

# **Disability is a Gender Issue**

**How Feminist Disabled Leaders Are Shaping a More Just, Inclusive Future Amid Anti-Rights Challenges**

**Trend Report 2026**

**WOMEN ENABLED INTERNATIONAL**

## **This Document Is Critical for You—Right Now.**

*"Today more than ever, everything is a race, gender, AND disability issue!"*

— **Maryangel García-Ramos**, Executive Director, Women Enabled International.

At this critical moment of sustained global attacks on democracy, human rights, and gender equality, strategic action is urgently needed. At Women Enabled International—the leading global organization at the intersection of gender and disability—we know that feminist disabled leaders, who represent 1 in 5 women worldwide, are vital to building and sustaining a future rooted in democratic values and gender justice.

The six anti-rights and anti-democratic trends analyzed in this report depict a human rights and gender equality landscape in crisis. Coupled with systemic exclusion and historic underfunding, rights at the intersection of gender and disability have been severely impacted. Despite these challenges, feminist disabled leaders are on the front lines, fighting back and mobilizing across movements.

For the first time ever, a trend report centers feminist disabled leaders. And WEI will continue to center these bold changemakers, because their voices and vision are essential to sustaining a future where democracy, human rights, and gender equality thrive.

# Getting Started: Situating Current Trends Within the Broader Picture

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## 5 Historic patterns impacting rights at the intersection of gender and disability\*

1. **Systematic deprioritization** of gender and disability rights in policymaking, leading to stalled disability-inclusive legal reforms and weak implementation of existing laws.
2. **Discrimination and social exclusion** limit access to decision-making spaces, healthcare, education, and employment.
3. **High rates of gender-based violence** and a lack of disability-inclusive survivor support services.
4. **Denial of bodily autonomy**, including substituted decision making for sexual and reproductive health-related decisions and limited access to sexual and reproductive health care.
5. **Minimal support services** for independent living in the community.

\*Source: WEI's Survey on the Work at the Intersection of Gender and Disability in 2025

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# Summary of Key Trends and Impacts

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## Democracy, Interrupted

Democratic systems and human rights systems continue to be dismantled worldwide.

- Executive Power Abused to Weaken Disability Rights
- Repression of Disabled Leaders
- Armed Conflicts Fuel Democratic Erosion

## Gender Equality as a Primary Battleground

The backlash on the rights of women, girls, and gender-diverse people is a central tactic of anti-rights and anti-democratic groups.

- Rollback and Progress Blocked

## Turning Tools of Justice into Tools of Harm

Anti-rights and anti-democratic groups make strategic use of the human rights frameworks and institutions to dismantle them from the inside and build alternative anti-rights frameworks.

- Disability Rights Instrumentalized
- Systems of Protection Defunded

## Gender as Colonialism

Gender rights—and the work of gender equality actors—are being denounced as a modern form of colonialism that threatens national values, security, and sovereignty.

- Feminist Disabled Leaders as Foreign Threats
- Co-Opting Disability Rights to Block Abortion

## Rising Conflict, Shrinking Rights

Armed conflicts are accelerating the erosion of democracy and human rights amid surging military spending and the near-exclusion of women from peace processes.

- Conflicts as Mass Disabling Events
- Conflicts Drive Gendered Rights Violations

## **Shifting Priorities, Expanding Harm**

Militarization, risk aversion, and austerity gain ground even among gender and democracy champions, further jeopardizing the rights of women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities.

- Militarization Diverts Rights Funding
- Austerity Erodes Essential Services

## **Core Tactics: How Feminist Disabled Leaders Are Fighting Back**

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- Organizing for Collective Power
- Proactive Monitoring and Early Response
- Driving Cultural Narrative Change
- Defending and Expanding Abortion Access
- Inclusive Approaches to Humanitarian Action
- Collective Action Across Movements
- Mobilizing Global Mechanisms for Justice

## Trend 01: Democracy, Interrupted

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Democratic systems and human rights frameworks continue to be dismantled worldwide, amid declining support for democracy, deepening social divisions, and armed conflicts.

A growing number of democratically elected leaders and autocrats are intensifying their efforts to erode democratic systems and dismantle human rights frameworks and mechanisms, particularly those related to gender and disability rights. The power and influence of these actors—long in operation—are reinforced by declining support for democracy and deepening social divisions, amid an unprecedented global surge in armed conflicts.

### The Big Picture

Across the globe, authoritarian leadership gains appeal amid growing dissatisfaction with democratic institutions and their ability to deliver essential public goods, services, and key social and economic outcomes.

- Only **7 in 100 people** worldwide live in countries where "fundamental freedoms are broadly respected."
- Freedom continues to decline—it has been doing so for **20 straight years**.

