J. and Emerson, P., 2009. 'The excess burden of trichomatous trichiasis in women: a systematic review and meta-analysis' in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene*, 103(10), pp.985-992.

⁶ World Bank, 2018. *Reproductive Health and Disability*. Accessed at <http://go.worldbank.org/FRRGTUUL20>.

Response to the Terms of Reference

1. The role of civil society groups in the Pacific Islands in responding practically to domestic, family and sexual violence, and other human rights issues such as gender equality

For women with disabilities, the risk of violence is both heightened and unique. Globally, women with disabilities are two to three times more likely to experience physical or sexual violence than women without disabilities.⁷ They also experience acts of violence specific to their experience of disability. Women and girls with albinism face the risk of being raped by men who believe that sex with them offers a cure to HIV/AIDS.⁸ Women with disabilities, particularly intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, in institutions or using the services of support workers are at heightened risk of abuse outside the home, and are less likely to access support or justice when violence is perpetrated by a caregiver or attendant.⁹ Women and girls with disabilities also experience forced practices such as involuntary sterilisations and hysterectomies at rates up to three times higher than other women.¹⁰

In addition, violence has also been identified as a notable cause of disability. In Vanuatu, one in six women has experienced physical or sexual violence by their partners in their lifetime. Of these, one in five acquired a permanent disability due to physical or sexual violence perpetrated by their partner.¹¹

Across the Pacific islands, data quantifying the scale of violence against women and girls with disabilities is scarce, but women advocates in disabled people's organisations (DPOs) are all too familiar with violence and the attitudes underpinning its prevalence. Pacific women and girls with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities in particular are often viewed as 'good for nothing, she's powerless, she's helpless, so they think they can do whatever they want'.¹² This perception underpins more than violence; In Fiji, 67 per cent of surveyed people felt that women with disabilities should not be married, while 27 per cent of respondents were unsure about this right.¹³ Across the region, 'cultural bias based on gender and disability greatly limits the educational opportunities of women and girls with disabilities',¹⁴ leading not only to low rates of educational attainment, but suppressed lifelong employment opportunities.

Though Pacific DPOs are limited in their scope to provide frontline responses to gender- or disability-based violence, they play a critical role in amplifying the voices and experiences of women and girls with disabilities who have often been excluded from mainstream services. This work enables lived experiences to inform targeted resources for disability-inclusive and gender-equitable approaches to violence, and ultimately influence service providers and governments to better include all women and girls, of all abilities.

2. The key figures and groups which advance the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific context

⁷ UK Department for International Development, 2000. *Disability, Poverty and Development*. DFID, London. p. 3.

⁸ United Nations General Assembly, 2017. *Sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women with disabilities: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities*. p. 8.

⁹ CBM International, 2013. *CBM submission on women and girls with disabilities to the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as requested by CRPD/C/8/3*. p. 6.

¹⁰ United Nations General Assembly, 2017. *Sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women with disabilities: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities*. p. 8, 10, 11.

¹¹ Vanuatu Women's Centre and Vanuatu National Statistics Office, 2011. *Vanuatu National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships*. Vanuatu Women's Centre, Port Vila.

¹² Caleb, N. Quoted in CBM Australia, 2018. *Leave No One Behind: Gender Equality, Disability Inclusion and Leadership for Sustainable Development*. URL: <https://www.cbm.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/CBM-011-WhitePaper-v1.4-WEB.pdf>.

¹³ Stubbs, D. and Tawake, S. 2009. *Pacific Sisters with Disabilities: at the Intersection of Discrimination*. UNDP Pacific Centre, Suva. p. 29.

¹⁴ Stubbs, D. and Tawake, S. p. 20.

On a regional scale, the Pacific Disability Forum (PDF) and its Women's Committee have played a substantial role in partnering with DPOs, governments and other development actors such as UN agencies to coordinate and promote action on disability rights, including the rights of women and girls with disabilities. Notably, PDF received support from the Australian aid program to develop and distribute a Toolkit on Eliminating Violence Against Women and Girls with Disabilities in Fiji.¹⁵ In addition to being distributed to major development organisations, the Toolkit also formed the basis of outreach programs funded by Australian aid and multilateral agencies such as UN Women, and led to the development of further toolkits in Samoa and Kiribati.

At a country level, DPOs and women's organisations each advocate on the rights of women and girls with disabilities. However, neither is fully resourced to prioritise either women and girls in broad disability rights advocacy, or the rights of people with disabilities in women's rights advocacy. As of 2014, 0.3 per cent of the \$2.7 billion funding available for human rights globally was allocated to work specifically advancing the rights of women and girls with disabilities. Within funding for women's and girls' rights, 1.5 per cent of funding was awarded to disability rights causes, and within disability rights funding, only 9.5 per cent focused on women and girls.¹⁶ In the Pacific, as around the world, this leads to women and girls with disabilities being sidelined in both the gender equality and disability rights movements.

