RISING FLAME

mariwala health initiative

Ten Principles for Inclusive and Intersectional Philanthropy

Credits and Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Disability and philanthropy – where do we currently stand?

People with disabilities constitute 16% of the world's population, making them the largest minority globally, with a significant proportion living in the Global South. Disability is not a singular experience; it intersects with gender, caste, class, sexuality, geography, and other identities that intensify discrimination and exclusion across life domains. These intersections shape access to education, employment, healthcare, safety, justice, and public life—not only for persons with disabilities themselves but also for their caregivers and families.

> **Philanthropy and CSR often reflect broader systemic gaps. Despite the scale of need, less than 2% of global aid is directed toward disability-focused initiatives according to a paper published based on Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) data on Official Development Assistance (ODA). Of this only a sliver of this reaches the Global South Organisations of persons with disabilities. Funding for women with disabilities is even more starkly limited according to report published by Women Enabled International.**

Historically, philanthropic practice has often relied on charity or medical models of disability, focusing on individual "fixes" rather than systemic change, and can unintentionally reproduce the structural barriers that exclude disabled people—including through definitions of impact and inaccessible applications and compliance requirements. Many funders are already questioning these patterns. The principles that follow aim to support and deepen that ongoing shift.

This moment offers an opportunity for renewed and collective attention. Exclusion from schools, workplaces, public transport, climate responses, and systems to address gender-based violence is shaped by policy and funding choices. Shifting these structures requires organisations of persons with disabilities and funders to work together, learning from one another and co-creating long-term pathways for change. The roundtable sought to identify and reflect opportunities for collaboration and to build momentum toward a more just, intersectional, and disability-led funding ecosystem.

Toward inclusive and intersectional funding

Addressing these challenges, Rising Flame and Mariwala Health Initiative convened an Inclusive and Intersectional Funding Roundtable during the 2025 International Purple Fest in Goa. Situated within the International Purple Fest— a global celebration of disability, inclusion, arts, and accessibility—the roundtable became a rare space to centre disabled leadership while inviting funders into a dialogue grounded in lived experiences and leadership of persons with disabilities. The Fest itself is a model of community-led agenda setting which shapes public conversations about disability, bringing together organisations of persons with disabilities, disability rights activists, families of persons with disabilities, and allies to build a shared vision for inclusion.

The roundtable opened with remarks from Hon. Minister Shri Subhash Phal Dessai, Minister for Social Welfare, Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities, Drinking Water, River & Navigation, Government of Goa, highlighting the government's commitment to engaging with leadership of persons with disabilities at Purple Fest. This collaboration across government, community, and philanthropy underscored the potential for collective action in strengthening disability-justice approaches to funding and in building shared responsibility for change.

The roundtable brought together in conversation a diverse group of participants representing the funding ecosystem and the disability rights movement. Funders included CSR teams from major Indian corporations, philanthropic foundations, feminist funds, DEI leaders from industry, and organisations that incubate or support social entrepreneurs. Alongside them were organisations which were founded and led by persons with disabilities working across a wide range of disabilities — including organisations working with specific disabilities such as: deafness, blood conditions, locomotor disabilities, chronic illnesses and rare diseases, and cross disability organisations — as well as groups led by women with disabilities, trans and queer disabled leaders, and those working in rural and marginalised communities. Participants also included entrepreneurs living with disabilities.

Together, we worked to advance an agenda for inclusive philanthropy guided by the following critical questions:

What does inclusion look like in philanthropic practice?
How can funding strengthen the leadership of persons with disabilities?
How can disability be understood intersectionally–across gender, caste, class, sexuality, geography, and other identities?
What systemic changes are needed to build an equitable funding ecosystem?

The discussions at the roundtable underscored that inclusive and intersectional philanthropy requires a transformative shift in how power, resources, and trust move through the funding ecosystem. Leaders with disabilities articulated not only the gaps in current philanthropic practice but also the possibilities that emerge when lived experience is centered, access is embedded, and funding supports long-term movement-building rather than short-term projects. The insights gathered here offer a pathway toward a funding landscape that recognises disability as inseparable from questions of justice, equity, and human dignity. The following section synthesises the key principles that emerged from the roundtable—principles that can guide funders, practitioners, and movements toward a more equitable and disability-affirming future.

Ten Principles for Inclusive and Intersectional Philanthropy

Shift from charity to justice-based funding approaches

Fund disability rights as structural, long-term justice work. Centre leadership, autonomy, and lived experience to move beyond individual fixes to systemic change.