## What does this mean for gender and disability rights and justice?

**Key Impact 1: Executive Power Abused to Weaken Rights.** Rights for people with and without disabilities are increasingly restricted through Executive Orders or similar instruments intended to bypass and weaken legislative and judicial oversight.

*"The political situations in various countries of the [Americas] have led to setbacks in the rights of persons with disabilities, with women with disabilities being the most disadvantaged." — Gender and disability advocate, Central America.*

**Key Impact 2: Repression of Disabled Leaders.** Increasingly, autocratic governments are escalating repression of activists and political opposition, including feminist disabled leaders, to create a chilling atmosphere and silence dissent.

*"The rollback of disability rights...—driven by wider democratic backsliding that has narrowed civic space and created a political climate hostile to human rights—is also evident in the targeted repression and intimidation of disability rights activists, including women with disabilities." — Gender and disability advocates, Caucasus region.*

**Key Impact 3: Armed Conflicts Fuel Democratic Erosion.** The global surge in armed conflicts—and violence by armed militias and criminal organizations—deepens democratic erosion and disproportionately impacts women, girls, and gender diverse people with disabilities, and the work of feminist disabled leaders.

*"Being a human rights defender in an area under rebel occupation has greatly constrained my work... [This] has reduced civic space, limited freedom of movement, and made rights-based advocacy more sensitive and challenging." — Gender and disability advocate, Central Africa.*

## How are feminist disabled leaders fighting back?

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Despite these unprecedented attacks and risks, feminist disabled leaders are training and organizing women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities to collectively push back against anti-democratic and anti-rights forces.

### **Core tactic: Organizing for Collective Power**

- "We trained 500 women with disabilities and caregivers on political advocacy and feminist activism." — Gender and disability advocate, Central America.
- "I established the Women with Disability Watch, which trains women on their rights and the legal instruments that protect them against harm." — Gender and disability advocate, West Africa.

## Trend 02: Gender Equality as a Primary Battleground

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The backlash on the rights of women, girls, and gender diverse people—with and without disabilities—is a central tactic of anti-rights and anti-democratic groups.

Anti-democratic leaders are part of a broader and increasingly coordinated ecosystem of actors that frame gender equality and human rights as social threats. This narrative deepens social polarization and fuels public support for authoritarian leaders who claim to confront these "threats" by rolling back—or blocking progress on—rights at the intersection of gender and disability.

### The Big Picture

Increasingly coordinated and well-funded far-right actors are mobilizing against the rights of women, girls, and gender-diverse people—with and without disabilities—as a key tactic to advance their agendas. Their most recent tools: **Social media and Artificial Intelligence.**

*"The unchecked spread of misogyny... and digitally enabled hate are corroding not just women's rights—but society at large."*

**Their impact: Rollback and progress blocked on gender equality.**

- **1 in 4 countries** reported stalling or reversing progress on gender equality over the past 5 years.

## Rollback and Progress Blocked

In many countries, anti-rights groups are dismantling legal and policy frameworks that, while imperfect, provided a basic level of human rights protection for women, girls, and gender diverse people with disabilities.

- In the **United States**, anti-rights groups are pushing to ban gender-affirming care, denying transgender people with disabilities control over their bodies and lives. To suppress opposition, the Trump administration has called for an investigation of charities accused of “extremism” for advocating for gender rights.
- In **India**, the new Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Act denies bodily autonomy to trans people with disabilities and medicalizes their bodies.
- In **Argentina**, government decisions stalling sexual and reproductive health programs, alongside budget cuts, have weakened or closed accessible services for women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities.

## **Core tactic: Proactive Monitoring and Early Response**

Feminist disabled leaders are developing adaptable and accessible systems to monitor the rights of women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities and produce credible evidence.

- "We are consistently monitoring legislative initiatives on women's rights in the National Congress... Women with disabilities are not considered in the development of most of these regulations." — Gender and disability advocate, Central America.
- "I have been particularly focused on monitoring the number of women and girls with disabilities who access SRH and GBV services and the challenges they face." — Gender and disability advocate, Pacific region.
- "I contributed to the establishment of a monitoring hub for women with disabilities to track government actions affecting their rights." — Gender and disability advocate, West Africa.

## Trend 03: Turning Tools of Justice into Tools of Harm

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Anti-rights and anti-democratic groups make strategic use of the human rights norms and institutions to dismantle them from the inside and build alternative anti-rights frameworks.

### The Big Picture

Anti-rights and anti-democratic forces are strategically manipulating human rights frameworks, narratives, language, and multilateral institutions to dismantle—or block progress on—the rights of women, girls, and gender-diverse people and advance alternative anti-rights frameworks, oftentimes by instrumentalizing disability rights.