In order to ensure the capacity of DPOs and women's groups to advocate effectively on the rights of women and girls with disabilities, and particularly to collaborate with governments and other development actors to insure equitable and inclusive aid investments, additional and targeted funding should be made available.

3. Engagement of these groups with Australia's Pacific Step-up

In line with high-level statements such as the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, Australia's Pacific Step-up has driven prioritised engagement with a number of representative women's organisations through the *Pacific Women* network and existing relationships with regional bodies such as the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) and the Pacific Community (SPC). However, targeted engagement with women with disabilities has been less intentional.

Under the auspices of the *Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development* initiative, there has been ongoing engagement with the Pacific Disability Forum, its staff, and affiliated DPOs. The extent to which this engagement has informed the development and implementation of the Pacific Step-up, however, is unknown; there has been little reporting at both a high- and grassroots-level.

Currently, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade support PDF and its DPO members under a four-year core funding agreement to foster broad disability-inclusive development across the Pacific. But PDF's value should not be constrained to this agreement; as a core regional body for Pacific people with disabilities, the organisation has contributions to make in key Pacific Step-up focus areas including ending violence against women and girls, improving access to justice, and strengthening support services for women and girls with disabilities.

¹⁵ Pacific Disability Forum, 2014. *Toolkit on Eliminating Violence Against Women And Girls With Disabilities In Fiji*. Available from [http://www.pacificdisability.org/getattachment/Resources/PDF-Resources/Toolkit-on-Eliminating-Violence-Against-Women-And-Girls-With-Disabilities-In-Fiji-\(1\).pdf.aspx](http://www.pacificdisability.org/getattachment/Resources/PDF-Resources/Toolkit-on-Eliminating-Violence-Against-Women-And-Girls-With-Disabilities-In-Fiji-(1).pdf.aspx).

¹⁶ Disability Rights Fund, 2015. *Supporting Inclusive Movements: Funding the Rights of Women with Disabilities*. Available from http://disabilityrightsfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Supporting_inclusive_movements_web.pdf.

4. The effectiveness of Australian overseas development assistance programs in supporting human rights of women and girls

Insufficient reporting on the Australian aid program's efforts to engage with DPOs on gender equality issues or to advance the human rights of women and girls with disabilities more broadly has led to difficulty assessing recent effectiveness. Without a baseline prior to the implementation of the Pacific Step-up, observers can note broad outcomes but are unable to determine the extent to which specific initiatives under the banner of the Pacific Step-up have advanced human rights in the region.

Prior to the step-up, DFAT's Aid Quality Checks (AQC) provided some evidence of impactful engagement against two primary metrics: investments identifying and addressing barriers to inclusion and opportunities for participation for people with disabilities, and investments involving DPOs in planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. AQC data following the launch of the Pacific Step-up in late 2018, however, demonstrates 'business as usual' for people with disabilities, and does not provide information on disability inclusion within gender-specific aid investments. While there is a need to strengthen performance, there is an equally pressing need to strengthen reporting to drive accountability and ensure that women and girls with disabilities are not left behind.

5. Any related matters

CBM Australia wishes to provide additional comment on two key matters of interest:

- a. The impact of COVID-19 on women and girls with disabilities so far; and
- b. Accountability to the 2015 Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade inquiry into the human rights issues confronting women and girls in the Indian Ocean - Asia Pacific region.

5a. Impact of COVID-19 on women and girls with disabilities

With support from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, CBM Australia and its regional partners have begun surveying women, men, girls and boys with disabilities in the Indo-Pacific region to understand the lived experience of COVID-19, disability and poverty. While this data is forthcoming, existing initial data from other sources indicates that women and girls with disabilities around the world are experiencing unique and adverse impacts of the pandemic, response measures and associated economic shocks.

A global survey conducted by Women Enabled International reported that women and girls with disabilities are experiencing heightened barriers to receiving regular sexual and reproductive health check-ups, breast cancer screenings, pregnancy-related services and menopause services, including exclusion as telehealth substitutes are insufficiently accessible for women and girls with disabilities.¹⁷ In addition, survey respondents identified increased barriers to meeting basic personal and household needs; and greater risk of violence under lockdown.¹⁸

A qualitative global study into the experiences of people with disabilities related to COVID-19 conducted by the Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities for Sustainable Development corroborated women and girls' concerns around access to healthcare. It also highlighted that women with disabilities are disproportionately affected by economic shocks, with many in already-precarious employment

¹⁷ Women Enabled International, 2020. *COVID-19 at the Intersection of Gender and Disability: Findings of a Global Human Rights Survey, March to April 2020*. WEI, Washington D.C. p.6.

