



**Inclusive Futures**  
Promoting disability inclusion



# Women and girls with disabilities in development and humanitarian projects

Successes, adaptations and failures from the Inclusive Futures programme



One in five women around the world have some form of disability. Women and girls with disabilities face increased challenges, barriers and discrimination due to their gender and disability.<sup>1</sup> Multiple barriers include access to inclusive employment, health, education, and participation and influence in decision-making structures. Women and girls with disabilities also face increased risks of violence, exploitation and abuse.

**Any programme that aims to be inclusive of women and girls needs to include women and girls with disabilities.**

Inclusive Futures is the flagship UK aid disability inclusion programme working across the development and humanitarian sector. It helps people with disabilities, with an increased focus on women and girls, by improving their access to work, education and healthcare. It also tackles negative stereotyping and discrimination faced by people with disabilities, particularly women and girls. The consortium runs projects in Bangladesh, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda.

**Cover caption:** Participants from our sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) project in Nepal. The project tested ways of improving access to SRHR services, especially for young women with disabilities. © Humanity & Inclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). 2011. World Report on Disability. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564182>

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## 9 key findings to ensure meaningful inclusion

This brief presents nine findings from the Inclusive Futures programme about the meaningful inclusion of women and girls with disabilities. These are structured in three categories highlighted below, summarised from a detailed learning report to be published in September 2023. The findings are drawn from a content analysis of project reports from the Disability Inclusive Development programme – Inclusive Futures, April 2020 – May 2023.



### What we'll keep doing

1. Engaging women and girls with disabilities to choose the topics that matter to them
2. Supporting women and girls with disabilities to steer projects
3. Proactively safeguarding women and girls with disabilities



### What we're changing

4. Going beyond statistics to get the whole story
5. Supporting networks and spaces where women and girls with disabilities access information
6. Creating an enabling environment among family members



### What we'll stop doing

7. Assuming participation will result in positive outcomes
8. Trying to change attitudes through short-term inclusion training
9. Enforcing standardised criteria for engagement

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# Summary of the findings



## What we'll keep doing

### 1. Engaging women and girls with disabilities to choose the topics that matter to them

Women and girls with disabilities told us that important topics to them are not given enough attention in development and humanitarian projects. These include:

Sexual and reproductive health and rights, such as their free, informed choice and autonomy about contraceptive use

- The choice of whether to marry, with whom, and when

In our inclusive family planning project in Nigeria, women with disabilities participated in the project design and identified the above topics as priorities. As a result, we tailored the messaging in our social behaviour change campaign and health worker training to address the issues.

### 2. Supporting women and girls with disabilities to steer projects

We have set up structures where women and girls with disabilities can influence decisions and the direction of projects continually. They let us know what is working, what isn't and what else needs to happen.

We use different formats with an emphasis on participation and accessibility. These include:

- Participatory design workshops
- Focus groups for girls with disabilities, which are led by a trained researcher (who is a woman)
- Project governance committees with representatives from women-focused organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs)

In our inclusive education project in Nigeria, we set up a steering committee with people with disabilities. This involved additional forward planning, with designated budget for reasonable accommodation – such as sign language interpreters, extended timeframes for engagement and clear roles and responsibilities for the steering committee members.

Under the steering committee, each project partner used the feedback and recommendations of women and girls with disabilities to continually adapt the project towards greater inclusion.



**Caption:** Risikat is the executive director of Women with Disability Self Reliance Foundation, an OPD organisation, and a member of the steering committee for our inclusive education project in Nigeria © Kabantiok Solomon/Sightsavers

### 3. Proactively safeguarding women and girls with disabilities

Women and girls with disabilities have heightened and intersecting vulnerabilities. We'll keep making sure all of our projects are prepared for this by putting safeguarding in place. For example, in our inclusive sexual and reproductive health project in Nepal, we embedded essential safeguards. These include:

- Mapping local referral networks
- Training safeguarding leads
- Establishing a robust reporting procedure
- Protecting budget for safeguarding activities and survivor support

We continue to embed safeguarding in staff training and risk assess all activities to ensure the safety of women and girls with disabilities. For example, we consider aspects such as time and location of activities, community sensitisation, gender of staff, accessible reporting mechanisms and incident response plans.



## What we're changing

### 4. Going beyond statistics to get the whole story

As a minimum, we collect and disaggregate data in relation to disability and gender. This means we have data showing how many women and girls with disabilities are participating in our projects. But this data does not tell us what their experiences are, or any conditions that are preventing their full participation or equal benefit from the project.

Despite high enrolment rates in our disability inclusive, ultra-poor graduation project in Uganda, we identified that women with disabilities were generating less income at the end of the project than men with disabilities. We worked closely with the women to understand why. They told us that they faced competing responsibilities as caregivers to children and elders, alongside maintaining households and carrying out roles in the community. These compounded to limit the time they had available to focus on their income and subsistence as part of the project.