Embed funding for disability justice across movements

Integrate disability into climate action, gender justice, education, labour, housing, public health, and all areas of social justice.

Provide flexible, core, multi-year funding

Support organisational stability, leadership development, and movement-building beyond project cycles and specific outputs.

Recognise reasonable accommodation as an essential budget requirement

Support accessible care, travel, technology, time, and labour required for meaningful participation.

Collaborate to influence the funding ecosystem

Use funder networks and platforms to shift norms, advocate for accessible practices, and bring disability into the centre of philanthropy.

Recognise disability as an intersectional identity

Understand disability as shaped by caste, class, gender, sexuality, geography, and other identities—never as a single category.

Centre and sustain the leadership of organisations led by persons with disabilities

Directly resource organisations led by persons with disabilities through periods of experimentation, backlash, and growth with steady relational support.

Embed accessibility and inclusion in all processes

Ensure applications, reporting, websites, events, policies, and internal decision-making are accessible by design.

Redefine what counts as impact

Value shifts in quality of life, access, power, and dignity—not only metrics, numbers, or short-term outputs.

Prioritise care, well-being, and safety

Resource health insurance, crisis response, mental health support and safe working conditions for disabled leaders and their teams.

By Rising Flame and Mariwala Health Initiative

Shift from charity to justice-based funding approaches

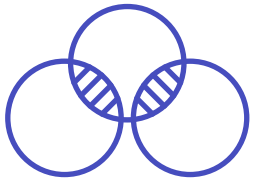
Disability funding must move beyond charitable or medicalised models toward approaches grounded in leadership, dignity, justice, and systemic change. Charity or medicalised lenses often focus on “fixing” individuals or meeting immediate needs—such as distributing aids, devices, or sponsoring medical treatment. Many funders are already experimenting with more structural approaches. This principle invites a deliberate, sector-wide shift in that direction.

> ***“I have been working in this space for so many years and so I’ve received many awards for the social work I do, but that’s not translated into funding in order to be able to continue the work.”***
>
> **- A founder who lives with a disability**

This paradigm positions people with disabilities as beneficiaries of care rather than strategic actors shaping change; as inspirational stories rather than movement-builders; and as subjects of social work rather than contributors to economic, social, and national development. Disabled founders, for instance, described repeatedly being overlooked for funding despite awards, recognition, and demonstrated impact.

For example, distribution of aids and appliances fits in a charity or medicalised funding paradigm, but leadership programmes, self led advocacy, or community-driven policy change receive far less investment. Similarly, funders may prioritise placement numbers in skilling programmes while underfunding life-skills training, sexuality education, or reproductive health. These areas are essential for the autonomy and long-term leadership required to address the social systems that exclude disabled people from education, employment, and community life.

> ***“In rural areas, persons with disabilities struggle every day with barriers that funders do not see. People imagine accessibility only as wheelchair ramps. But what about access to our own bodies, our choices, our voices?”***
>
> **- A founder who lives with a disability**



Recognise disability as an intersectional identity

Disability does not exist in isolation. Disabled people’s experiences are shaped simultaneously by caste, class, gender, sexuality, age, geography, religion, language, and more. Funding that treats disability as a standalone issue rather than lived at the intersections of multiple identities risks reproducing exclusion. Intersectional identities such as Dalit disabled people, queer and trans disabled people, women with disabilities, rural disabled people, and persons living with HIV and disability must be made visible in funding priorities.

> ***"We work with locomotor disabilities, trans people, sex workers, HIV-positive disabled people. And when HIV stigma combines with disability stigma, people are alienated from every system of life. Intersectionality is not a word for us – it is our daily survival."***
>
> ***- A founder who lives with a disability***

An intersectional approach acknowledges that disability is shaped by the same social, political, and economic forces that drive all inequality. A Dalit person with a psychosocial disability experiences exclusion very differently from an upper-caste wheelchair user; a queer or trans person with an intellectual disability faces compounded stigma, especially within queer and trans spaces. When funding overlooks these differences, it recreates the very exclusions it aims to solve. To fund disability effectively, philanthropy must resource the full complexity of disabled people's lives—recognising not just disability, but the intertwined identities and systems that shape exclusion and possibility.

