



Pacific Islands Policy Platform on Gender and Disability Inclusion in COVID-19 Response

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and other crises have had major implications for access to rights of women with disabilities in the Pacific Islands region. This policy platform is an advocacy instrument for women with disabilities and their organizations to engage with national and local level governments in Pacific Island countries to ensure gender- and disability-inclusive participation in COVID-19 crisis management and recovery.

The Pacific Disability Forum (PDF) facilitated the development of this policy platform, with support from the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), as part of its "Power to Persuade 2.0: Empowering Women with Disabilities to Influence Public Policy" online training-of-trainers (TOT) held from August 18 through September 10, 2020. Participants in this initiative include women with disabilities across the region, including alumnae from PDF's first [Power to Persuade](#) training held in September 2019 in which participants developed the Pacific Islands Policy Platform on Political Participation. Power to Persuade 2.0 is part of a broader initiative by PDF and Shifting the Power Coalition, with support from IFES, to ensure gender and disability inclusion in COVID-19 response.

Justification

In the Pacific Islands region, there are an estimated 775,000 women with disabilities. Most Pacific Island countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), both of which recognize equal access to rights for women with disabilities, including during crises. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) also have a focus on achieving gender equality (Goal 5) and ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (Goal 16).

There are also several regional frameworks focused on gender equality that address the specific issues faced by women with disabilities. These frameworks include: the Pacific Leaders Gender Equality Declaration, the Pacific Platform for Action on Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights

2018 – 2030 and the Framework of Pacific Regionalism. Other regional frameworks which protect the rights of women with disabilities to participate in decision-making processes include: the Pacific Regional Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2016 – 2025, the Pacific Islands, Australia and New Zealand Electoral Administrators Network (PIANZEA) Outcomes Statement and the Incheon Strategy 2013-2022.

An advocacy brief published by Shifting the Power Coalition in July 2020 identifies regional policies and stakeholders responsible for the COVID-19 response, including the Pacific Humanitarian Protection Cluster. At a national level, COVID-19 crisis management and recovery has been guided by the National Disaster Risk Reduction Policy in Fiji, the Regional Disaster Committee in Bougainville and the AHP Disaster Ready Program in Vanuatu, to name a few. While the collective advocacy of Shifting the Power Coalition members and Pacific Disability Forum has resulted in the inclusion of gender equality and disability inclusion language in disaster management policies, women with disabilities continue to face barriers to inclusion in COVID-19 crisis management and recovery.

Access to healthcare, accessible information and social protection have been identified and jointly agreed by women with disabilities across the Pacific region as the three main priority areas and actions in order to ensure gender and disability inclusion in the Pacific regional COVID-19 response.

Priority Areas

1. Healthcare

Pacific women with disabilities are experiencing decreased access to health services and negative impacts on their physical and mental health due to COVID-19. Barriers to healthcare for Pacific women with disabilities include discrimination, inaccessible health facilities and health information, and limited awareness among healthcare professionals on how to assist women with disabilities.

To address these challenges and align with international and regional commitments to ensure the right to health for Pacific women and girls with disabilities, national governments and relevant stakeholders must take the following actions:

- Include women with disabilities in consultations with health departments about national health plans.
- Train healthcare professionals on how to support and provide services to women with disabilities.
- Ministry of Health should provide counseling and psychosocial support for women with disabilities.

2. Information and Communications

Despite international and regional commitments to ensure accessibility of information, Pacific women with disabilities continue to face discrimination and increased communication barriers during the pandemic. Public health information related to COVID-19, including health and safety measures, is often not produced in local languages or accessible formats such as sign language, braille or easy-to-read. For Pacific women with disabilities including rural women who lack access to the internet or assistive devices such as screen readers, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated unequal access information and communications.

To address these challenges and ensure the right to accessible information for Pacific women and girls with disabilities, national governments and relevant stakeholders must take the following actions:

- Improve access for women and girls with diverse disabilities to nationally available and up-to-date COVID-19 related information and communication by producing information in accessible formats such as easy-to-read, large print, sign language and braille.

3. Social Protection

Pacific women with disabilities have a right to social protection without discrimination. National governments have a responsibility to ensure that Pacific women and girls with disabilities have access to social protection measures to ensure an adequate standard of living. Pacific women and girls with disabilities are experiencing significant economic barriers as a result of COVID-19, including challenges accessing social protection services due to lack of eligibility, limited funding or government reprioritization of support systems during the crisis. There is also a need for better data collection to inform decisions on social protection and a need to ensure social protection goes directly to Pacific women with disabilities rather than to their families or partners.

To address these challenges and ensure social protection measures are inclusive of Pacific women and girls with disabilities, national governments and relevant stakeholders must take the following actions:

- Ensure social protection is made available to women with disabilities in different geographic regions, not just certain areas.
- Advocate for a social protection policy which considers the diverse priorities of women with disabilities.

- Conduct a questionnaire to identify what services women with disabilities require and assign government focal points to implement social protection measures with support from women with disabilities organizations.
- Focal points should ensure that information on social protection measures is shared with all relevant stakeholders, including women with disabilities organizations, DPOs, CSOs and women's organizations.