- **China, Russia, and the United States** are weaponizing funding to destabilize the UN human rights and gender equality infrastructure.
- Recent efforts have been made to replace existing human rights frameworks with alternative—or “rival”—norms, like the **Geneva Consensus Declaration**.
- Anti-rights actors are systematically infiltrating, influencing, and contesting human rights norms and mechanisms.

- **Key Impact 1: Systems of Protection Defunded.** The defunding of the United Nations is directly jeopardizing the work of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD Committee), at the very moment when the Committee is developing groundbreaking guidelines on addressing intersectional discrimination.

*"When the UN started cutting its budget, we feared [gender and] disability rights would become an easy target. Unfortunately, we were right." — Women Enabled International.*

- **Key Impact 2: Disability Rights Instrumentalized.** Anti-rights and anti-democratic movements are increasingly portraying children with disabilities as vulnerable to so-called "transgender ideology" to justify rollbacks on—and block further progress toward—LGBTQ+ rights.
- In **2025, Egypt**, a signatory of the Geneva Consensus Declaration, successfully advocated for the removal of language around sex.

*“[In our submission, we] reaffirm... that meaningful equality can only be achieved when all women and girls with disabilities—including transgender, intersex, non-binary and gender-diverse people—are visible, valued and heard.”* — **Women With Disabilities Australia (WWDA) and People With Disability Australia (PWDA).**

*“We are here raising our voices as a wake-up call to governments to end [the] practices that dehumanize us, combat stigma [against us], and invest in quality, accessible, affordable, and gender-sensitive community support services.”* — Gender and disability advocate from Central Africa addressing the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in 2024.

## Trend 04: Gender as Colonialism

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Gender rights—and the work of gender equality actors—are being denounced by anti-rights actors as threats to national identity, traditional values, and sovereignty, and a form of Western interference.

### The Big Picture

Anti-rights and anti-democratic forces are framing human rights—particularly around gender—as a colonial import contrary to domestic traditional values and a threat to national independence, security, and sovereignty. These narratives drive efforts to weaken human rights frameworks and accountability mechanisms.

- Although these efforts have been prominent in **Africa**, similar patterns have been reported in the **Asia-Pacific region, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Europe**.
- These narratives permeate States' efforts to shrink civic space and defund civil society, including through “**foreign agent**” laws.

- **Key Impact 1: Feminist Disabled Leaders as Foreign Threats.** Anti-rights groups frame gender and disability rights as "liberal colonialism" and advocate for returning to "traditional values."

*"The so-called 'foreign agents' law limited civic space and public advocacy, reduced visibility for disability rights issues, and constrained collective action led by women with disabilities." — Gender and disability advocate, Central Asia.*

- **Key Impact 2: Co-Opting Disability Rights to Block Abortion.** Anti-abortion groups increasingly co-opt disability rights to justify restrictions on abortion rights, arguing that such restrictions should be respected as an exercise of national sovereignty.
  - In a **2025 case** involving a prenatal diagnosis of Down syndrome, **ADF International** claimed that the European Court of Human Rights failed to defer to national cultural values.
  - Similar arguments were advanced in **Beatriz v. El Salvador** before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

## **Core tactic: Defending and Expanding Abortion Access**

For feminist disabled leaders, access to abortion is vital for ensuring human rights. Across the globe, they actively advocate for decriminalization, promote cross-movement collaboration to ensure advocacy does not perpetuate stigma, and oppose anti-abortion strategies that co-opt disability rights.

*"We are not your pro-life scapegoats, and eugenics has no place in abortion access." — Disability rights advocate **Stefanie Lyn Kaufman Mthimkhulu**.*

*"I'm really proud of our efforts to raise awareness on the wide diversity of gender identities among people with disabilities in my country, breaking the silence and stigma." — Gender and disability advocate.*

## Trend 05: Rising Conflict, Shrinking Rights

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Armed conflicts are accelerating the erosion of democracy and human rights amid surging military spending and the near-exclusion of women from peace processes.

### The Big Picture

Armed conflict is driving human rights abuses against unprecedented numbers of women, girls, and gender-diverse people. Women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities face heightened and disproportionate risks and systematic exclusion from peace-building processes.

- Over **600 million women and girls** live within 50 kilometers of armed conflict—the highest recorded since the 1990s.
- In **2024, global military spending rose by 9.4%**, while funding for gender equality and disability rights remained critically insufficient.
- The global rollback of gender equality is heightening risks for those living in conflict areas.

- **Key Impact 1: Conflicts Drive Gendered Rights Violations.** Due to intersecting forms of discrimination, women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities are disproportionately affected by conflicts. They face increased exclusion, higher rates of sexual and gender-based violence, higher maternal mortality, and heightened barriers to essential services.

