

Countering Policy Exclusions: Canada, disability, and international commitments Part 2

Event Description

On May 12, 2025, from 12:30-2:00pm ET, the [Live Work Well Research Centre](#) (LWWRC) and Dr. Leah Levac's Canada Research Chair in Critical Community Engagement and Public Policy co-sponsored a panel on Zoom. Attendees joined host Deborah Stienstra along with four panelists to discuss their roles in five international commitments: the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Beijing +30, Global Disability Summit, and the G7 ministers' meeting on inclusion and disability. The panelists discussed their individual and organizational contributions to these commitments, as well as the persisting gaps and next steps to continue improving the inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in Canada and internationally.

- **Host:** Deborah Stienstra
- **Panelists:** Maureen Haan, Neil Belanger, Marijke De Pauw, Bonnie Brayton
- **Note taker:** Catherine Hall

Round 1 of Questions

Speaker(s): Deborah, Maureen, Neil, Marijke, Bonnie

Could you give one example of where you have been active at the international level recently and what the implications are of the event results or conclusions for disability rights and justice especially for women and girls with disabilities in Canada? In this context, what are one or two policy actions you think the new federal government should undertake to address these conclusions? How are women and gender-diverse people with disabilities providing leadership in these areas?

Maureen's response:

- She was present for the 2024 G7 meeting in Italy, where the disability minister was tasked to create a Charter to support disability in G7 countries.
- The Charter supports independent living, inclusive education, decent employment and working conditions, inclusion for youth with disability in sports, cultural and recreational activities, and emergency preparation and disaster risk management.
- The Charter advocates for shift in policy making to ensure the disability community is engaged in the policy making.
- Work inclusion is an important part of the Charter, which calls out the role of public, private profit, and non-profit industries to include people with disabilities, but there is not a lot of focus specifically on women and girls with disabilities and how they should be included in the workplace.
- Initially they didn't have a benchmark on the current levels of inclusion or a way to measure improvements over time, but the CCRW has received funding from Accessibility Standards Canada (ASC) to help support this.

Neil's response:

- Began by acknowledging the Indigenous territories he is residing on and Steven Estey, Ellen Cohen
- IDC/BCANDS has been involved with international work related to disability for a number of years in a variety of capacities including:
 - Holding international consultative status with United Nations' Economic and Social Council;
 - Is the only Canadian organization to hold observer status with the European Association of Service Providers with Persons with Disabilities;
 - Works closely with the community of officials on human rights and special rapporteurs as it pertains to disability in Canada.
- IDC/BCANDS is very involved with the CRPD, including the first review in 2017 and the second review in March 2025.
- Delays from COVID-19 gave about 60 organizations 5 years to make recommendations for the CRPD, which they collected from 23 different shadow reports.
- In Geneva, many key issues were identified including:
 - Lack of close consultation and active involvement by marginal groups
 - Persistent discrimination
 - Women and girls are experiencing disproportionate rates of poverty, barriers to housing, lack of financial resources, etc.
 - Limited representation in political advocacy leadership positions in public life

- Lack of culturally appropriate services
- Lack of disability awareness campaigns to combat ableism and stigma
- Lack of accessibility within communities
- Track 2 MAID
- Specific goals were also identified including:
 - Removal of Track 2 MAID
 - Review the Canadian Disability Benefit
 - Revamp non-insured benefits to include emergency funding to escape abusive relationships mandate to include representation from women from disabilities
 - Provide civil society with the resources necessary to do the work of monitoring the conventions.

Marijke's response:

- Humanity and Inclusion Canada was at the Global Disability Summit, where a framework was designed to close the gap between disability inclusion and development cooperation.
- The Global Disability Summit resulted in 800 new commitments to disability inclusion.
- Girls and women with disabilities are at risk of being erased once again and there is necessity for cross-movement engagement and allyship.
- Canada was not able to make new commitments, but it is necessary to take stock of implementation of current commitments and fulfill current commitments before next summit.
- There was also a political declaration which echoed the call for the need for 15% of humanitarian assistance, and development funding allocated to mainstream inclusion of persons with disabilities.
- Closer look at the declaration revealed that there is little focus on the diversity of people with disabilities—including women and girls with disabilities.
- It will be important for Canada to accept the declaration and to look at how funding will impact specifically women and girls with disabilities.