A powerful example shared at the roundtable illustrated this gap: A funder once visited an organisation intending to support work on violence against women. After hearing a detailed presentation on violence faced by women with disabilities, they responded, *"Thank you, we had no idea about women with disabilities… now can we move to violence against actual women?"* This interaction revealed how disability is often treated as separate from gender, and how disabled women are rendered invisible within mainstream approaches, even when the issue is directly about their lives.

Embed funding for disability justice across movements

> ***"We need a narrative shift–disability cannot be a vertical. Whatever your sector–education, skilling, CSR, civil society, government–ask how disability can be built into your core work as a horizontal, not as an add-on."***
>
> **- A funder**

Disability runs through every social issue, yet most mainstream movements continue to treat it as a specialist or separate domain. The shift here is not only about recognising intersectional identities, but about integrating disability justice into the core work of all sectors—education, gender justice, climate action, labour, housing, health, and more. This principle asks funders to embed disability within movement agendas, programme design, and resource allocation, rather than creating disability as a separate track. If disability inclusion is built into mainstream systems, not left to disability-specific programmes, justice becomes more expansive, equitable, and effective for all. Where Principle 2 focuses on who is visible, this principle focuses on where disability is built into policies, programmes, and budgets.

Disability is often missing from major justice interventions, even when disabled people are among those most affected. For example, if a funder supports early childhood education, disability inclusion should be embedded into screening, curriculum, teacher training, and family support.

If a skilling programme targets women, women with disabilities should be part of that programme by design, rather than added later as a 'special' category. This requires treating disability as a horizontal principle that strengthens the work of every movement, not as a vertical silo.

Climate justice is a powerful example of this gap. During floods and heatwaves, disabled people are often the last to be evacuated, the last to receive emergency information, and frequently excluded from policy design. In urban India, disabled people living in informal settlements lack accessible cooling centres, transport, and healthcare. These conditions become deadly in extreme heat. Inclusive early warning systems, awareness of risks such as heat intolerance for people on psychiatric medication, and accessible evacuation planning all benefit entire communities. This principle emphasises that every movement is stronger when disability justice is woven into its foundations.

Centre and sustain the leadership of organisations led by persons with disabilities

Long-term, sustainable change requires shifting who receives funding by prioritising investment in organisations led by persons with disabilities, particularly those led by women with disabilities, queer and trans disabled people, Dalit and Adivasi disabled leaders, and rural disabled leaders. These organisations hold the lived experience, strategic insight, and political imagination necessary to shift systems, yet they remain significantly underfunded while larger, organisations led by non disabled persons receive the bulk of disability grants.

> ***"As the work with women and girls with disabilities continues, organisations face pushback from communities. That's precisely when we need funders to stay with the organisations, to trust their leadership and help them strengthen the programme–not step away."***
> **- A funder**

For philanthropy, supporting disability justice means funding leadership of persons with disabilities, teams, and governance structures, not just programmes. This includes investing in organisations where persons with disabilities hold real decision-making power, supporting leadership pipelines, and ensuring teams have the stability, salaries, infrastructure, and long-term support required to influence systems.

It also requires funders to practice trust in concrete ways: co-creating agendas, valuing the expertise of lived experience, sharing decision-making, and staying invested even when programmes face challenges, backlash, or slow progress. Systemic change takes time, and funders must have the staying power to walk alongside organisations through that process.

Provide flexible, core, multi-year support

Short-term, activity-based project cycles cannot build organisational stability, leadership pipelines, or accessibility infrastructure. Flexible, core, multi-year support is essential for disability justice work, which requires time, continuity, and the ability to respond to community realities rather than rigid project frames.

Core and flexible funding is particularly critical for small grassroots organisations and organisations led by persons with disabilities, who may lack the administrative capacity, or language access required by conventional grantmaking. When funders simplify processes, reduce barriers, and commit to multi-year accompaniment, they expand who can lead and sustain the work.

> ***"We need to have side-by-side movement in which funders walk alongside organisations led by persons with disabilities to do advocacy and build disability justice movements with long-term core funding and not just programmatic funding. That's the only way we start building an inclusive funding ecosystem in India for disability rights. To do all this we will need to shift from charity to a solidarity-based approach."***
> ***- A funder***

Participants emphasised that sustained funding enables organisations to strengthen their teams, improve accessibility, build leadership, and navigate inevitable challenges without fear of losing support.

