



Women
With
Disabilities
Australia
(WWDA)

WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AUSTRALIA (WWDA)

Submission on International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

December 2023

PUBLISHING INFORMATION

Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) (2023). Submission regarding the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy: December 2023. Written by Clare Gibellini (Policy Officer) and Sophie Cusworth (Policy Manager), Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA): Hobart, Tasmania.

Acknowledgments

WWDA acknowledges the traditional owners of the land on which this publication was produced. We acknowledge First Nations people's deep spiritual connection to this land. We extend our respects to community members and Elders past, present and emerging.

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Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) receives part of its funding from the Australian Government, Department of Social Services (DSS).

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Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) has Special Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

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ABN: 23 627 650 121
ARBN: 621 534 307

ABOUT WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AUSTRALIA (WWDA)

[Women With Disabilities Australia \(WWDA\)](#) Inc is the national Disabled People's Organisation (DPO) and National Women's Alliance (NWA) for women, girls, feminine identifying, and non-binary people with disability in Australia. As a DPO and an NWA, WWDA is governed, run, and staffed by and for women, girls, feminine identifying and non-binary people with disability.

WWDA uses the term 'women and girls with disability', on the understanding that this term is inclusive and supportive of, women and girls with disability along with feminine identifying and non-binary people with disability in Australia.

WWDA represents more than 2 million women and girls with disability in Australia, has affiliate organisations and networks of women with disability in most States and Territories, and is recognised nationally and internationally for our leadership in advancing the rights and freedoms of all women and girls with disability. Our organisation operates as a transnational human rights organisation - meaning that our work, and the impact of our work, extends much further than Australia. WWDA's work is grounded in a human-rights based framework which links gender and disability issues to a full range of civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. All WWDA's work is based on co-design with and participation of our members. WWDA projects are all designed, governed, and implemented by women and girls with disability.

Disabled People's Organisations (DPOs), also referred to as Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) are recognised around the world, and in international human rights law, as self-determining organisations led by, controlled by, and constituted of, people with disability. DPOs/OPDs are organisations of people with disability, as opposed to organisations which may represent people with disability. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has clarified that States should give priority to the views of DPOs/OPDs when addressing issues related to people with disability. The Committee has further clarified that States should prioritise resources to organisations of people with disability that focus primarily on advocacy for disability rights and, adopt an enabling policy framework favourable to their establishment and sustained operation.¹

WWDA'S SUBMISSION

Introduction

1. Women With Disabilities Australia (**WWDA**) welcomes the opportunity to provide this submission to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (**DFAT**) to inform a new International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy.
2. WWDA commends the Australian Government on its commitment to advancing equity and rights for persons with disabilities globally. In particular, WWDA supports the Australian Government's commitment to:
 - a. ensuring disability equity and rights are central to Australia's development cooperation, humanitarian action and multilateral human rights engagement;
 - b. identifying priority areas where Australia can advance disability equity and rights, including through foreign policy and broader multilateral engagement (where appropriate and relevant); and
 - c. identifying performance measures by which the Australian Government will hold itself to account.
3. WWDA understands that DFAT is also developing an International Gender Equality Strategy, and supports its commitment to building clear connections between these new approaches and strategies, including through consultations with stakeholders and partners. For women and girls with disabilities, clear interaction between and consistency across the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy, International Gender Equality Strategy, and other strategies and approaches will be critical.
4. We set out our recommendations at the conclusion of this submission.

A human rights framework

5. At the outset, WWDA recommends that the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy is framed by, and operationalised within, a comprehensive human rights framework, consistent with Australia's obligations under the international human rights treaties to which Australia is a party, as well as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (**UNDRIP**). Australia must ensure that the purpose of the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy is to achieve equity, and give effect to the rights contained in these instruments. This means that the Strategy cannot merely promote awareness or inclusion for people with disabilities, but must operate specifically from a human rights framework.
6. As the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (**UN Special Rapporteur**) has stated, 'inclusive development cannot be effectively achieved in the absence

of a human rights framework... policy efforts should move away from the charitable and medical approaches towards a human rights-based approach to disability, where persons with disabilities are considered as rights holders, rather than as mere receivers of protection, rehabilitation and/or welfare'.²

7. As the Special Rapporteur has provided, establishing an inclusive policy framework involves three key aspects (referred to as the pre-conditions of inclusion):³

*First, the existence of a **non-discrimination** framework that prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in all areas of life and ensures that reasonable accommodation is provided to persons with disabilities. Second, **accessibility** is a requirement that must be set up to enable persons with disabilities to access and enjoy all programmes and services and to participate fully and independently in society. Third, the availability of **services and the provision of assistive devices** that support the autonomy and inclusion of persons with disabilities, allowing them to benefit from all policies and programmes on an equal basis with others.*

