

People with Disability Leading and Influencing

Summary Paper



Pictured: Screenshot of event attendees on Zoom

Overview

About Women Leading and Influencing

Australia Awards [Women Leading and Influencing](#) (WLI) is an Australian Government initiative developing the skills, confidence, and connections of leaders to drive positive change in the Pacific region. An on-Award (in-Australia) and reintegration (in-Pacific) enrichment program, WLI offers a range of developmental leadership offerings to Pacific Australia Awards scholars studying at Australian universities and institutions. The program builds on the preceding Women's Leadership Initiative Pilot (2017–2022) to enhance support for WLI alumni returning home to the Pacific, and the role of men supporting women as change agents.

Introduction

In June 2024, WLI, [Australia Awards Africa](#), and [Australia Awards in Indonesia](#) co-hosted an online event bringing together three disability rights and inclusion advocates and leaders from Africa, Southeast Asia and the Pacific to explore how people with disability understand and exercise leadership, and influence change in their communities and countries. A panel discussion exploring the leadership journeys of the leaders was followed by an interactive audience Q&A and small group break-out discussions. The event was hosted for the international Australia Awards network and colleagues invested in support for leaders with disability.

About this summary paper

This Summary Paper includes key insights shared by event panellists and attendees based on their own professional experiences of and reflections on leading and influencing. It highlights what motivates panellists to lead, as well as the challenges that they have faced and overcome. It outlines key research findings on disability leadership and takes lessons from disability inclusion and equity gains made in Mauritius, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea.

The panel

Facilitated by **Dr Mercy Masta**, GEDSI and Safeguards Specialist, Australia Awards WLI, the panel included:

- **Emilline Law Kwang** (Mauritius), Management Support Officer of the Public Sector Business Transformation Bureau, and Australia Awards Alumna,
- **Ipul Powaseu** (Papua New Guinea), Senior Program Manager (Disability Inclusion) of PNG Women Lead, and
- **Dante Rigmalia** (Indonesia), Chair of the Indonesian Disability Commission, and Australia Awards Alumna.

What Motivated Panellists to Lead and Advocate?

Emilline Law Kwang's journey

Emilline was born in Mauritius with cerebral palsy and grew up 'in a bubble' with little contact with other people with disability. She describes feeling like 'the odd one out', despite growing up in a loving, supportive family. Her start in disability advocacy was 'lonely', as her speaking up to address inequalities was seen as 'complaining'.

What actually triggered my advocacy work was going to Australia and seeing that so many people with disabilities led totally autonomous lives because they had accessibility in place. The overall culture and mindset in Australia led me to realise that speaking up doesn't mean that I am complaining, but rather I am making full use of my voice to call out discriminatory practices which are part of everyday life in my country.

The COVID-19 pandemic opened 'a window of opportunities for people with disabilities to work from home' and led Emilline to realise that consideration of the needs of people with disabilities also leads to creation of policies that cater to the population at large.

While everyone was overwhelmed with being closed indoors, I realised that a lot of the policies and measures being implemented could have gone so much more smoothly for everyone, even people without disabilities. Working from home, online grocery purchases, and so on, are measures that could have benefited people with disabilities prior to the pandemic, but it's only when the masses were affected that this was considered.

Ipul Powaseu's journey

Ipul contracted poliovirus as an infant. Because of widespread discrimination and stigma, she 'never wanted to be identified' as a person living with disability.

Even when I went to high school, there were two people with the same impairment I had, but I didn't want to sit with them because of the stigma.

In 2006, after Ipul had graduated from university and was working in the agricultural research sector, Ipul attended a workshop at which women with disability spoke about how they were discriminated against. The women could not access public services, including public transport, because these were not designed to accommodate people with disability, including wheelchair users.

'Their words stuck with me for a while. I couldn't get away from them,' says Ipul who describes this moment as a turning point that led her to reflect on her own experiences, identity and future. At the same time, Ipul was being approached with various opportunities to lead and advocate in the disability space, including at the

government level. While she was initially very hesitant, Ipul eventually agreed to take on a leadership position in the disability movement, citing ongoing encouragement from young women living with disability pleading with her to do so.

