



Wide angle

Regional report

Powerful yet overlooked: African women with disabilities and the ongoing struggle for inclusion, 30 years after Beijing

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A tribute to women leaders who paved the way

This report would never have existed without the past involvement of the women leaders who have left us over the last decade. We would like to honour the legacy of four remarkable women with disabilities - Florence Adong-Ewoo, Rachel Kachaje, Judy Heumann and Catherine Uteka - whose lives have been dedicated to advocacy, resilience and the fight for justice.

Florence Adong-Ewoo, from Uganda, was a beacon of strength who challenged societal norms and worked to empower women and girls with disabilities in Africa.

Rachel Kachaje, a Malawian disability rights activist, fought tirelessly for inclusion and dignity, serving as a government minister and a global leader in advancing disability rights; she helped creating Disabled Women in Africa.

Judy Heumann, a trailblazer from the USA, is remembered globally as the "Mother of the Disability Rights Movement". Her tireless advocacy reshaped policies and minds, driving progress in accessibility and human rights.

Catherine Uteka of Malawi was a passionate advocate for women and girls with disabilities, especially women living with deafblindness, ensuring that their voices were heard, and their rights were protected.

These women leave behind a profound legacy of boldness, advocacy and change. Their work will inspire generations to come.



Foreword by Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame

Thirty years ago, the world came together in Beijing to declare a bold and transformative vision for gender equality through the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. As we commemorate this milestone, we must reflect on the progress made and recognise the persistent and profound challenges that continue to confront African women and girls with disabilities—those too often pushed to the margins of development and inclusion. This report, **“Powerful yet Overlooked,”** is both a tribute to the unwavering engagement and activism of women with disabilities and a powerful call for the full realisation of their rights.

African women with disabilities have long been agents of change, demonstrating resilience and leadership in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Despite facing multiple layers of discrimination based on their gender, disability and other intersecting identities, they have made significant contributions to their families, communities and economies. They have organised, advocated and shaped policies, often with very limited resources and minimal recognition. And yet, thirty years after Beijing, the promises made to them remain largely unfulfilled.

The findings of this report starkly illustrate the reality that African women and girls with disabilities continue to face extraordinary barriers to equality. They are disproportionately affected by poverty, subjected to violence, and are consistently excluded from education, employment, and decision-making spaces. These barriers are deeply rooted in ableism, sexism, and the ongoing failure to meaningfully incorporate the lived experiences of women with disabilities into laws, policies, and development programs.

One of the most critical insights from this report is the persistence of these barriers, despite the existence of international and regional frameworks designed to protect their rights. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa have set ambitious standards, yet implementation remains weak. Governments have signed agreements and ratified protocols, but the lived realities of women with disabilities continue to be ignored. This report shows that, far too often, women with disabilities are excluded from the very policy-making processes that directly affect their lives, leaving them largely invisible in national and regional efforts to advance gender equality.

Nevertheless, African women with disabilities have not been passive. The voices captured in this report—gathered through consultations with over 20 women-led organisations and a continental survey reflecting the experiences of almost 250 women with disabilities and persons with disabilities from gender minorities across 23 countries—are testimonies of agency and activism. They tell stories of determination and leadership but also of deep frustration at the slow pace of progress. Importantly, this report does not merely highlight the gaps; it offers clear and actionable recommendations for how governments, regional bodies, and civil society can move forward with tangible commitments to ensure that African women with disabilities are no longer overlooked.

The fight for the rights of African women and girls with disabilities is not solely about disability right; it is a fight for human rights and gender equality. The inclusion of women with disabilities is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly the goal of "leaving no one behind." Moreover, the world has not yet realised that excluding women with disabilities is an impoverishment. Without confronting the unique challenges that women with disabilities face, and as well incorporating the unique perspectives through which women with disabilities, in all their diversity, understand gender justice issues, our global ambitions for gender equality will remain out of reach.

As we move forward, this report is a crucial reminder that equality for women with disabilities is not a secondary issue—it is central to any feminist movement. Feminist and disability rights organisations must stand together, ensuring that the voices and leadership of women and girls with disabilities are placed at the heart of our collective advocacy. Their exclusion diminishes the entire movement for gender justice. The time for inclusive, meaningful change is now.

Ms Gertrude Oforiwa Fefoame

**Chair, United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons
with Disabilities**

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Acknowledgements

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The Task Force would like to acknowledge the significant contributions to the present report of the following 23 organisations: Organisation des Femmes Aveugles du Bénin (Organisation of Blind Women of Benin), ONG Dédji (NGO Dedji), ONG Bartimée (NGO Bartimée), Association Burundaise pour la Promotion des Droits des Femmes Handicapées - Urumuri (Burundian Association for the Promotion of the Rights of Disabled Women), Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services, Coalition on Violence Against Women, Endorois Indigenous Women Empowerment Network, Kenya Female Advisory Organization, United Disabled Persons of Kenya, Women Challenged to Challenge, Disabled Women in Africa Malawi, Equal Basis Development Initiative Jos, Umuryango Nyarwanda w'Abagore Bafite Ubumuga (Rwandan Organization of Women with disabilities), Alliance Sénégalaise de lutte contre les VBG faites aux femmes et filles handicapées (Senegalese Alliance to combat GBV against women and girls with disabilities), Association des femmes handicapées de Handicap Form'Educ (Association of Women with Disabilities of HFE), Brigade Communautaire de Conscientisation et Dénonciation des violations des droits humains de Ziguinchor (Ziguinchor Community Brigade for Raising Awareness and Denouncing Human Rights Violations), Centre d'écoute pour les femmes et filles handicapées de l'Association des personnes handicapées de Pikine (Support centre for women and girls with disabilities run by the Pikine Association of Persons with disabilities), Comité des femmes handicapées de la FSAPH (FSAPH Women with disabilities' committee), Women In Law and Development in Africa, Association de Promotion des Femmes Handicapées du Togo (Association for the Promotion of Women with Disabilities in Togo), Cellule Féminine - Association des Sourds du Togo (Women's wing - Togo Association of the Deaf), Mubende Women with Disabilities Association, Lira District Disabled Women Association.

