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Technology Supply & Provision

# Overcoming gender-related barriers to wheelchair services



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## Creating enabling environments for women and girls who use wheelchairs

Women and girls [1] who use wheelchairs experience multiple, intersecting barriers that limit their access to wheelchairs and wheelchair services. Socioeconomic status, insufficient educational opportunities, family and cultural contexts that stigmatize disability and limit the freedom of movement of women and girls, and the physical environment all contribute to reduced access to services and opportunities for inclusion for women and girls with disabilities. These key findings are based on the responses of more than 100 individuals from 91 wheelchair service providers to a survey on gender-related barriers to accessing wheelchair services circulated by Momentum Wheels for Humanity as part of the USAID-funded CLASP project.

### Strategies to address gender-related barriers to wheelchairs and wheelchair services

In 2020, Momentum Wheels for Humanity circulated a second survey and conducted key informant interviews with ten wheelchair service providers from nine countries to identify and compile promising practices that can inform more inclusive programming, awareness raising, and advocacy efforts. The findings from the surveys and interviews point to the importance of a holistic, multi-leveled, and participatory approach to ensure access for women and girls to wheelchair services, informed by a thorough understanding of the gender situation in their context. However, simply providing the wheelchair is not sufficient, women and girls who use wheelchairs require close and ongoing follow-up to link them to information, services, and opportunities. Education and economic development are two critical areas widely recognized among respondents as life-changing for women and girls who use wheelchairs. In parallel to promoting access to services, it is crucial to foster the empowerment of women and girls who use wheelchairs, both in using their assistive devices and in feeling confident to make decisions.

In addition to overcoming barriers by adapting and targeting comprehensive services to women and girls; interventions must also focus on the surrounding environment to support needed physical adaptations, strengthen support networks, and tackle social norms at the intersection of gender and disability. It is essential to engage and mobilize caregivers, families, and communities, including outreach workers and local leaders. Peer support mentors and networks can play an especially positive

role, helping women and girls who use wheelchairs to feel less alone, offering a safe space, and providing role models and success stories. Advocacy at different levels on inclusion and gender equality is a critical component. Partnerships with local Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs) as well as women's and youth groups to promote the rights of women and girls who use wheelchairs were viewed as an effective way to leverage efforts. Overall, it is key that women and girls with disabilities are viewed as partners throughout the design, implementation, and monitoring of wheelchair services.

“ I always try as much as possible to encourage and empower [girls] to make them feel like, ‘Yes, you can do it. You are capable of doing what you put your mind to doing. Don’t listen to people giving you the feedback that you’re not good enough.’

— CoRSU, Uganda

The findings and recommendations listed below are drawn from best practices that have been identified from service providers operating in diverse contexts and are supported by existing frameworks that informed the analysis, including the World Health Organization (WHO) 8-steps for wheelchair service provision [2], the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Gender Analysis Domains/Gender Dimensions Framework [3], Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Gender guidelines [4], IASC GBV guidelines [5], and IASC principles on Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA).



## Key Findings

### **Finding 1: Implement targeted services that promote safe access to appropriate wheelchair services for women and girls with disabilities**

- Conduct participatory, risk, and/or other relevant assessments to identify gender-related barriers to accessing wheelchair services and to inform the development of targeted approaches that address barriers
- Incorporate flexible, accessible, and safe service provision modalities, including community-based/mobile components and/or initiatives that facilitate access to center-based services
- Offer comprehensive, tailored services to each woman and girl with disabilities, and referrals to other services as needed, including health, protection, and mental health and psychosocial support
- Ensure that women service providers are available to facilitate women and girls' access to services, and that male staff are available to raise awareness with and engage men in activities on gender and disability

### **Finding 2: Create an enabling environment for women and girls who use wheelchairs by supporting and empowering their caregivers and families and engaging men as allies in positive gender norms**

- Raise the awareness of caregivers and families on how to support women and girls who use wheelchairs
- Offer psychosocial support services to caregivers and families and build their support networks with other caregivers and families
- Train and mobilize parent leaders on issues of gender and disability
- Increase men's engagement in supporting women and girls who use wheelchairs and addressing harmful social norms

### **Finding 3: Strengthen community capacities related to gender and disability and foster an inclusive environment**

- Raise community-level awareness to combat stigma regarding gender and disability
- Train and mobilize outreach workers, peer leaders, and relevant community leaders to support the identification and referral of women and girls with disabilities; community-led initiatives; and community-led advocacy
- Promote participation and representation of women and girls with disabilities in community structures

### **Finding 4: Build the capacity of providers to adapt services for women and girl who use wheelchairs and foster links with DPOs and women's groups**

- Train service providers, local partners, and government actors on gender and disability, accompanied by technical support, on-the-job supervision, and guidance resources
- Build gender focal points within different agencies and locations to support gender mainstreaming efforts, including development and use of gender mainstreaming checklists
- Support women's and youth groups and encourage them to be inclusive of women and girls with disabilities
- Facilitate linkages between women's groups, DPOs, and wheelchair service providers to promote coordinated efforts and advocacy for women and girls who use wheelchairs
- Promote gender representation and diversity within staffing of actors involved in wheelchair service provision, including women within DPO leadership
- Conduct internal gender reviews of staffing, policies, and organizational culture
- Ensure active PSEA and child safeguarding policies and systems with mechanisms



for reporting and links to services that are accessible for women and girls who use wheelchairs

### **Finding 5: Promote the empowerment of women and girls who use wheelchairs and their access to opportunities**

- Increase access to education and economic opportunities for women and girls who use wheelchairs
- Support inclusive education and work environments through physical adaptations and sensitization of teachers, school staff, and employers
- Promote inclusion through sports participation for women and girls who use wheelchairs
- Invest in leadership opportunities for women and girls who use wheelchairs
- Build the skills and confidence of women and girls in managing their wheelchairs

### **Finding 6: Promote women and girls who use wheelchairs as partners in programming and elevate their voices**

- Promote active participation and raise the voices of women and girls who use wheelchairs within program design, delivery, and monitoring
- Develop accountability mechanisms that are safe, accessible, and appropriate for women and girls who use wheelchairs and analyze access to, satisfaction with, and impact of wheelchair services
- Set gender-related objectives and outcomes and ensure wheelchair programming is gender-responsive, transformative, and working toward gender equality and inclusion

## **References**

1. Momentum did not receive sufficient data and responses that were representative of gender minorities. More data and research would be needed to determine additional comprehensive recommendations that would be effective for gender minorities.
2. WHO. *Guidelines on the Provision of Manual Wheelchairs in Less-Resourced Settings*. 2008. 8 steps: referral; assessment; prescription; funding and ordering; product preparation, fitting, and adjusting; user training; and follow-up and maintenance/repairs.
3. USAID. *ADS Chapter 205: Integrating Gender Equality and Female Empowerment in USAID's Program Cycle*. 2017.
4. IASC. *The Gender Handbook for Humanitarian Action*. 2017.
5. IASC. *Guidelines for Integrating Gender-Based Violence Interventions in Humanitarian Action*. 2015.

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