



## INVISIBLE NO MORE: WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN THE WOMEN, PEACE, AND SECURITY AGENDA

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The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, rooted in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, emphasizes the crucial role of women in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and post-conflict recovery. Despite its comprehensive framework, the agenda often overlooks the specific needs, experiences, and insights of women with disabilities—rendering them invisible despite the fact that they represent 20% of the world population of women. This makes them a significant yet frequently neglected demographic, especially in conflict and post-conflict settings, where disability rates can surge to nearly 25%. Conflict increases the incidence of disabilities through the use of bombs, landmines, and similar devices, and through the use of violence, particularly sexual violence, as a weapon of war, impacting the bodily autonomy of women and girls.

Women with disabilities face double discrimination, simultaneously excluded from women's rights movements and male-led disability organizations. In nearly every domain—employment, education, healthcare—they experience heightened difficulties. Societal stereotypes and prejudices are just one example of the systemic barriers that often confine women with disabilities to low-status, poorly paid roles and restrict their access to essential services and participation in decision-making. Moreover, most women's rights policies tend to neglect their unique intersecting needs, rendering them invisible within broader gender and disability frameworks.

### Violence and vulnerability

During conflicts, women with disabilities are disproportionately vulnerable to violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), which has been weaponized in times of war. Displacement, destruction of essential services, and the breakdown of protection mechanisms further increase their risks. Women with disabilities can be separated from caregivers, lose access to assistive devices, face physical and attitudinal barriers in accessing humanitarian assistance, and be physically and socially isolated.



Humanitarian responses often lack accessibility considerations, leaving women dependent on aid that may not meet their specific needs. Development strategies frequently ignore the intersectional realities faced by women with disabilities experiencing displacement, resulting in limited opportunities for social participation and reintegration in host countries. Women's stereotypical gender roles as caregivers can add additional burdens on women with disabilities who are also caregivers, especially in contexts of displacement. Internally displaced women with disabilities face increased risks of neglect, abandonment, and further marginalization, hindering recovery and social inclusion.

### **Policy and Decision-Making Gaps**

Women with disabilities are frequently absent from civic, peacebuilding, and governance spaces, especially during wartime and in post-conflict rebuilding. Their voices are rarely included, and their participation is often marginalized or overlooked in peace negotiations or peacebuilding initiatives, despite evidence indicating that inclusive participation of women, including women with disabilities, fosters more sustainable peace agreements. Policy responses aimed at preventing conflict-related violence seldom address the particular forms of violence and discrimination faced by women with disabilities. Moreover, the exclusion of women-led organizations of persons with disabilities from decision-making processes limits the development of inclusive prevention strategies.

There are a number of reasons that women with disabilities are marginalized in decision-making and peacebuilding processes. Invisibility is reinforced by societal stereotypes and stigma that view women with disabilities solely as victims, denying them their role as active agents of change. Post-conflict interventions are often no better, adopting charity or medical models of disability, portraying women with disabilities as passive recipients of aid rather than recognizing their agency and capacity for leadership. This is driven in part by outdated understandings of disability within humanitarian law and practice, which continues to define disability as synonymous with "infirmity" or "sickness". In addition to perpetuating stigmatizing perceptions of disability, this approach erases the rich history of struggle, community, and identity that has formed around the global disability justice movement in recent decades.



Insights that come from within this community, which demonstrate the numerous ways in which leadership is particularly adept at creating adaptive, agile systems and practices of self-help and mutual aid in times of crisis, are thus lost in situations where they could benefit wider humanitarian and WPS approaches.

Organizations of women and girls with disabilities are chronically underfunded, limiting their capacity to engage fully with the WPS agenda. As they are both excluded from women's movements in WPS as well as male-led disability movements, they are limited in their access to leadership positions, capacity strengthening and training opportunities, and ability to travel safely. This exclusion from civic life and leadership opportunities diminishes their ability to influence peace processes and recovery efforts in multiple ways. Furthermore, structural barriers—such as inaccessible environments and communication challenges—impede their meaningful involvement.

Another critical obstacle to advancing the rights of women with disabilities within WPS is the paucity of disaggregated data. Without detailed information distinguishing women and girls with disabilities from other groups, policymakers lack a clear understanding of their specific challenges, needs, and contributions. This data deficiency leads to their underrepresentation in decision-making, peacebuilding initiatives, and the formulation of inclusive policies. Addressing this gap requires systematic collection and analysis of disaggregated data, as well as a deeper understanding of the diversity of disability identities and experiences, to ensure that women with disabilities are adequately represented, their voices amplified, and their rights integrated into peace and security strategies.