8. The Australian Government's Strategy must prioritise these pre-conditions.

An intersectional framework

9. WWDA also recommends that the Strategy be developed and operationalised within an intersectional framework. The Australian Government must prioritise the rights of women and girls with disabilities, and other cohorts of people with disabilities who experience overlapping forms of marginalisation. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises the significance of intersectional discrimination, particularly in relation to women and children with disabilities. Further, the UN Special Rapporteur has called on States to acknowledge the situation of the most marginalised groups of people with disabilities in the design and implementation of policies and programs, including:⁴

...women, youth, older persons, indigenous persons, persons with psychosocial disabilities, persons with intellectual disabilities, autistic persons and deaf-blind persons...To be inclusive, policies and programmes must respond to the needs of those heterogeneous groups.

10. As the UN Special Rapporteur has also stated:⁵

The participation of persons with disabilities is essential to ensure that they are both agents and beneficiaries of development aid. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals constitutes an excellent opportunity for ensuring that international cooperation is inclusive of and accessible to persons with disabilities. The promotion of gender equality is also a critical aspect to be included in disability-inclusive policies. Men and women with disabilities face different forms of exclusion and discrimination throughout their life cycle and expectations relating to their role within the family, school, workplace and the community also differ greatly and vary widely across countries. While many States have

adopted legal frameworks to guarantee equality of rights between women and men, as well as national gender action plans, only a few have taken concrete action to address the specific needs of women and girls with disabilities, to enhance their participation and to dismantle the barriers they face.

Priority areas

11. In developing its International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy, WWDA recommends that the Australian Government prioritise the following areas:

- a. **Segregation and discrimination:** Consistent with international human rights conventions, the Strategy must recognise the principles of equality and non-discrimination as foundational human rights. The Strategy must recognise that segregated systems, policies, practices and settings are a direct contravention of the CRPD, and are inconsistent with disability equity and disability rights. The Strategy must operate from a framework of non-discrimination.
- b. **Autonomy and decision-making:** The Strategy must recognise the legal capacity of people with disabilities as central to equality before the law. This includes the rights to human dignity, personal agency, and effective participation and inclusion in society and in decision-making processes.
- c. **Sexual and reproductive rights:** The Strategy must recognise sexual and reproductive rights as fundamental human rights, incorporating the right to dignity, equality, autonomy, privacy, freedom, and self-determination. It must recognise and address that regardless of country or context, no group has ever been as severely restricted, or negatively treated, in respect of their sexual and reproductive rights, as people with disabilities – particularly women and girls with disabilities.⁶
- d. **Freedom from violence:** The Strategy must address, and aim to eradicate, violence against people with disabilities in all its forms. This includes forms of violence that occur within domestic, residential and service settings, as well as forms of violence that are state-sanctioned or remain lawful or legitimised through policy.
- e. **Poverty:** The Strategy must address the disproportionate burden of poverty on people with disabilities, who are recognised as amongst the poorest of all groups in society. The Strategy must address the various manifestations of poverty, including lack of income and productive resources, hunger and malnutrition, ill-health, limited access to education and other basic services, homelessness and inadequate housing, unsafe environments, and social discrimination and exclusion.⁷
- f. **Climate change:** The Strategy must address the disproportionate impact of climate change on the human rights of people with disabilities, who have a global mortality

rate of up to four times that of people without disabilities in natural disasters.⁸ Research from the United Nations indicates that only 20% of people with disabilities can evacuate immediately and without difficulty in the event of a sudden disaster; the remainder can only do so with a degree of difficulty and 6% are not able to do so at all.⁹ When able to evacuate, people with disabilities continue to face additional barriers, including violence and discrimination (and a heightened risk of sexual violence in public shelters), separation from support systems, and loss of critical assistive technology.¹⁰

- g. **Access to assistive technology and support services:** The Strategy must promote access to assistive technologies and support services that facilitate active and meaningful participation of people with disabilities in the community and in decision-making processes. This recognises that services and assistive devices are a pre-condition to inclusivity and equity.

