

Systems Change: Gender Equality Issue Paper

Executive summary

More women and girls than men and boys have eye conditions and disabilities — yet women and girls are often excluded from accessing quality services and support. Achieving equality for all genders is key to delivering our vision of a world where people with disabilities and eye conditions can fully exercise their rights to health, education, work – and protection in emergencies.

At Light for the World, gender equality is integral to our work. Through our inclusive feminist approach, we intentionally use a rights-based and intersectional lens based on feminist values in our programmes, advocacy and communications.

In this issue paper, we outline our unique gender equality approach and how this is integrated in our programmes. As part of our Strategy 2030, we share four priority areas and four targets we have set to ensure we deliver impact, at scale, sustainably.

Why gender equality is key

At Light for the World, we believe in a world where people with disabilities and eye conditions can fully exercise their rights to health, education, work – and protection in emergencies. Achieving gender equality is key to delivering on our mission.

Despite key human rights frameworks – including the UN’s Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD),¹ the African Disability Protocol and the Maputo Protocol of the African Union – people with disabilities and eye conditions continue to experience significant inequalities and barriers to realising their rights. Disability rights and gender equality are being rolled back in many countries, while one in three women continue to be subjected to physical or sexual violence.²

According to the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) and World Health Organization (WHO), at least 1.1 billion people globally (55% women) have vision impairments,³ and 16% of the world’s population (18% women and 14.2% men)⁴ live with a disability. Multiple and intersectional discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities, due to gender roles, norms and stereotypes as well as gender-based violence (GBV), contribute to an increased prevalence of vision impairment and disability among women.⁵

People with disabilities, especially women and girls, face systematic barriers due to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including in their access to health services (especially sexual and reproductive health and rights - SRHR), education and employment, as well as participation and decision making.

Gender-responsive programming and investments in women and girls with and without disabilities is proven to improve wellbeing for all. We integrate gender equality - with a special focus on intersectionality, SRHR and inclusive prevention and protection from GBV in all its forms – in our work.

Our unique gender inclusive approach

At Light for the World, our programmes and advocacy include a cross-cutting focus on gender equality.

Through our inclusive feminist approach, we intentionally use a rights-based and intersectional lens based on feminist values in all our programmes, advocacy and communications. We use a twin-track approach, ensuring that we mainstream gender equality throughout our work, while also having targeted actions and programme approaches focusing on the empowerment of women and girls.

Together with youth and people with disabilities of all genders, we co-create innovative, impactful and accessible

1 UN-Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2025. Women’s Rights in Review 30 Years After Beijing. New York: UN-Women p. 15

2 International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB) Vision Atlas. See: (<https://visionatlas.iapb.org/>) [accessed 09.12.2025]

3 Global report on health equity for persons with disabilities. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2022. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO, p. 24

4 S. Browne (2017) Issue brief: Making the SDGs count for women and girls with disabilities New York: UN Women p. 1

UN Women (2025) Policy Paper, 30 years of Beijing Platform for action: an intersectional approach to gender and disability inclusion. New York: UN Women p. 5

Bourne R, et al. (2020). Trends in prevalence of blindness and distance and near vision impairment over 30 years: an analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study. *Lancet Glob Health*.

5 Women Deliver (2016) Strengthen Women’s Political Participation and Decision-Making Power. See: (https://womendeliver.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Good_Campaign_Brief_8_092016.pdf) [accessed 29.07.2025]

programmes in eye health and disability rights. In our programmes gender equality is fully embraced as a crosscutting issue and critically considered using an intersectional lens.

Light for the World, together with our local, regional and global partners, advocates for policies and funding to be disability inclusive and to use an intersectional lens. This ensures women and girls with disabilities are not left behind. Our gender equality work is guided by global frameworks such as the CEDAW, the UNCRPD, the 2030 Agenda, the Beijing Platform for Action, the Sendai Framework and International Agency Standing Committee (IASC) guidelines as well as local legislation.

Together with our partners, we build knowledge and strengthen technical skills on the implementation of inclusive (and intersectional) gender mainstreaming. This includes gender-sensitive, -responsive and -transformative approaches in programming.

As an organisation and partner, we walk the talk as a gender inclusive organisation, implementing family-friendly policies and ensuring gender equality in our policies and partnership approaches.

Our priorities

To ensure gender equality and sustainable impact, we have four strategic priorities:

1. Gender mainstreaming in eye health and disability rights programmes

- ▶ Applying an intersectional approach to our programmes and advocacy related to eye health, economic empowerment, inclusive education, humanitarian action and climate action. This includes addressing the intersectional barriers women with disabilities face and co-creating programmes together with women with disabilities and women-led OPDs.
- ▶ Challenging gender roles and systemic, structural barriers and cultural harmful practices that hinder inclusion. For example, caregiving often falls on women with and without disabilities. In our livelihood and economic empowerment programmes, we support women to increase their financial independence but also work with men to take up household responsibilities.

2. Sexual and reproductive health and rights

- ▶ Strengthening capacity of, and collaboration with, local partners for disability inclusive comprehensive sexuality education.⁶ We support women with disabilities to be able to take decisions over their own bodies as a basis for gender equality and for inclusive prevention and protection from GBV in all its forms.

3. Capacity strengthening

- ▶ Strengthening the capacity of service providers in gender equality, SRHR and GBV on disability rights and intersectional approaches. We also empower women and girls through programmes in inclusive education and economic empowerment.

4. Advocacy, partnerships and communication

- ▶ Amplifying voices of women with disabilities and all genders in all our advocacy and communication and learning from them and impact stories.

6 UNESCO, et. al. (2018). International technical guidance on sexuality education. An evidence informed approach. See: (https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/reproductive-health/sexual-health/international-technical-guidance-on-sexuality-education.pdf?sfvrsn=10113efc_29&download=true) [accessed 29/07/2025]

- ▶ Collaborating with women-led OPDs, local expert organisations on gender equality, SRHR and GBV, as well as with networks on the regional and international level.

Our targets

We are committed to gender equality, and have identified the following targets as part of our Strategy 2030:

1. Significantly increase the number and scale of programmes in eye health and disability rights that ensure gender equality, such as programmes focusing on access to SRHR and inclusive prevention and protection from GBV in all its forms, in collaboration with local partners by 2030.
2. Across all our programmes, ensure safeguarding measures are in place for both staff members and project participants.
3. Build strategic local partnerships in each focus country on gender equality, SRHR and GBV. Link to regional and global levels.
4. Expand and continuously improve family-friendly policies and training on intersectionality, feminism and gender equality for all staff.

Role model men approach

In the humanitarian action Resilience project funded by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA) as part of International Partnerships Austria, Light for the World collaborated with Uganda Community Based Association for Women and Children Welfare (UCOBAC) to identify 30 men role models with and without disabilities from the different zones and villages in the programme target refugee settlement and host communities. The role model approach included conducting peer dialogue sessions with other men, referring GBV cases to relevant services, sensitising youth on GBV and SRHR and supporting survivors to access help without stigma. The approach also promoted shared household responsibilities, challenged harmful cultural norms and promoted gender equality at the household level. Male engagement was shown as key to sustainably addressing GBV and advancing gender equality.

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