Funders at the roundtable described how core and flexible funding can be structured to expand access. Some of them have redesigned their grantmaking model to prioritise small grassroots and groups led by persons with disabilities by simplifying applications, offering forms in fifteen languages, and encouraging individual activists as well as small collectives to apply. They also collaborated with other women's funds to ensure resources reached communities that are typically excluded from mainstream funding by extending flexible funds to organisations to use for organisational strengthening. This approach demonstrated how unrestricted funding—paired with intentional access measures—can open the door for groups who otherwise struggle to secure support.

Embed accessibility and inclusion across all processes

Accessibility is foundational to disability justice. It determines who can participate, who can lead, and who is excluded at the very first step. For disabled people and organisations led by persons with disabilities, inaccessible systems are structural barriers that restrict autonomy, block opportunities, and prevent full participation in philanthropy. When funders build accessibility into every process, they expand who can apply, engage, and lead.

> ***"We realised that lasting change required senior leadership to see accessibility as a norm, not an exception. So, we embedded inclusion across all organisational processes—every leadership meeting includes sign-language interpretation, and persons with disabilities are routinely present on stage and in the audience. We also design experiences for leaders to directly engage with accessibility, such as site visits where senior executives tour facilities alongside disabled colleagues. When disability is normalised in everyday organisational life, inclusion becomes integrated—not an afterthought."***
>
> ***- A funder***

For funding organisations, accessibility can be integrated across grantmaking, reporting, communications, meetings, events, and internal organisational policies. Participants highlighted the persistent barriers created by inaccessible websites, application portals, reporting formats, and venue choices. These barriers that prevent disabled people from applying for funding, participating equally, or exercising decision-making power. By working with disabled leaders to address these gaps, funders can remove barriers that currently prevent disabled people from applying for funding, participating equally, or exercising decision-making power.

For example, one blind founder described repeatedly informing funders that their application systems were inaccessible with screen readers. Despite being fully capable of designing programmes, managing budgets, and ensuring compliance, she was unable to independently complete the application because the forms themselves were screen reader inaccessible. Some funders made improvements; others did not. This forces her to rely on team members to submit budgets and forms she cannot do a final review of.

Funders also emphasised that accessibility must shape both internal and outward-facing processes. Disability policies, reasonable-accommodation policies, and grievance mechanisms must be built with the leadership of persons with disabilities and other historically marginalised communities. The ability to raise a complaint safely and accessibly is itself a sign of trust and inclusion.

Recognise reasonable accommodation as an essential budget requirement

Disability justice work requires recognising that reasonable accommodation is a rights-based obligation. According to United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Reasonable accommodation is defined as “necessary and appropriate modification and adjustments not imposing a disproportionate or undue burden, where needed in a particular case, to ensure to persons with disabilities the enjoyment or exercise on an equal basis with others of all human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Work led by persons with disabilities often involves additional time, resources, assistive technologies, access support, and accessible environments. These are fundamental requirements for participation, leadership, and safety. Funders must budget for these needs upfront and understand that accessibility shapes programme costs and timelines.

> ***“We realised that global advocacy spaces are rarely accessible. What works is budgeting for reasonable accommodation from the start—accompaniment, travel support, and interpreters who understand the activist’s context. When we fund these needs, disabled activists, especially women with disabilities, can participate meaningfully rather than being present in name only.”***
>
> ***- A funder***

Organisations led by people with disabilities described how accessibility constraints directly influence their budgets. For instance, training programmes often require accessible venues—but in some cities, only one or two hotels have more than a single wheelchair-accessible room, and these are frequently five-star establishments.

Organisations are then perceived as choosing luxury, when there is no accessible two-star option. Similarly, for programmes involving women with disabilities travelling alone for the first time particularly from the rural contexts, onsite meals are essential—not per diems—because navigating unfamiliar transport, food delivery apps, or unsafe environments is not viable.

Some organisations, constrained by underfunding, run cross-disability programmes in inaccessible venues—an approach disabled leaders firmly reject. Ensuring access sometimes means running programmes less frequently but doing so ethically.

Education funding for people with disabilities, for instance, must include the accommodations that make learning possible. Organisations shared that funders often question why budgets should include costs for sign-language interpretation, personal assistance, accessible transportation, or power wheelchairs. Yet funding tuition alone is meaningless if a Deaf student cannot access classrooms or a wheelchair user cannot reach campus. Without this, participation becomes symbolic rather than substantive.

Redefine what counts as impact

Disability justice work challenges conventional ideas of impact. Transformative change is often relational, narrative, or infrastructural rather than easily quantifiable. Many organisations led by persons with disabilities emphasised that their impact unfolds over time, in ways that do not fit traditional output-driven models.