*"The war caused profound suffering for women and girls with disabilities, many of whom were exposed to heightened risks, abuse, trauma, and exclusion, and continue to carry the physical and psychological consequences..." — Gender and disability advocate, Central Africa.*

- **Key Impact 2: The Genocide in Gaza.** A catastrophic humanitarian and legal failure and a stark reminder of recurring erasure.
- Feminist disabled leaders remain largely **excluded from peace-building and recovery processes.**

## **Core tactic: Inclusive Approaches to Humanitarian Action**

Globally, feminist disabled leaders are stepping in where humanitarian responses fall short—delivering essential services and challenging persistent patterns of discrimination that exclude them from peace-building processes.

- "I am working to amplify the voices of women and girls with disabilities in conflict-affected contexts and promote more inclusive community and humanitarian responses." — Gender and disability advocate, Central Africa.
- "We established an informal network of individual advocates and local disability organizations that have supported many Ukrainians with disabilities since the beginning of the war." — **Dr. Magda Szarota**, Humanity in Action Polska, Board Member.

## Trend 06: Shifting Priorities, Expanding Harm

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Militarization, risk aversion, and austerity gain ground even among champions of gender and democracy, further jeopardizing the rights of women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities.

### The Big Picture

Across regions, even established champions of gender equality and democracy are shifting toward militarization and austerity. These patterns are placing gender and disability rights under intensified pressure, just as anti-rights actors gain financial and political momentum.

- In the **Global South**, debt, austerity, and regressive tax systems are exacerbating pressures to reverse gains.
- **Smaller human rights organizations** face intensifying competition for limited funding as resources shift to larger, “low-risk” organizations.
- Democratic states’ support is under strain amid pushes to increase military spending and pressure from well-resourced anti-rights groups.

- **Key Impact 1: Militarization Diverts Rights Funding.** Rising militarization is diverting funds away from policies, services, and advocacy efforts.

*"The political struggle between the ruling and opposition parties has resulted in substantial cuts to budgets for human rights groups." — Gender and disability advocate, East Asia.*

- **Key Impact 2: Austerity Erodes Essential Services.** Governments are accelerating austerity measures that erode the availability and quality of essential public services—particularly those that enable independent living—while delaying implementation of existing protections.

*"There is the perception that any change in the promotion of the rights of women with disabilities requires economic resources, and governments are in a state of 'austerity.'" — Gender and disability advocate, North America.*

Despite these shifting priorities, feminist disabled leaders continue to mobilize locally and globally for sustained investment and to ensure their lived experiences shape laws, funding priorities, and development agendas. Working across movements, they monitor budgets and policy reforms and produce evidence-based analysis.

*"When the government eliminated the only public policy promoting personal assistance, we were left without funding to address this need. In response, we organized meetings... We also made significant progress in our ability to organize alongside caregivers' organizations..." — Gender and disability advocate, South America.*

## Feminist Disabled Leaders' Vision for the Future

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WEI held a consultation with feminist disabled leaders to reflect on what it would take to challenge systems breakdowns and rebuild for a more intersectional, democratic, and gender-equal future.

- **“Liberation must celebrate rest, joy, and creativity.”** We must create space for rest, joy, and creativity, so that feminist disabled leaders and their communities can live fully.
- **“Harmful practices must trigger repair and real change, not PR statements.”**  
Accountability must carry consequences. Where harm has been committed, there must be reflection, unlearning, and real systemic change.
- **“We should be conscious of our interdependence.”** Narratives and practices must shift from a charity mindset towards recognizing feminist disabled leaders as agents of change.
- **“Funding must shift from projects to power.”**

## What Can You Do?

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Here are 6 concrete ways you can center feminist disabled leaders—a precondition for building a democratic future where women, girls, and gender-diverse people—with and without disabilities—can thrive:

1. **Identify and Connect.**
2. **Mainstream** with feminist disabled leaders to align your work with their priorities and strategies.
3. **Prioritize** the rights and needs of women, girls, and gender-diverse people with disabilities across all your programs, policies, and initiatives.
4. **Support** building accessible spaces and movements where feminist disabled leaders hold real decision-making power.
5. **Promote** feminist disabled leaders with core, flexible, and long-term funding.
6. **Elevate** cross-sectoral partnerships across rights and justice movements to advance democracy and gender justice. Use feminist disabled stories and leadership to transform the narrative, strengthening recognition that everything is a disability issue.

## Credits

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This report was brought to you by **Women Enabled International**. WEI is the leading global organization at the intersection of gender and disability. As feminists with disabilities and allies ourselves, WEI works to create structural change by centering and amplifying the work and knowledge of local leaders.