



# Recommendations for Strengthening Meaningful Participation and Inclusion of Women with Disabilities in South Asia (SDG 16)

April 2021

## Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16 is focused on the advancement of peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG 16) – goals that underpin and directly impact the achievement of all other SDGs.

Women with disabilities face intersectional barriers to inclusion in institutions and decision-making processes and are underrepresented in government positions, legislatures and civil society leadership. *Intersectionality* recognizes the unique experience of discrimination that comes with the intersection of multiple social identities, such as gender and disability. The participation of women with disabilities as decision makers is essential to the realization of SDG 16. UNESCAP's Asia-Pacific Forum provides an important advocacy instrument for South Asian women with disabilities to share their experiences related to implementation of SDG 16, including perspectives on how to eliminate discrimination and strengthen meaningful participation of women with disabilities in the region to bring about more accountable and transparent institutions that better respond to all citizens.

The actions recommended below were prepared by South Asian women advocates with disabilities during the International Foundation for Electoral Systems' (IFES) 2021 South Asia regional conference<sup>1</sup> for alumnae of its *Power to Persuade* program. The conference brought together nearly 100 women with disabilities from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. UNESCAP's Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development and the High-Level Political Forum can bring attention to the policy priorities of women with disabilities throughout the region and establish a joint commitment with policymakers.

## Recommendations

**SDG 16.3: Promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all.** Women with disabilities in South Asia are disproportionately at risk of violence due to systemic discrimination, stigma and lack of access to justice.

- **Policy Ask #1: Increase access to law and justice for women with disabilities** in order to minimize physical, economic, societal, political, cultural, sexual and all other kinds of gender-related violence against women with disabilities. Improve institutional capacity and procedures to enforce existing laws protecting the rights of women with disabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> The regional conference was supported by Global Affairs Canada, the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the United States Agency for International Development.



**SDG 16.6: Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.** Public institutions are often inaccessible to women with disabilities and women with disabilities experience compounded discrimination accessing public services.

- **Policy Ask #1: Ensure that voting procedures, facilities and materials are accessible** and easy to understand and use by women with disabilities.
- **Policy Ask #2: Ensure that access to government services and documents proactively mitigate intersectional barriers that disproportionately affect women with disabilities, limiting their access to political rights and power.** Examples include reviewing and modifying voter registration and application processes for identity cards/legal documents to ensure the process is accessible to women with disabilities.

**SDG 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.**

Women with all types of disabilities in South Asia face intersectional barriers to inclusion in decision-making processes and are underrepresented in government positions, legislatures and civil society leadership. Women with disabilities are also uniquely impacted by health and climate change issues, and their involvement as decision makers leads to more inclusive and representative policies to address these challenges.

- **Policy Ask #1: Ensure inclusion of women with disabilities in local-level development committees,** including disaster risk mitigation related to pandemics, climate change and natural disasters. For countries that implement disaster risk management committees or other bodies tasked with overseeing disaster responses, include women with disabilities as committee members, ideally through establishment of a quota for such bodies. Furthermore, the committees should hold consultations with women-led DPOs or groups to address implementation of public services.
- **Policy Ask #2: Protect the right of women with disabilities to stand for elections,** to effectively hold office and perform all public functions at all levels of government, facilitating the use of assistive and new technologies where appropriate, and providing access to funding to stand for office.
- **Policy Ask #3: Ensure that programmes related to women with disabilities are implemented and supported by the state** to empower women with disabilities to take up leadership roles in the society. This should include a focus on engaging women with disabilities as transformational leaders to lead community, local and national-level efforts to address public crises, such as the negative impacts of climate change.



**SDG 16.10: Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.** Public information, including information on COVID-19, is often not provided in accessible formats and women with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by the digital divide.

- **Policy Ask #1: Public information, including on social and economic benefits and information on the COVID-19 pandemic, should be provided in accessible formats.** Programs and public information at the local level are often not accessible for persons with disabilities. Local governments should adopt policies of conducting programs and publishing information in accessible formats, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic and other matters of public health and safety. Examples of accessible information formats include sign language interpretation, braille, closed captioning and easy-to-read format.

**SDG 16.B: Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development.** Despite legal guarantees, women with disabilities continue to face numerous barriers and discrimination when taking part in political and electoral processes, such as restrictions on access to voter registration and polling places, and to participate in public life more broadly.

- **Policy Ask #1: Protecting the right of women with disabilities to vote** by secret ballot in elections and public referendums, without intimidation. Guaranteeing the free expression of the will of persons with disabilities as electors and to this end, where necessary, at their request, allowing assistance during voting by a person of their own choice.
- **Policy Ask #2: Facilitate training programmes organized by key stakeholders to raise awareness about disability** throughout the society, including at the family level, and to foster respect for the rights and dignity of women with disabilities.

The following organizations participated in the development of these joint recommendations:

1. Special Talent Exchange Program (STEP), Pakistan
2. Nepal Disabled Women's Association (NDWA), Nepal
3. Physically Challenged Development Foundation (PDF), Bangladesh
4. Sri Lanka Central Federation of the Deaf (SLCFD), Sri Lanka
5. Deaf Women's Association (DWA), Sri Lanka
6. We for Rights, Sri Lanka
7. Enable Lanka Foundation (ELF), Sri Lanka
8. Wellassa Organization of Persons with Disabilities (WOPD), Sri Lanka
9. Disability Suwashakthi Foundation, Sri Lanka