While incredibly important, Ipul explains that taking on leadership in this space came 'at a cost' and required her to be 'on full-time' and 'to understand and walk the challenges' people with disability experience.

I had to leave my job for one and a half years to live with [people with disability]; to travel with people who I identify with, and that was how I moved from my professional career into what I call my passionate career, because I identified. I have that identity and I did not realise that there is a need for voices to get together as one collective voice so that it can be heard louder. That's how I came into the disability movement.

Dante Rigmalia's journey

Dante was born hard of hearing and with dyslexia in Indonesia. Because primary school education in the country was not then designed for students with barriers to learning, completing primary and junior high school was a challenge for Dante. This ultimately led her to 'drop out' of high school.

During my teens it was hard for me to work with the world, socially. I felt down and I didn't know what to do.

Eventually, Dante's parents encouraged her to take an exam which put her on a university pathway to becoming a primary school teacher.

While working as a teacher in the field, Dante 'saw a lot of the same problems' she experienced as a young student and encountered parents with little to no understanding of their children's conditions – many of which were 'hidden'.

To improve conditions for young students with disability and their families, Dante resolved to create more inclusive learning environments and teach other teachers how to do the same. First, she listened to students and fellow teachers (including special education teachers) to learn about their methods, challenges, and experiences.

After designing a 'systematic program' to support students with disability, help teachers remove barriers, and make classrooms more inclusive, Dante went on to contribute to national education curricula, toolkits, and programs on inclusive teaching and learning. She would go on to share her learnings and experiences with the Indonesian Ministry of Education and non-government organisations to enable better outcomes for students with disability.

Developing the Next Generation of Disability Advocates

To upskill and train the next generation of disability leaders (of all genders) to drive positive change by taking ‘a seat at the table’ in decision-making, Ipul is transitioning her focus from being a leader herself, to developing leadership capacity in others.

Creating a gender balance in the training of future leaders, including men and women from each of the provinces in PNG, Ipul and her colleagues are training participants to understand their rights and ‘be empowered to know what they’re fighting for’. Through this work, Ipul aims to make organisations or people within the disability movement understand that ‘it’s not just about being included, but also recognising that [people with disability] need to sit at the table as well’.

One of the values that I brought with me when I took on this leadership is to empower leaders, and I keep on telling them that change or empowerment has to start within yourself.
Ipul Powaseu

Initiatives empowering disability advocates to ‘open the door’

- Systemic advocacy training for women with disabilities can help to progress advocacy calls from ‘inclusion’ to ‘equity’.

- Showing disability advocates ‘where the door is’ (in government, policymaking, program design, and other avenues) and empowering them to walk through it.

Learning from Research on Support for Leaders with Disability in Indonesia

A research brief by the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP), ‘[Finding self, leading others: Leadership journeys of persons with disabilities in Indonesia](#)’, identified that donors and actors supporting leaders with disabilities should build the capacity of groups of people, rather than focusing on individuals.

Brief authors highlighted that consistent, long-term funding and network-building opportunities should be provided for organisations of people with disabilities.

They also found that people with disabilities need access to opportunities that enable them to learn by doing, learn from mentors, build relationships, develop their understanding of the social model of disability, and develop self-worth and self-efficacy.

Learning from the Introduction of Disability Law in Indonesia

On 18 April 2016, Indonesia celebrated the enactment of [Law No. 8/2016 on Persons with Disabilities](#) which represented an important shift to a human rights-based approach to disability.

Progress since the law’s introduction

Dante reflected that the Law’s enactment led to:

- Change in public perception and legal requirement to provide disability services through a human rights-based, rather than a ‘charity’-based, framework.
- Establishment of social protection systems and regulations to ensure the effective planning, respect for, protection and fulfilment of rights of people with disability in all settings – including education, transport, and housing.
- Development of plans and budgets by government departments and ministries, institutions, and services to ensure compliance with laws and regulations.
- Establishment of the Komisi Nasional Disabilitas (KND), also known as the National Commission for Disability, to fulfil the mandate of the Law.