¹⁸ Women Enabled International, 2020. p. 16.

experiencing heightened financial disadvantage and ongoing uncertainty about their prospects after vitally necessary COVID-19 subsidies end.¹⁹

Just as the Australian aid program has rapidly responded to the emerging health, economic and social shocks wrought on our region by COVID-19, so too should the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's inquiry assess the impact of the crisis on the rights of women and girls, particularly those with disabilities.

5b. Accountability to 2015 inquiry into the human rights issues confronting women and girls

Recommendation 14 of the report tabled by the Committee suggests that, in order to specifically support the human rights of women and girls with disabilities:

- all programs funded or supported by the Australian Government that seek to address violence against women and girls are designed with the specific needs of women and girls with disabilities taken into account in the design phase;
- all women's health and reproductive rights programs supported by the Australian Government take into consideration the needs of women and girls with disabilities and seek to ensure these women and girls are included—and not adversely affected—by the programs; and
- work to support women and girls with disabilities in the Indo-Pacific region remains a priority for the Australian Government, and is included in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade's Country Plans.

While there is broad commitment to these objectives across the aid program, driven by high-level policy statements in overarching frameworks such as the Foreign Policy White Paper and targeted strategies for gender equality and disability-inclusive development, there has been little progress in reporting on impact.

There is a particular need to recommit to the inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in the Australian Government's regional COVID-19 response and recovery initiatives, particularly as women with disabilities report heightened fear of and vulnerability to violence; experience disrupted access to healthcare including sexual and reproductive health services; and face being overlooked in revised country-level aid investment plans.

As part of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade's inquiry into the human rights of women and girls in the Pacific, the committee should take steps to review the impact of its previous recommendation related to women and girls with disabilities and promote accountability to previously-gathered evidence.

Recommendations

In line with previous recommendations made in its 2018 report *Leave No One Behind: Gender Equality, Disability Inclusion and Leadership for Sustainable Development*, CBM Australia submits that the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade should recommend that the Australian Government:

¹⁹ Stakeholder Group of Persons with Disabilities for Sustainable Development, 2020. *The experience of persons with disabilities with COVID-19: A short qualitative research study carried out between 1 May to 5 June 2020*. Available from www.internationaldisabilityalliance.org/sites/default/files/master_sgpwd_covid-19_report_-_repaired_via_365_june_22_2020.docx.

- Make gender-sensitive disability inclusion, and disability-sensitive gender equality, priorities in the aid program cycle from design to implementation to evaluation. Achieve this by ensuring that women and girls with disabilities are actively consulted, and that programming is informed by their lived experiences.
- Earmark adequate budgets for disability inclusion in gender investments, particularly those in education, health (particularly sexual and reproductive health) and gender-based violence services. Prioritise the accessibility of investments, including through ensuring physical accessibility, communication options, and adequate training in social approaches to disability inclusion.
- Introduce a new disability-inclusive development strategy or policy statement to maintain the aid program's commitment to disability inclusion following the expiry of the *Development for All 2015-2020* strategy, and ensure that this strategy is gender-sensitive in nature.
- Ensure that other major government strategies relating to aid, development, peace and security are subject to analytical review from both a disability- and gender-sensitive perspective before publication.
- Develop and implement indicators on women and girls with disabilities for development investments, in order to mitigate the risk of this group being left behind and obscured by improvements for women without disabilities, or men and boys with disabilities.
- Set quotas to ensure that women and girls with disabilities benefit from available grants and other funding, from both gender equality and disability inclusion project pools.
- Scale up investments in social protection to improve coverage, particularly for women with disabilities and the mothers or female carers of children with disabilities.
- Apply a 'leave no one behind' lens to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by consulting with women and girls with disabilities, including in high-level reporting.
- Continually monitor and evaluate engagement with people with disabilities and their representative organisations in order to ensure that this engagement is effective and inclusive, and that all people with disabilities are represented.

About CBM Australia

CBM Australia is a Christian international development agency, committed to improving the quality of life of people with disabilities in the poorest places in the world. In 2019, CBM Australia supported field projects in 11 countries and supported partners including governments, multilateral organisations, non-government organisations and DPOs in 18 countries.

CBM Australia is proud to work in partnership with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) as part of the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP), and is a member of the Australian Council for International Development.

Attachments

CBM Australia, 2018. [*Leave No One Behind: Gender Equality, Disability Inclusion and Leadership for Sustainable Development.*](#)