12. In order to ensure that the Strategy is effective, WWDA recommends that the Australian Government prioritise the following:

- a. **Participation of people with disabilities:** Ensure genuine and effective participation of people with disabilities and their representative organisations in the development of policies, programs and initiatives. This is discussed in greater detail below.
- b. **Policy and program development:** Promote the development of policies, programs and initiatives that centre and address the unique needs of women and girls with disabilities and other minoritised cohorts.
- c. **Investment in capacity building:** Invest in capacity building and training programs for government, services and community to enhance their understanding of the rights of people with disabilities. Simultaneously, invest in building the capacity of individuals with disabilities and their representative organisations to understand, assert and enforce their rights.
- d. **Targeted efforts in key areas of life:** Prioritise initiatives that promote improved outcomes for people with disabilities in relation to health, the justice system, employment, education, and access to services. This includes by implementing initiatives to promote literacy (including digital and financial literacy).
- e. **Collaboration on international and community levels:** Collaborate with civil society and other States to promote the rights of people with disabilities, support and resource community-based initiatives, and promote the engagement and participation of people with disabilities within global events.

- f. **Targeted and intersectional data collection:** Address, as a priority, the current data gaps relating to specific ‘at risk’ population groups within the disability community, and the dearth of data on the lives of women and girls with disabilities.
- g. **Accountability:** Ensure that the Strategy is accompanied by strong and effective mechanisms for accountability, with measurable and tangible outcomes and transparent reporting.

How can DFAT support the role of, and partner with, organisations of persons with disabilities?

13. Through its *General Comment 7*, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has clearly articulated the duty of States parties to actively involve people with disability, through their representative organisations, including those representing women and children with disability, in the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the Convention and in other decision-making processes.¹¹ The CRPD Committee has clarified that States should give priority to the views of DPOs when addressing issues related to people with disability. The Committee has further clarified that States should prioritise allocating resources to organisations of people with disability that focus primarily on advocacy for disability rights and adopt an enabling policy framework favourable to their establishment and sustained operation. As the UN Special Rapporteur has made clear, the structural barriers that exclude people with disabilities cannot be addressed without the direct involvement and participation of persons with disabilities. This, as the UN Special Rapporteur has stated, ‘requires a profound change in the way many States, development agencies and other organisations currently operate worldwide’.¹²
14. Further, as the Committee has acknowledged, ‘the active and informed participation of everyone in decisions that affect their lives and rights is consistent with the human rights-based approach in public decision-making processes, and ensures good governance and social accountability’.¹³ The right of all people to participate in public life is also enshrined in a number of international human rights instruments, to which the Australian Government is a party. For example, participation in public life as a principle and human right is recognised in article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, article 5 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, articles 12 and 23 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as both a general obligation and a cross-cutting issue, including in articles 4 and 33. The Australian Government must recognise and give effect to the right to participate in public life, including through adequate allocation of funding and resources for community sector organisations that are led by and represent minoritised cohorts, to facilitate participation.
15. This requires that DFAT actively engage and consult with organisations of persons with disabilities (**OPDs**), also known as Disabled People’s Organisations (**DPOs**), in the development,

implementation, and evaluation of all policies and programs related to disability and international development. Disabled People's Organisations and Disability Representative Organisations play a critical role in elevating the voices of people with disability who may not otherwise have the opportunity to influence policy or program design or reform. However, these organisations must be adequately funded and resourced to participate and engage with the communities they represent, in order to effectively ascertain and represent their priorities. This requires that DFAT provide robust support for the organisational capacity of DPOs, including through funding programs and resources for capacity-building initiatives, project management, advocacy, and strategic planning. As the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has stated, 'full and effective participation requires that States parties facilitate participation and consult with persons with disabilities representing the wide diversity in impairments. The right to participate is a civil and political right and an obligation of immediate application, not subject to any form of budgetary restriction...'.¹⁴

16. Establishing grant programs that specifically cater to DPOs/OPDs can further empower them to address specific needs within their communities, enhancing their ability to drive positive change. On-the-ground engagement with community is a critical step in ensuring that representative organisations can act as a conduit between community and government. However, consultation and engagement is resource-intensive, particularly when working with minoritised cohorts. For example, in order to ensure that community engagement is accessible to people with disability with a range of impairments, Disabled People's Organisations and Disability Representative Organisations must take additional steps to arrange appropriate supports, and provide events, materials and information in various formats and languages and various locations and settings. Engaging with people with disability in closed settings or remote locations, or people who do not or are unable to participate in online events, requires additional resourcing, including travel. For people who have had negative and/or traumatising experiences with governments and authorities, organisations must also invest in building trust. Genuine engagement is also time-intensive. Many representative organisations are required to respond to competing demands across government departments, with strict time constraints. Disabled People's Organisations in particular, which are led by people with disability, often face additional barriers to meeting inflexible time constraints, due to fluctuations in staff health. DFAT must ensure that it provides adequate time and resourcing for the critical work of DPOs.
17. DFAT should also play a role in advocating for the inclusion of disability perspectives in mainstream international policies and agreements. Working closely with DPOs, DFAT can ensure that international development initiatives explicitly consider the rights and needs of persons with disabilities, contributing to a more inclusive global agenda. This should include by facilitating networking opportunities and collaboration between DPOs, government agencies, non-government organisations, and international organisations. Creating a supportive ecosystem for knowledge sharing and joint initiatives fosters a collaborative environment that can lead to more comprehensive and impactful initiatives.