- Collaboration with government departments (including the Ministry of Labour), to advocate for more inclusive work environments.
- Establishment of Disability Service Units which can provide information and resources to private companies and community sector organisations.

The National Commission for Disability is a new institution, so our resources are limited, including our human resources and budget. The government is yet to support [the Commission] at the maximum level. The role of [the Commission] is crucial at the national level, so we need to deal with many stakeholders, yet the ability that we have as a new institution is still limited. I’m trying to make organisations or people within the movement understand that it’s not just about being included but recognising that [people with disability] need to sit at the table as well ... so I can sit down with organisations or persons with disability and say, ‘This is the way we’re going to knock on the door’.

Dante Rigmalia

Progress Promoting Disability Inclusion in Mauritius

Emilline Law Kwang spearheaded a disability inclusion campaign titled '[Normalising the Inclusion of People with Disabilities in Mauritius](#)'. The campaign was funded by the Australian High Commission in Port Louis through the Direct Aid Program and aimed to raise awareness of the importance of inclusive policies and accessible infrastructure. The campaign's strategy saw Emilline host a three-day workshop for over 100 attendees to participate in discussions and ideas exchange on improving disability inclusion practices.

The workshops led to the development of a comprehensive [report of recommendations](#) the country can adopt to enhance accessibility, better integrate people with disability into mainstream activities, address stigma, and promote inclusive language.

Progress since the report's release

Establishment of [The Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act \(2024\)](#) which legislates against discrimination and abuse and protects disability rights in training and education, employment, in emergency situations, housing, data collection, and other settings and mechanisms.

This Act is a first step in recognising that people with disabilities are not a burden on society. We all know we deserve the same rights as anyone else ... however, this should be followed up with the appropriate mechanisms to ensure that's not just putting words on paper, and it's not just about government and their policies. Emilline Law Kwang

Barriers to Fulfilment of Disability Rights and Inclusion

Panellists highlighted a range of barriers to the fulfilment of disability inclusion and equity, including:

- Stakeholders' ineffective incorporation of the perspectives of people with disability in their planning, which leads to underestimation of the budgets and programs required to empower people with disability.

The Indonesian National Commission on Disability has been doing a lot of advocacy in encouraging the government to answer to the participation of the people with disabilities in policymaking processes. However, we find that the limited understanding of disability and the importance of people with disability is the challenge. Therefore, we need to work together; to knock on the door together, specifically in policymaking. Dante Rigmalia

- Inadequate provision of human resources and funding allocated to regulatory bodies and commissions limits their ability to fulfil the mandate of disability laws and enforce regulations.
- Funding limitations in data capture causes the needs, challenges, and experiences of people with disability to be missed in national data capture mechanisms (including national censuses). This leads to uninformed service planning and resource allocation, erasure of the links between disability and community participation, and underestimation of the services, infrastructure and interventions needed to adequately support, and fulfil the rights of, people with disability.

I approached the National Statistical Office [to discuss] whether there was going to be information or questions [in the Census] around disability, and the one the response from them was, 'We don't have enough money. We need financial support.' The issue for people with disabilities is, whilst we may be counted as citizens, our needs are not taken into consideration because our challenges have not been identified. Ipul Powaseu

- Public spaces and infrastructure (including schools, workplaces, and universities) are not often designed with accessibility in mind which leads people with

disability to either use their own limited resources to advocate for the changes needed to enable their own access (E.g. wheelchair access), or avoid visiting those spaces, which limits their opportunities.

- Negative 'mindsets', attitudes, and behaviours (including stigma) from people *without* disability towards people *with* disability prevents adequate resourcing for disability inclusion and equity efforts.

There needs to a re-education in terms of population mindset, I believe. I think that's one of the main barriers. It's not just about financing and structures. Emilline Law Kwang

- People with disability being engaged to share their experiences feel that the process of gathering their input is 'tokenistic' and represents a 'seat-warming' exercise, rather than a meaningful information exchange that will create positive change.