> ***"As funders, we have to push ourselves to say it is okay to fund innovation, experiments, creative work and it may not always work. Everything may not have tangible outputs. A lot of organisations we fund will use it for institutional strengthening work, for leadership transition, for strategic planning. There are no tangible activities like community members reached or any specific numbers. Right now, the biggest ask from all donors is impact and tangible output. So, we really have to examine this risk appetite among us."***
>
> ***- A funder***

Reporting, for example, is often framed around immediate results. But as one leader with a disability explained, disability work does not operate on instant outcomes. Improving quality of life, strengthening autonomy, or removing systemic barriers cannot be measured like surgeries completed or devices distributed. Impact may look like making information accessible, expanding mobility, shifting community attitudes, building self-confidence and sense of self or enabling someone to participate independently for the first time.

Funders at the roundtable also recognised that institutional strengthening are essential forms of impact, even when they do not produce immediate or easily countable results. Leadership transitions, building internal systems, planning for sustainability, or testing new approaches are foundational to long-term change, though they may not generate short-term deliverables.

Further, leaders with disabilities stressed that communities at the intersections of disability, caste, gender, and class often experience multiple crises simultaneously, and that this lived reality must shape how funders understand and evaluate impact. When impact is defined only in terms of easily countable outputs, there is a risk of overlooking the daily work of survival, access, and resilience that disabled communities carry.

Collaborate to influence the broader funding ecosystem

Because disability remains underfunded across sectors, individual funders alone cannot shift the landscape. Systemic change requires collective action. Funders can use their reputational power, networks, and institutional leverage to encourage peers to adopt inclusive and intersectional practices, sharing what they are learning and inviting others to experiment alongside them. Peer influence in philanthropy is strong. When one funder shifts norms on accessibility, on flexible funding, on investing in leadership of persons with disabilities, it often opens the door for others to follow.

Roundtable participants emphasised that disability inclusion cannot remain siloed within a few committed institutions. Funders can change norms by sharing learnings, opening conversations about mistakes, modelling better practices, and advocating for disability justice within donor networks, CSR forums, corporate boards, and philanthropic collaboratives. This includes encouraging other funders to adopt the principles advanced from this roundtable.

> ***"As funders, we have a responsibility to influence other funders as well. It's not enough for a few of us to lead—what matters is sharing how we do this work, comparing models, and shaping better outcomes together. When funders move together, they shift what the entire ecosystem sees as possible."***
>
> ***- A funder***

Collaborative philanthropy also helps reduce risk for individual funders. Pooling resources, co-funding grants, and aligning strategies make it easier for funders to support innovative or long-term disability justice work. Examples from other movements such as gender justice funds, climate collaboratives, and feminist funding consortia show that shared advocacy amplifies visibility, accelerates uptake, and normalises new approaches within the sector. Disability funders can apply these tested models to expand their influence.

Recognise care, well-being, and safety as integral to disability justice

Care, well-being, and safety are core components of disability justice. Disabled leaders and persons with disabilities -led organisations struggle with the costs of health insurance, mental health support, personal assistance, crisis response, and accessible safety planning. These expenses are the infrastructure that allows disabled teams to survive, work, and lead. Funding must explicitly include allocations for well-being, care support, and safe participation in public, political, and advocacy spaces.

> ***"Many of our partners led by women with disabilities were struggling even for basic health insurance. Very few organisations have the flexibility to use funds for care. So we now require partners to allocate at least 15% of their budget to well-being or crisis support—and they can allocate more if they need. Care must be funded as part of the work, not outside it."***
>
> ***- A funder***

Participants emphasised that crises, whether pandemics, floods, political upheaval, or natural disasters, expose the fragility of organisations led by persons with disabilities when care is unfunded. During recent crises, organisations led by women with disabilities were among those hit hardest. They could not shift budgets to cover care or health insurance because donors restricted reallocation. This experience made clear that crisis preparedness, team well-being, and care budgets are essential to feminist and disability justice.

Organisations led by persons with disabilities also described the ongoing struggle to secure basic care support for staff. Many do not have health insurance, cannot offer medical reimbursements, and lack the financial flexibility to cover urgent needs. One funder shared how they responded by requiring and normalising budget lines for well-being, care, and crisis contingencies, offering a model that other funders can adapt to their own contexts.

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