Executive summary

Women with disabilities represent up to three-quarters of the population in low- and middle-income countries. Yet, thirty years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA), enhanced protection through international and regional frameworks including the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (the African Disability Protocol), the promises of gender equality remain unfulfilled for African women and girls with disabilities. This report, **“Powerful yet Overlooked,”** brings to light the persistent gaps in inclusion, participation, and the protection of the rights of women with disabilities, despite international commitments and national efforts. It reflects the voices and experiences of 244 women and gender-diverse individuals with disabilities across 23 countries in Africa, drawing on consultations and surveys conducted in collaboration with over 20 women-led organisations of women with disabilities.

Key Findings

The report underscores that women and girls with disabilities are still largely invisible in development policies, economic programs, and decision-making processes. Some of the key barriers identified include:

- **Socio-economic exclusion:** Women with disabilities face significantly higher rates of poverty compared to their male counterparts and women without disabilities. Data from 51 countries indicate that only 20% of women with disabilities are employed, compared to 30% of women without disabilities and 53% of men with disabilities.
- **Violence against women with disabilities:** Women and girls with disabilities experience gender-based violence at disproportionately higher rates, and in unique forms as compared to women without disabilities. It is estimated that 83% of women with disabilities will experience sexual violence in their lifetime. Unique forms of violence include forced sterilisation, forced contraception, and deprivation of basic necessities and mobility and sensory devices, exacerbated by systemic ableism and sexism.
- **Meaningful participation:** Despite being directly affected by policies, women with disabilities are rarely engaged in national and regional decision-making processes. Their voices are excluded from spaces addressing human rights, gender equality, and development.
- **Power and decision making:** Women with disabilities are underrepresented in politics due to societal discrimination, inaccessible environments, lack of resources and their de facto exclusion from legal gender quotas. They also encounter difficulties in being meaningfully included in disability rights spaces, which often prioritise male leadership. In some feminist spaces, women with disabilities may remain excluded due

to internalised ableism, with their concerns often overlooked or inadequately addressed.

The report reveals significant government failures in addressing the intersection of gender and disability. While global and regional frameworks exist, their implementation is weak. Of 31 gender-based violence policies analysed in the 2024 Policy review of GBV policies by MIW¹, two-thirds neglect women with disabilities, and only 6% include targeted measures. Women with disabilities are often excluded from economic empowerment, social protection, and leadership opportunities, with policies frequently lacking disaggregated data and failing to address their specific challenges.

Last, the report highlights that across all sectors (GBV policies, empowerment programmes, social services, electoral quotas, education), efforts continue to focus at best on non-gendered 'persons with disabilities' although the intersection of gender and disability is at the heart of the multiple and intersectional discrimination experienced by women and girls with disabilities. Each critical area analysed illustrates the serious shortcomings that prevent women and girls with disabilities from enjoying their rights and how little progress has been made since Beijing+25.



¹ Available on MIW Website at the [Leave no woman behind](#) page

Recommendations

To the African Union

Meaningfully and actively engage women with disabilities and their representative organisations, including their regional or pan African representative organisations, in the human rights and inclusive governance processes at the regional and global level.

Intensify the African Disability Protocol ratification campaign and urge all member states to ratify and implement it.

Encourage the remaining eleven member states (Botswana, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Egypt, Eritrea, Madagascar, Morocco, Niger, Somalia and Sudan) to ratify the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (the Maputo Protocol).

To Governments

Continue efforts to recognise women and girls with disabilities as diverse individuals facing multiple and intersectional discrimination, rather than as a gender-neutral "vulnerable group" or "persons with disabilities", with a view to better promoting inclusive policies that address both gender and disability and ensure the full protection of their rights.

Ratify and further domesticate the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Enhance programming and accountability by collecting data disaggregated by gender, age, and disability and perform intersectional analysis of data through the National Bureaus of Statistics.

Ensure both built environment and information accessibility to facilitate women with disabilities participation at the upcoming consultations such as the finalisation of the African Union Convention on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls and the Beijing+35 review process.

Take measures to ensure the inclusion and representation of women with disabilities in all their diversity, including those with invisible, psychosocial, and intellectual disabilities, as well as women with intersecting identities, such as Indigenous women with disabilities, in AU programme of work.

Consider involving women-led Organizations of Persons with Disabilities in any consultative council and commission discussing gender equality, human rights, women's rights and the rights of persons with disabilities.

Secure funding for targeted actions focusing on women with disabilities within mainstream programs aimed at supporting access to quality services.

Promote the political participation of women and girls with disabilities within national and local decision-making spaces, by implementing affirmative action measures such as legislated electoral quotas, and support leadership development programmes.

To the civil society organisations

Meaningfully and actively cooperate with women with disabilities and their representative organisations.

Adopt an intentional intersectional approach to women's rights and feminist questions and diversify leadership to include women with disabilities in their diversities.

Prioritise inclusion and accessibility from the initial stages of project design; hire women with disabilities for your staff and involve volunteers with disabilities; ensure that accessibility is a requirement for all activities.

Ensure women with disabilities are represented and given leadership roles in coordination spaces where gender equality, violence against women and other issues facing women are discussed and addressed.

