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Beyond Leaving No One Behind: Lessons from Disability Inclusion for the Post-2030 Development Agenda

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* The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.

The commitment to leave no one behind fundamentally changed the way the international community understood sustainable development. It acknowledged that development cannot be considered successful if its benefits fail to reach those who experience discrimination, exclusion and unequal opportunities. More importantly, it challenged governments to look beyond national averages and recognize that inequalities are often shaped by the intersection of gender, disability, age, poverty, ethnicity, migration status and other social identities.

Ten years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, the principle remains both relevant and necessary. From the perspective of the disability rights movement, however, one important lesson has become increasingly evident. The challenge has not been a lack of commitment to inclusion, but the difficulty of translating the commitment into institutions, policies and accountability mechanisms effective of responding to live experiences of persons with disabilities in particular women and girls with disabilities, for example, rarely experience discrimination through a single policy sector. Their access to education influences employment; employment determines income and social protection; inaccessible transport limits access to health care, justice and political participation. These realities are interconnected, yet public policies frequently remain fragmented.

This lived experience suggests that the next development agenda should move beyond recognizing intersectionality as an analytical concept. The greater challenge is to redesign governance systems so that they are capable of responding to intersecting inequalities in practice.

The 2030 Agenda made an important contribution by bringing intersectionality into mainstream development discourse through the leave no one behind principle. It encouraged governments to improve data disaggregation, expand participation and give greater visibility to populations that had previously been underrepresented. In many countries, disability inclusion and gender equality became more visible within national development plans, while collaboration among governments, civil society and United Nations agencies also expanded.

Nevertheless, implementation has often reflected the way governments are organized rather than the way people experience inequality. Gender, disability, health, education, labour, social protection and finance continue to operate largely within separate institutional frameworks. As a result, women with disabilities frequently encounter multiple barriers that fall between sectors and therefore between responsibilities. This institutional fragmentation remains one of the most significant limitations of the current development framework.

One of the clearest lessons emerging from the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is therefore that recognition of intersecting inequalities is only the first step. Looking beyond 2030, the missing transition is from intersectional analysis to intersectional governance. Governments should be encouraged to develop inclusive planning, budgeting, implementation and accountability mechanisms that address overlapping forms of discrimination across sectors rather than through isolated programs.

International human rights law already provides important guidance for such a transition. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) both recognize that women and girls with disabilities experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. CRPD General Comment No. 3 calls for disability-inclusive and gender-responsive legislation and policies, while General Comment No. 7 reinforces the right of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations to participate fully in decision-making. Similarly, CEDAW General Recommendation No. 18 first highlighted the invisibility of women with disabilities within gender equality policies, and General Recommendation No. 35 recognizes the heightened risk of gender-based violence arising from intersecting discrimination. Together, these standards demonstrate that advancing the SDGs is not only a matter of development policy but also of fulfilling States' legally binding human rights obligations.

A second lesson concerns the broader context in which inequalities continue to evolve. Despite progress in many areas of human development, widening income disparities, climate change, demographic shifts, digital transformation and shrinking civic space increasingly shape people's opportunities. These structural trends affect everyone, but they do not affect everyone equally. Women with disabilities often enter periods of economic uncertainty already facing barriers to education, decent work, financial services, social protection and digital technologies. Economic shocks therefore tend to reinforce existing inequalities rather than create new ones.

Reducing gender inequality cannot therefore be separated from addressing wider economic structures that concentrate wealth, opportunity and political influence. Disability inclusion and gender equality should not be viewed solely as social policies; they are essential components of inclusive economic development.

Experience across countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) suggests that progress is strongest where governments combine universal social protection, disability-inclusive and gender-responsive budgeting, accessible public services, investment in the care economy and meaningful participation of representative organizations of persons with disabilities in economic decision-making. These measures not only reduce inequality but also strengthen resilience and social cohesion during periods of economic and social change.

Beyond counting people: Building inclusive evidence ecosystems

Another important lesson from the implementation of the SDGs concerns how we understand and measure inequality. The commitment to "leave no one behind" encouraged countries to improve the availability of disaggregated data, and significant progress has been made. Many national statistical systems now collect data disaggregated by sex, age and disability, providing a stronger evidence base for policymaking than existed a decade ago.