18. DFAT must also ensure that its information and communication is accessible to people with disabilities with a wide range of impairments. This involves providing materials in accessible formats, utilising inclusive communication methods, and incorporating universal design principles in public outreach. DFAT should support and invest in innovative projects and technologies that enhance the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities, and work with DPOs to identify and implement solutions that address specific challenges faced by their communities. Establishing regular dialogues and feedback mechanisms between DFAT and OPDs is essential for maintaining ongoing collaboration and participation.
19. Ultimately, DFAT should ensure a participatory approach by implementing the United Nations' Key Considerations for Meaningful Consultation when engaging with Disabled People's Organisations (or Organisations of Persons with Disabilities):¹⁵
- a. OPDs should be consulted through a variety of appropriate, context specific methodologies;*
 - b. OPDs should be engaged as partners in the planning, design and implementation of consultations;*
 - c. OPDs should be adequately supported for their participation, including through timely information, capacity building and funding;*
 - d. Consultations should aim to engage with the diversity of the population of persons with disabilities and consider intersectionality;*
 - e. Consultations should be accessible and reasonable accommodation needs to be provided;*
 - f. Consultations should be safe, empowering, respectful and not tokenistic;*
 - g. Consultations should be based on transparency, meaningful dialogue and good faith;*
 - h. Knowledge and learning generated by consultations should be taken into account and outcomes should be shared with OPDs.*

What are the biggest challenges to and opportunities for advancing disability equity and rights?

20. There are a number of challenges to advancing disability equity and rights in an international context, including pervasive ableism and discrimination, the segregation of people with disabilities from the broader community, and inadequate legal protections for people with disabilities. Access to quality education, healthcare, and open employment also remain global

concerns for people with disabilities, alongside significant economic disparities.

21. Political instability, conflict and climate crises are also both key priority areas for, and challenges to, the promotion of disability rights. It is increasingly clear that the impacts of climate change and other crises expose existing inequalities, and that those who face the greatest levels of risk in times of crisis are those who face the highest inequality in everyday life. Inadequate infrastructure and evacuation measures may not account for the specific needs of individuals with disabilities, and environmental changes (such as rising sea levels or extreme weather patterns) or displacement can disrupt access to healthcare, essential services, and assistive technology. A lack of accessible information, accessibility in evacuation, response, and recovery efforts, and exclusion of disability issues in planning and preparedness, means that people with disability are also at higher risk of injury and death. However, Articles 9, 11 and 14 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (**CRPD**) clearly stipulate that governments have a duty to ensure that people with disabilities have the information and supports they need to stay safe and protected in situations of risk.¹⁶
22. Amidst these challenges, there are also opportunities. International collaboration and advocacy provide a platform for States and civil society to champion inclusive policies, and innovations in relation to technology and assistive technology provide for greater accessibility, participation and inclusion. Greater human rights literacy among people with disabilities and their representative organisations provides a pathway to the assertion and enforcement of disability rights on a global scale. Simultaneously, as the UN Special Rapporteur has noted, the policy reviews associated with adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presents a unique opportunity for States ‘to include persons with disabilities adequately across all policies and programmes, as well as to ensure policy coherence and intersectoral coordination’.¹⁷

Recommendations

1. Ensure that the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy is framed by, and operationalised within, a comprehensive human rights framework consistent with Australia’s obligations under the international human rights treaties to which Australia is a party, as well as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (**UNDRIP**), formally endorsed by Australia in 2009.
2. Ensure that the International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy is framed by and operationalised within an intersectional framework and is responsive to the unique needs of different cohorts of people with disabilities, including those at greatest risk and who experience overlapping forms of marginalisation.
3. Implement the recommendations of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in its *General comment No. 7 on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organisations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention*.¹⁸ This includes recommendations in

relation to funding and capacity building for Disabled People's Organisations and Disability Representative Organisations; establishing and regulating accessible consultation mechanisms; and adopting and implementing policies to ensure that people with disabilities can exercise their right to be consulted and participate in public decision-making.

