

Who Decides? We Decide!

# Key messages on disability and the right to bodily autonomy

## What is bodily autonomy?

Bodily autonomy is the ability to determine one's life and future, and have the information, services and means to do so free from discrimination, coercion and violence. In relation to sexual and reproductive health, it is the **power to make basic decisions about one's body and health, such as whether or not to have sex, use contraception or seek health care.**

Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) states that “persons with disabilities **enjoy legal capacity on an equal basis with others** in all aspects of life” and calls for **full access to the support they need to exercise this right.**








## More than half

of women with intellectual disabilities have been told they should not have a child.

Some women with disabilities are up to

**10 times**

more likely to experience sexual violence.



In a recent study, **20%** of women with disabilities had never used any sexual and reproductive health service.

Persons with disabilities make up **15%** of the world's population so must be included in any humanitarian response for the whole of society.



**Only 60%**

of young persons with disabilities believe that a wife has a right to refuse unprotected sex with her husband.



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### KEY MESSAGE

**Right to receive information and make decisions about your body, health and sexuality**

Women with disabilities, particularly intellectual disabilities, are subject to **forced sterilization, abortion and use of contraceptives** against their will because others say it is best for them.

Perpetrators can use the **denial of legal capacity** to permit these acts against women and girls with disabilities without their **consent**. Not only are their reproductive rights violated, but where victims are no longer at risk of getting pregnant, they are also made easier targets for sexual abusers.

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*According to the cultural and socially constructed beliefs I was brought up with, it is non-disabled women's responsibility to reproduce, and I, as a woman with disabilities, could not and should not reproduce.*

— Interviewee in Mexico, Disability Rights International, [Twice Violated](#).

Duty bearers and service providers should guarantee **free and informed consent** by educating persons with disabilities about the risks, benefits and alternatives of a particular action, treatment or service.



## 2 KEY MESSAGE

### Right to live a life free from violence

Women and young persons with disabilities are **more likely to face gender-based violence (GBV)** and disability-specific abuse, but are **less likely to have full and equal access to prevention and response services**.

Women and young persons with disabilities also experience controlling behaviours from intimate partners, caretakers or others that can be mistaken for protection, but in fact prevents them from exercising their right to bodily autonomy.

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*Empowering young people with disabilities with sexual and reproductive health and rights, knowledge and information is one of the keys to change.*

— Aniyamuzaala James Rwampigi, former president of the African Youth with Disabilities Network



## 3 KEY MESSAGE

### Right to access sexual and reproductive health information and services

Girls and young women with disabilities are often **excluded from comprehensive sexuality education** due to a perception that they do not need this information. This makes them more vulnerable to sexual abuse.

Not being able to address GBV when it is happening has **health consequences**. Young women with disabilities who are exposed to GBV have an **increased risk of acquiring HIV** or other sexually transmitted infections, and are more vulnerable to **unintended pregnancy**.



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*We [young persons with disabilities] are dreaming a lot about inclusion, about quality education. We are dreaming about human rights; we are dreaming about many things. But we know that we shall achieve that. People may say it is impossible, but I say it is possible and that the future is very bright.*

– Robert Ssewagudde, leader of a Ugandan disability rights advocacy group

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## KEY MESSAGE

### Right to a life without discrimination

**Negative attitudes** towards persons with disabilities are at the **root of discriminatory laws**, policies and practices. Social and gender norms underpin many behaviours that prevent the use of services that would improve health, realize rights and safeguard dignity.

Some social and gender norms deem women and young persons with disabilities incapable of making their own choices. **Addressing harmful social and gender norms** and discrimination will empower those left furthest behind, including persons with disabilities.

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## KEY MESSAGE

### Right to protection during crises

Women and girls with disabilities are more at risk before, during and after any disaster, conflict or emergency situation. **The impacts of crises on bodily autonomy are often worse for persons with disabilities.**

Although persons with disabilities need protection and access to services, most humanitarian assistance is **not currently designed or delivered in an inclusive way.**

Repeated and regular rape by multiple perpetrators is the most common form of GBV reported during humanitarian emergencies.

To learn more about how to take action and for sources of this document, please see:  
UNFPA (2021). *Advocacy brief on disability and the right to bodily autonomy.*