Bonnie's response:

- In collaboration between DAWN Canada and IDC/BCANDS, a report was developed for Canada's presentation before the CEDAW committee, which highlighted some key areas including:
 - The over-representation of Indigenous women in federal incarceration
 - Barriers to education employment, housing, and services

- Implementation of and recommendations from the missing and murdered women's inquiries
- Systemic barriers including high rates of victimization and poor access to healthcare for women with disabilities
- Track 2 MAID
- The disproportional impact of COVID-19 on women with disabilities, who faced higher rates of infection, mortality, and violence during the shelter-in-place policies
- DAWN also participated at Beijing +30 and attempted to organize with other organizations and advocates, although this is challenging to do at the UN.
- There was an incredibly powerful and very positive presence of Indigenous women from around the world.
- Bonnie made two policy recommendations: (1) targeted spending and meaningful use of data to address intersectional inequalities and (2) an ethical review of the expansion of MAID.

Round 2 of Questions

Speaker(s): Deborah, Neil

Given the setbacks and barriers for women and girls with disabilities in Canada, why do you keep working at the international level? What can come from this work?

Neil's response:

- A lot of good people doing a lot of good work, but that doesn't always translate to change in Canada.
- Discrimination against women and girls with disabilities is quite significant and although there is some improvement, there is so much more needed.
- A "Me first" attitude has had significant impacts on Canada and hinders positive change.
- In this election, people who were supportive of people with disabilities either didn't run or were not elected, which makes it necessary to find new people to push the disability agenda.
- IDC/BCANDS never saw themselves moving to this level of international commitments, but felt the need to in order to help address many of the ongoing problem areas in Canada including poverty, lack of affordable housing, and lack of employment opportunities.

- It is necessary to continue at the international level and acknowledge when Canada is doing well and push for us to return to a level where we're making significant improvements.

Speaker(s): Deborah, Bonnie

How are you using increased knowledge and data about the situations of women and girls with disabilities to press for change in Canadian and international contexts?

Bonnie's response:

- Canada is supposed to be supporting the leadership and capacity of women and girls with disabilities.
- Ableism is still an issue, even within the human rights community.
- DAWN was part of the National Action Plan planning, but not one province or territory mentioned women and girls with disabilities as a commitment.
- DAWN has also been involved with dozens of Supreme Court interventions.
- Most of their mission work is unfunded by the government and they must do projects that are aligned with government priorities.
- DAWN has four pillars: research, education, policy, and advocacy and works collaboratively with other organizations.
 - Good example: Accessibility Standards Canada have contracted DAWN to work on standards for women in prisons
 - Have also partnered with the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies.
- There needs to be a shift in the disability community and how they handle intersectionality.

Speaker(s): Deborah, Marijke

What are some concrete actions that can be taken to include both gender and disability in Canada's international development assistance policies?

Marijke's response:

- One commitment that Canada has submitted but not made progress with is the participation of people with disabilities and their organizations in developing, reviewing, and implementing Canada's international development and humanitarian assistance policies.

- Should specifically focus on inclusion of women with disabilities and their organizations.
- Need to have accessible ways of providing feedback and funding for accommodations.
- Secondly, gender and disability require more than a check box exercise. Often disability for example is included in a long list of other at-risk groups, but that's really insufficient to have impact.
- Intersectional frameworks need to be reviewed and implemented appropriately, especially for women and girls with disabilities.
- Need significant funding for specific projects and programs that target gender and disability and their intersection.
- Need long-term funding for women-led OPDs that isn't just project-based.
- Funding should also be available for organizations of women and girls with disabilities that are not registered.
- Need measurable targets and ways of tracking improvement of inclusion of people/women and girls with disabilities.

Speaker(s): Deborah, Maureen

How should civil society organize itself to hold the federal government accountable on its international commitments related to disability and work specifically for women and girls with disabilities?

Maureen's response:

- Reading and understanding the commitments Canada has made, and how Canada understands and interprets their commitment.
- Finding people who align with your commitments. Who is missing from this group? How are women and girls with disabilities represented in these conversations?
- Performing is where the focus should be now that we're aware of what we want
 - Who does what? Who needs to be engaged?
 - Need to foster a relationship with the federal government, which includes making sure women are leading.
- One thing CCRW has done is to build measurement within their funding requests.
 - One example is Accessibility Standards Canada, where their technical committees are intentionally measured for intersectional representation.