Australia's New Cross-Cutting International Disability Equity and Rights Strategy

Australia's Ambassador for Gender Equality, **Ms Stephanie Copus Campbell** shares, 'Despite ongoing and tireless efforts from disability leaders and organisations of persons with disabilities in the region, there's much more to be done to protect and promote the rights of people with disabilities.'

Australia is developing a new international disability equity and rights strategy, through which we're extending the scope beyond inclusive development and to advancing equity for persons with disabilities across development cooperation, across our humanitarian action, and more broadly across our entire foreign policy engagement with local systems of belief, and of traditional, religious and other informal forms of healthcare provision.'

Moving from Disability Inclusion to Equity

Panellists agreed that commitments to, understandings of, and language around disability rights must move beyond inclusion and towards equity. It is therefore 'important to define disability leadership and equity', shift community attitudes, and look to effective strategies for advocacy and positive, meaningful progress.

Defining disability leadership and equity

- Strong disability leadership requires deep listening and equal and fair collaboration with others to understand their challenges, experiences, and needs.
- 'Anyone with a disability will be a leader' when they speak up or can combine their calls with voices of other advocates with disability (including networks).

For me, leadership is about working with people and hearing their voices ... I would open the door first, but it's not me leading, but walking *with* them ... and bringing in opportunities to remove those challenges or identify the gaps and understand how we can build capacities to address those challenges. Equity is about justice and fairness.

Ipul Powaseu

I have a loud voice and that's my definition of a leader ... I'm not in a super high position [and] I don't have money to back me up or anything like that, but I have my voice and that's enough for me.

Emilline Law Kwang

Shifting community attitudes and building support for equity and inclusion

- In the inclusive education context, it is important to educate all students, not just those living with disability, on the features of a quality, accessible education and how they uphold the values of society.
- Broadly, it is important to reflect on and use language that refers to inclusivity as a philosophy that reflects values, not a 'level' to pass or a 'checklist' to tick off.
- Allies in the community can support public events and community initiatives designed to raise awareness of the experiences and contributions of people with disability.
- Increasing community understanding of inclusive policies and practices, and expectations around inclusive infrastructure can help people without disability to identify and advocate for inclusion.

Striving for equity, in practice

- It is vital to build community and workplace awareness of disability inclusion and how to support the fulfilment of rights of people with disability in

practice. This includes ensuring equal access to career progression and leadership development resources, and recognition of the fact that women with disability in leadership positions experience overlapping challenges and forms of discrimination (such as ableism and sexism) that may hinder their career progression.

- Because women with disability in the workplace are less represented in formal leadership than their male counterparts, strong support and inclusive professional environments are needed to ensure women's access to, and maintenance of, senior leadership positions.
- Equitable processes to incorporate voices of people with disability must be based on principles of 'fairness', 'justice', and building the capacity of disability leaders to participate and 'have a seat' at the decision-making table, rather than feeding others information to 'speak on their behalf'.
- In the context of development organisations engaging people with disability in program/project design, it is important to address *why* people with disability are engaging or not, and what their barriers to participation may be, so they can be addressed.
- Formal and informal mentorship opportunities can be valuable for people living with disability.
- Increasing the availability of educational scholarships and enrichment opportunities specifically for people with disability can help to build leadership capacity.
- Adequately incentivising and compensating (including through concessions) people with disability for their participation in service-improvement processes, especially in contexts when other staff are being paid for their time, is important.

It's really about having that voice and agency to speak on themselves. Fairness and justice require a lot of capacity building, so organisations for people with disabilities and people with disability can have that voice to make the choices, because for most people [with disability], and we still have this now, others are speaking on their behalf. Ipul Powaseu

Conclusion

This Summary Paper outlines key insights shared by event panellists and attendees of the WLI, Australia Awards Africa, and Australia Awards in Indonesia event on leading and influencing with disability. It is intended for use by those invested in support for disability leaders.

Interested? Want to know more?



[Listen to the panel discussion](#)

Find more information on Australia Awards *Women Leading and Influencing* and how you can get involved:



<https://www.wliprogram.org>



info@wliprogram.org