Yet experience has also shown the limitations of relying solely on official statistics. Quantitative indicators can tell us how many children with disabilities are enrolled in school or how many women participate in the open workforce, but they often reveal far less about why many people remain excluded. They rarely capture inaccessible public services, discriminatory attitudes, barriers to justice, unpaid care responsibilities, digital exclusion or the cumulative effects of multiple forms of discrimination throughout a person's life.

From the perspective of organizations of persons with disabilities, evidence should therefore be understood more broadly. The next development agenda should move from official statistics to inclusive evidence ecosystems that combine national statistics with citizen-generated data, participatory research, community monitoring and qualitative evidence. These approaches do not replace official statistics; they strengthen them by bringing into policymaking the knowledge and experiences of those most affected by exclusion.

This approach is fully consistent with Article 31 of the CRPD on data collection and statistics, as well as Articles 4(3) and 33(3), which recognize the central role of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in shaping policies and monitoring implementation. Participation should not begin once policies have been drafted; it should begin when evidence itself is generated. When women with disabilities participate in defining indicators, interpreting findings and identifying priorities, data become not only more inclusive but also more useful for public decision-making.

From parallel movements to cross-movement solidarity

The implementation of the 2030 Agenda has also demonstrated the indispensable role of civil society in advancing equality and accountability. Feminist movements, disability rights organizations, Indigenous Peoples' organizations, youth movements and many other human rights actors have expanded political space, influenced legislation and brought the lived experiences of underrepresented communities into national and international policy discussions.

At the same time, experience suggests that collaboration among these movements cannot be taken for granted. Although disability rights and feminist movements share common commitments to equality, dignity and autonomy, they have often developed along separate trajectories. Disability issues have sometimes remained peripheral within mainstream gender equality agendas, while disability movements themselves have not always given sufficient attention to gender equality or the leadership of women with disabilities. Similar dynamics can be observed across other human rights movements, each responding to its own history, priorities and constituencies.

Recognizing these tensions is important, not to assign responsibility, but to identify opportunities for stronger collaboration. The lived experiences of women with disabilities demonstrate that discrimination is rarely experienced in isolation; our advocacy should reflect that same reality. The

post-2030 agenda therefore requires a further transition from parallel movements to cross-movement solidarity.

Across ASEAN, encouraging examples are already emerging. Partnerships among organizations of persons with disabilities, women's rights organizations, national human rights institutions, humanitarian actors and development partners have strengthened disability-inclusive responses to gender-based violence, disaster risk reduction, humanitarian action and political participation. These experiences suggest that cross-movement collaboration not only broadens political influence but also produces more comprehensive and sustainable policy solutions. Rather than competing for limited policy space or resources, human rights movements can strengthen one another by recognizing that equality is indivisible and that progress for one underrepresented community reinforces progress for all.

Looking Beyond 2030

As discussions on the post-2030 development agenda begin, three priorities deserve particular attention.

First, the next global framework should move beyond acknowledging intersecting inequalities and institutionalize intersectional governance. Coordinated planning, financing and accountability across sectors are essential if governments are to respond effectively to the complexity of people's lives.

Second, the international community should invest in inclusive evidence ecosystems that combine official statistics with citizen-generated evidence and participatory monitoring. Better evidence is not only about improving data quality; it is about ensuring that those who have historically been invisible help shape the knowledge that informs public policy.

Third, governments and development partners should strengthen cross-movement solidarity by creating sustained opportunities for collaboration among organizations of persons with disabilities, feminist organizations and other representative human rights movements. Participation should move beyond consultation towards shared leadership in designing, implementing and evaluating public policies.

In conclusion, the promise leaving no one behind remains one of the most important commitments of the 2030 Agenda. The experience of the past decade, however, suggests that inclusion cannot be achieved simply by expanding existing programs. It requires institutions that are capable of responding to intersecting inequalities, evidence systems that reflect people's lived experiences, and partnerships that recognize the value of diverse social movements working together. Anchored in the CRPD, CEDAW and the broader international human rights framework, the post-2030 agenda has an opportunity to move beyond inclusion as an aspiration and make it a defining characteristic of governance itself.