Question & Answer Period

Speaker(s): Participant 1, Bonnie, Marijke

Participant 1: I would like to know, for example, regarding the international level, how would your organizations be interacting with civil society organizations of persons with disabilities in the Global South for example during those summits like the Global Summit and how are the exchanges and collaborations?

Bonnie's response:

- DAWN is aligned with the Global Forum on the Leadership of Women with Disabilities (GFLWD).
- Makes up a strong network with an international network of women with disabilities leaders who have been meeting for over 10 years.
- Many organizations meet informally at other international meetings.
- Hopeful that with a new government, the feminist international assistance policy is actually focused on the women who most need it.

Marijke's response:

- Humanity & Inclusion (HI) tries to support organizations of persons with disabilities including women-led organizations.
- Can support by providing financial support for local partners to be present and join the conversations or by participating in side events and echoing their calls and their priorities.
- Immense funding cuts are having large impacts on international organizations, but also on local organizations.

Speaker(s): Participant 2, Neil, Maureen

Participant 2: Does Canada have a sort of formal national level—a grouping of ODPs and CSOs that meet regularly and can speak with a united voice?

Neil's response:

- There is an informal network called the National Disability Network, but it's certainly not reflective of all organizations.
- The concept has been around for a while, but it is still developing.
- Designed to look at common interests and priorities and present ideas to the government from the network, but not necessarily representative of the disability community.

Maureen's response:

- The network is around community of practice, not necessarily decision making.
- It does not receive funding.

Speaker(s): Participant 3, Bonnie, Marijke

Participant 3: Back in Uganda where I come from, I also noticed that many of women with disabilities struggle especially with issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). So in a medical sense, we have health practitioners that are supposed to be helping when it comes to issues of childbirth, but they end up discriminating against them and stigmatizing them. We have many women who go through issues of sexual violence as women with disabilities. My question is, in SHSR have there been instances where any other panelists maybe have worked with healthcare professionals and created allies with them to support women and disabilities and how did they go about it?

Bonnie's response:

- Women with disabilities and their sexual and reproductive health and rights are not represented at all.
- The myth that women with disabilities do not need access to sexual reproductive health continues in an international context and in the Canadian context.
- DAWN Canada is going to be working with the Public Health Agency of Canada to update their resources.

Marijke's response:

- Working with healthcare professionals is really important.
- Awareness-raising sessions and capacity building is really important, especially with healthcare professionals, policy makers, and disability organizations.
- Gathering data and being able to measure the impact of the interventions is also important.

Speaker(s): Participant 4, Participant 5, Maureen, Neil, Marijke, Bonnie

Participant 4: I live in Haiti, where the situation is truly chaotic. We have no parliament, and the government is also unstable. In this context, what concrete techniques can we use to effectively continue our advocacy and lobbying for the rights of women and girls with disabilities? Techniques that are truly adapted to our reality?

Participant 5: Liberals promised justice for people with disabilities, is there news on the process? Also how are Canada's geographic provincial/university vacuums of disappearing disability systemic leadership and expertise being addressed?

Maureen's response:

- Mentorship is hugely important and hopefully the network will someday be able to foster this mentorship. Often people stay in roles much longer due to lack of plans for succession.
- Need intergenerational leadership.

Neil's response:

- We should be encouraging civil societies to be advocates and to include youth.
- Without a functioning government, it is necessary to rely on each other and share resources among ourselves.

Marijke's response:

- One strategy for doing advocacy in contexts like Haiti's is to build cross-sector alliances and across different advocacy movements.
- Engage with community leaders to ensure there is local buy-in, not just at the national level.
- Leverage international organizations and networks because it minimizes risk for local actors.

Bonnie's response:

- In Haiti it will be important to lean into each other and build on existing support groups.
- State parties are not something you can rely on for change in the current context in Haiti.
- Focus on the community where you are first and foremost and go after small wins in the community.
- Within the Canadian context, she hopes the new prime minister will see the importance and value of the 30% of people with disabilities in Canada.