4. Establish transparent and accessible accountability mechanisms that provide oversight of and reporting on the measures to systematically address disability rights and equity under the Strategy.
5. Establish a Disability Equity and Rights Oversight Council or other advisory group made up of people with disabilities to oversee the development, implementation and monitoring of the Strategy and compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
6. Commit to, and invest in, further implementation of the *Pacific Framework for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: 2016 -2025*.
7. Implement the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the rights of persons with disabilities in relation to developing and implementing disability inclusive policies:
 - a. *Mainstream the rights and needs of persons with disabilities into all policies and programmes and ensure specific programmes and services for needs that cannot be covered by mainstream programmes;*
 - b. *Ensure a human rights-based approach to disability in the design, implementation and evaluation of all policies and programmes;*
 - c. *Ensure the active involvement and participation of persons with disabilities and their representative organizations in the design, implementation and evaluation of all policies and programmes;*
 - d. *Integrate a gender perspective in such policies and programmes, addressing the intersectionality of discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities;*
 - e. *Establish a clear policy framework that prohibits all forms of discrimination on the basis of disability and guarantees to persons with disabilities equal and effective legal protection against discrimination on all grounds;*
 - f. *Ensure the provision of reasonable accommodation in all programmes, services and interventions, establishing a dedicated funding mechanism for government entities;*
 - g. *Establish a comprehensive policy framework on accessibility, including national accessibility standards and enforcement mechanisms;*
 - h. *Establish a policy framework to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to assistive technologies and support services that are available, accessible, adequate and*

affordable, and provided under a community-based approach;

- i. Ensure free access to assistive technologies and support services for the poor, as part of the State universal health coverage and social protection systems;*
- j. Establish an intersectoral policy framework for the inclusion of persons with disabilities across all sectors and at all levels of governance and consider implementing specific national action plans on accessibility, assistive devices and support services;*
- k. Develop disability-related indicators to assess adequately the impact of all policies and programmes on persons with disabilities;*
- l. Incorporate the short set of questions formulated by the Washington Group on Disability Statistics in all national surveys and censuses to collect data disaggregated on the basis of disability;*
- m. Allocate funds to all public entities to make their policies, programmes and services progressively available, accessible and inclusive of persons with disabilities;*
- n. Encourage international cooperation actors to support disability inclusive policies and programmes and refrain from supporting any policy, programme or practice that is inconsistent with the rights of persons with disabilities.*

ENDNOTES

¹ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *General Comment No. 7 on the Participation of Persons with Disabilities, Including Children with Disabilities, through Their Representative Organizations, in the Implementing and Monitoring of the Convention*, UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/7 (9 November 2018).

² Devandas-Aguilar, C. (2016) Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the rights of persons with disabilities, UN Doc No. A/71/314.

³ Devandas-Aguilar, C. (2016) Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the rights of persons with disabilities, UN Doc No. A/71/314.

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⁸ Stein P.J., Stein M.A., (2022) Climate change and the right to health of people with disabilities. *Lancet Glob Health*. 10(1):e24-e25.

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¹⁰ Stein, P.J., & Stein, M.A. (2022). Disability, Human Rights, and Climate Justice. *Human Rights Quarterly* 44(1), 81-110.

¹¹ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, General comment No. 7 (2018) on the participation of persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations, in the implementation and monitoring of the Convention, UN Doc No. CRPD/C/GC/7.

¹² Devandas-Aguilar, C. (2016) Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the rights of persons with disabilities, UN Doc No. A/71/314.

¹³ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *General Comment No. 7 on the Participation of Persons with Disabilities, Including Children with Disabilities, through Their Representative Organizations, in the Implementing and Monitoring of the Convention*, UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/7 (9 November 2018).

¹⁴ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *General Comment No. 7 on the Participation of Persons with Disabilities, Including Children with Disabilities, through Their Representative Organizations, in the Implementing and Monitoring of the Convention*, UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/7 (9 November 2018).

¹⁵ United Nations Executive Office of the Secretary-General. (2021) United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy: Consulting Persons with Disabilities.

¹⁶ UN General Assembly (2007) [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#). United Nations General Assembly. A/RES/61/106.

¹⁷ Devandas-Aguilar, C. (2016) Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the rights of persons with disabilities, UN Doc No. A/71/314.

¹⁸ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, *General Comment No. 7 on the Participation of Persons with Disabilities, Including Children with Disabilities, through Their Representative Organizations, in the Implementing and Monitoring of the Convention*, UN Doc CRPD/C/GC/7 (9 November 2018).