- We now gather qualitative data in participatory ways in our scale projects, including interviewing women and girls with disabilities as part of our gender analysis right from the beginning
- This data gives us a fuller story, so we can better include and best respond to their unique barriers, commitments, needs and preferences

### 5. Supporting the networks and spaces where women and girls with disabilities access information

We found that working through some disability networks and community groups, such as umbrella OPDs, recreated wider societal gender norms. This included limited leadership and decision-making opportunities and a gap in coverage of important issues for women and girls with disabilities.

- We now take more deliberate steps to engage women and girls with disabilities, including working with women-focused OPDs and women-led community groups
- We also establish spaces where women with disabilities come together as project participants

In Uganda, we supported women with disabilities to form district-level associations where they could discuss project topics. We worked with each new association on a development plan to strengthen its organisational capacity and ensure its sustainability.



**Caption:** Mary is a microentrepreneur from our inclusive livelihoods project in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya © Ninth Wonder Productions / Sightsavers

## 6. Creating an enabling environment among family members

Family members and caregivers can play a critical role in enabling or preventing a woman or girl with disabilities from taking part in a project. When working with women and girls with disabilities, we learnt to build the support and confidence of the family around them. In our inclusive skills training project in Bangladesh, parents and caregivers raised concerns about their child travelling alone on public transport to attend training and the discrimination they might face from customers during their placement.

We trained facilitators from the local disability community to address these concerns, by going from household to household. This built the confidence and support of the family and asserted the woman or girl's right to choose to participate in the project.

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## What we'll stop doing

### 7. Assuming participation will result in positive outcomes

In some of our innovation work, we aimed for high enrolment rates among women and girls with disabilities. For example, in our inclusive education project in Kenya, where girls with disabilities typically have lower enrolment rates. We were successful in achieving a high participation rate of women and girls with disabilities across our projects, but towards the end of some of our pilots we began to see unequal outcomes:

- In Bangladesh, children with disabilities, especially girls, had lower return rates to school after COVID-19 closures
- In Bangladesh and Kenya, women with disabilities who graduated from our inclusive trainee schemes received lower rates of pay or fewer business opportunities than the men with disabilities who graduated

We now know that enrolment isn't enough, it's just the first step. In addition, we now make increased efforts to ensure that women and girls with disabilities are meaningfully engaged throughout our projects with targeted activities. We combine this with efforts to drive wider transformation of cultural and societal norms around gender, such as through social behaviour change campaigns.

### 8. Trying to change attitudes through short-term inclusion training

Addressing negative stereotyping and discrimination against women and girls with disabilities is essential for sustainable, long-term positive change. However, it takes much more than short training with key influencers such as teachers, health workers, employers, or community members.

- While short training can be an essential starting or refresher point, it is not sufficient to address embedded non-inclusive and discriminatory attitudes or practices
- We now aim to be both realistic and ambitious about how much we can transform social norms throughout the length of our project, and target influencers including family, community, sector (teachers, health workers, employers) and government members with tailored and repeated engagement

For example, our social behaviour change work in Nigeria used radio drama, public service announcements and social media effectively to engage people with and without disabilities over an extended time period, to address negative stereotypes, including about women and girls with disabilities.





**Caption:** Pupils from our inclusive education project schools in Kenya, take part in an activity for World Children’s Day. © Ninth Wonder Productions / Sightsavers

## 9. Enforcing standardised criteria for engagement

Some initial criteria required for women and girls with disabilities to engage in our projects created barriers to their participation. We had designed our criteria to be inclusive of people with disabilities, but we did not consider gender disparity fully in this.

To register in our inclusive business project in Kenya, microentrepreneurs with disabilities had to meet a standard minimum income requirement, a required time commitment and attend a set location for training sessions. We learnt that many women with disabilities who were microentrepreneurs were not eligible to apply, as they often had a lower monthly income, and that some of their businesses were used as ‘back-up’ income. They also had primary childcare responsibilities, making it difficult to commit to full training cycles away from home.

- To be inclusive of women with disabilities, we now maintain flexible criteria in our application process
- This includes a lower criterion for minimum monthly income for women with disabilities, and flexible attendance options, with a business specialist visiting trainees to top-up their training if they have missed any workshops

**Inclusive Futures consortium and OPD partners will be at the Women Deliver Conference from 17-20 July 2023. Join our Q&A session with two women representing organisations of people with disabilities on Thursday, 10.30 AM at The Square, booth number S22-23**

**Learn more about our approach to reaching women and girls with disabilities: [inclusivefutures.org/reaching-women-and-girls-with-disabilities](https://inclusivefutures.org/reaching-women-and-girls-with-disabilities)**

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