### **Women with Disabilities in UNSC Resolution 1325**

While resolution 1325 is a landmark resolution that recognizes the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and girls and emphasizes the importance of their participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and peacebuilding, it does not once mention disability. Few Security Council resolutions (e.g., UNSCR 1960, 2010; UNSCR 2106, 2013) do so, and then, only portray them as victims needing protection from sexual violence rather than recognizing their agency or participation.



The absence of disability in these resolutions may be due to limited expert and activist briefings from women with disabilities before the UN Security Council and other global security forums. A notable improvement in the more recent resolution on UNSCR 2475 (2019), emphasizes that states must enable meaningful participation and representation of persons with disabilities, including their organizations, in humanitarian and peace processes, and consult experts on disability mainstreaming. In practice, however, we have yet to see any significant impact, and there is no evidence, such as a report or study, on the implementation of UNSCR 2475.

Most National Action Plans (NAPs) for WPS also exclude women with disabilities. For example, an analysis of 10 NAPs in the Arab region shows that disability is mentioned only in protection contexts, not participation. However, some improvements are worth noting. Countries like Jordan and Somalia show some inclusion of women with disabilities in decision-making. South Sudan's 2015-2020 NAP, which involved consultations with women with disabilities, includes over 30 references to women and girls with disabilities and makes a commitment that activities undertaken need to take into consideration the “unique conditions and the priority interests and the needs of women and girls with disabilities.”

### **Women with Disabilities in Canada's National Action Plan on WPS**

In Canada, women and girls with disabilities are rarely consulted, if at all, on the development of NAPs on the WPS agenda and are poorly represented in civil society organizations. In Canada's third NAP on WPS (2023-2029), entitled "Foundations for Peace," disability is only referenced in footnotes, as examples of an intersectional approach, or in the annex, which describes key terms such as Canada's Gender Based Analysis Plus (GBA+). This approach is consistent with the first two action plans which lack any integration of approach inclusive of women with disabilities. The commitments outlined by the CNAP for “Focus area 1: Building and sustaining peace, regarding women and gender-diverse peacebuilders and human rights defenders,” lack specific inclusion and consideration of women with disabilities.



While the commitments emphasize advocating for meaningful participation, capacity building, protection from security threats, and improved engagement systems, they do not explicitly address the unique barriers faced by women with disabilities. This approach risks tokenization of disability identities at best, and at worst can lead to erasure of women and girls with disabilities, as they are pushed to the literal margins during Canada's NAP implementation.

### Recommendations

#### Incorporate Women with Disabilities into Canada's WPS agenda

Advocate for the explicit inclusion of women with disabilities in Canada's approach to WPS, recognizing their agency, leadership, and unique barriers they face. Ensure explicit reference to their meaningful participation and address their specific needs in peacebuilding, conflict prevention, and recovery efforts. Make targeted efforts to engage with and learn from disability-led organizations serving women, including grassroots groups.

#### Enhance Inclusive Data Collection and Disaggregation

Develop and implement systematic mechanisms for collecting disaggregated data on women and girls with disabilities, covering aspects such as violence, access to services, participation in decision-making, and social inclusion. Use this data to inform policies, tailor interventions, and monitor progress effectively.

#### Harmonize the WPS agenda with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other relevant policy frameworks.

A disability lens needs to highlight not only the specific and unique vulnerabilities that women and girls with disabilities face, but the insights coming from the disability community in terms of building agile, human-centred systems. Implementing these recommendations will foster a more inclusive, equitable, and effective WPS agenda that recognizes and leverages the agency of women with disabilities in peace and security efforts.



### **Integrate the Social Model of Disability into Knowledge and Systems**

Promote knowledge and mechanisms for inclusion in WPS based on the social model of disability, which recognizes the disabling barriers embedded in systems, attitudes and structures rather than in bodily or cognitive differences that need to be “fixed,” as per the prevailing medical model. This approach aligns with contemporary standards in human rights-based approaches to disability justice, and avoids unintentional perpetuation of stigmatizing views of disabled women and girls as merely vulnerable subjects lacking agency.

### **Strengthen Inclusion of Women with Disabilities in all their Diversity in Decision-Making and Peace Processes**

Create accessible platforms and support structures that actively involve women with disabilities and their organizations in peace negotiations, policy development, and post-conflict recovery initiatives. This includes removing environmental, institutional, attitudinal and communication barriers and ensuring their participation is meaningful, genuinely valued and influential.

### **Increase Funding and Support for Women with Disabilities' Organizations**

Allocate targeted funding and capacity-building resources to organizations of persons with disabilities and women with disabilities. This will empower them to advocate for their rights, participate effectively in peace processes, and design and implement inclusive programs aligned with WPS objectives.

Much has been learned over the last 25 years of WPS resolutions – time enough to see the full inclusion and meaningful participation of women with disabilities, who represent 20% of all women globally.