My Story, My Dignity

INCLUSIVE FUTURES

Transforming Education and Independent Living for Women and Girls with Disabilities and Single Mothers of Children with Disabilities

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List of Abbreviations

ChwD – Children with Disabilities
OPM – Office of the Prime Minister
PwD – Persons with Disabilities
WGwD – Women and Girls with Disabilities
SHG – Self-help Group
CRPD – Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
NGO – non-governmental organization

1. Executive Summary

Education and independent living are fundamental rights for all persons with disabilities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Yet, in Kosovo, women and girls with disabilities (WGwD) and children with disabilities (ChwD) continue to experience systemic exclusion due to inaccessible schools, insufficient learning support, lack of adaptive materials, stigma, limited availability of specialized services, and complete absence of independent living structures for adults. When children with disabilities cannot access the educational institutions and specialized services necessary for ensuring their well-being, this unmet need becomes an additional burden for single mothers who, despite their suffering, are often unable to secure these services privately due to financial constraints. Furthermore, single mothers of children with disabilities are often effectively prevented from pursuing their academic careers, as they provide 24/7 care without any institutional support whatsoever.
Self-help groups (SHGs) from the project My Story, My Dignity document deep-rooted challenges that undermine education quality, participation, equal opportunity, and long-term well-being. Many children face pressure to enter special classes rather than inclusive environments. Adults with disabilities in general lack personal assistance, supported housing, or community-based rehabilitation services. This policy paper examines the structural, institutional, and social barriers in Kosovo's education and independent living systems and proposes CRPD-aligned reforms necessary for achieving meaningful inclusion.

2. Background & Problem Statement

2.1 Context

tigma, which limits education, public participation, and access to decent work, and increases vulnerability to violence, isolation, and economic dependence. The situation is even more severe for single mothers of children with disabilities, who provide unpaid 24/7 care with little formal support (e.g., personal assistance, respite care, therapy, or inclusive education), leaving many excluded from employment and training and forced to rely on inadequate social assistance. Their marginalization reflects structural gaps in social protection, education, and labor market systems—not personal limitations. Moreover, when children with disabilities cannot access the educational institutions and specialized services necessary for their well-being, this unmet need becomes an additional burden on mothers, who, despite their suffering, are financially unable to secure these essential supports for their children. Kosovo has adopted progressive legislation supporting inclusive education and independent living:

- **Law No. 04/L-032 on Pre-University Education (2011)**
- **Law No. 06/L-084 on Child Protection (2019)**
- **Law No. 05/L-021 on Protection from Discrimination (2015)**
- **Law No. 05/L-020 on Gender Equality (2015)**
- **National Education Strategy 2022-2026**
- **National Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2025¡V2030**

CRPD Articles 19 and 24 guarantee:
• The right to inclusive education at all levels
• The right to live independently and be included in the community
However, implementation gaps remain significant.

2.2 Methodology

This policy paper is based on qualitative data gathered through the establishment and facilitation of six self-help groups (SHGs) over a three-year period, during which 48 meetings were organized and facilitated, providing a consistent and supportive space for sharing experiences and perspectives. Of the six SHGs, one consisted of single mothers of children with disabilities (ChwD), while the remaining five were composed of women and girls with disabilities (WGwD). The groups were geographically spread across six municipalities, with two based in Gjilan and one each in Kamenica, Vitia, Hani i Elezit, and Kaçanik.
The meetings were intentionally designed to foster open dialogue, mutual support, and collective problem-solving. Data for this paper were collected through participatory observation, group discussions, and detailed facilitator notes. Participation was voluntary, and all ethical standards related to confidentiality and informed consent were rigorously upheld. The insights and evidence emerging from these sessions provide the core foundation for the analysis and recommendations presented in this policy paper.

SHGs evidence indicates:

- Insufficient teaching assistants;
- Lack of accessible learning materials;
- Inaccessible school buildings;
- No sign language interpretation;
- No Braille or large-print textbooks;
- No audio materials;
- Lack of sufficient specialized services within schools;
- Lack of sufficient personal assistance system;
- Lack of financial and individualized support programs for single mothers of children with disabilities.

These gaps create long-term exclusion across education, employment, civic participation, and quality of life.

3. Findings

3.1 Inclusive Education in Kosovo: A Promise Unfulfilled

While inclusive education exists on paper, SHG testimonies clearly show that schools are **not equipped** to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

Key Problems Identified:

- Teachers lack training in inclusive education.
- Schools rarely adjust curriculum, teaching materials, or assessment methods.
- Children with disabilities struggle academically due to lack of support.

Since 2021, the Ministry of Education has taken positive steps to address the need for teaching assistants in pre-university education by employing around 330 assistants for children with disabilities across various municipalities. However, this number remains insufficient to meet the growing demand for professional support services (Coalition of NGOs for Child Protection in Kosovo, 2024).

3.2 Physical Accessibility in Schools

Most schools as reported by SHGs lacked:

- Ramps
- Lifts
- Handrails
- Accessible toilets
- Wide corridors
- Adaptive classroom furniture

Handikos (2020) has evaluated accessibility in 144 primary and lower secondary schools across 30 municipalities in Kosovo, revealing substantial gaps across key accessibility standards. None of the schools had designated disability parking, and while 81 had ramps, none met required standards, leaving only 28 with compliant ramps. Accessible toilets were absent in 107 schools, misused in 27, and functional in only 10. Elevators were missing in all but one school, where the elevator was nonfunctional. No tactile surfaces, orientation plans, or proper visual-contrast markings were identified. Access markings appeared in only two schools, and 33 schools (23%) lacked sufficient classroom space for wheelchair mobility, indicating widespread accessibility challenges. The situation presented in this research that illustrates the presence of countless architectural barriers in the evaluated school buildings proves the insufficient commitment of local and central institutions towards creating opportunities for physical access for people with disabilities, in primary and lower secondary education buildings, as a prerequisite for the inclusion of CwDs in education.

Countless architectural barriers impact physical inaccessibility, which further causes:

- Safety risks;
- Absences from school;
- Full exclusion for wheelchair user;
- Psychological pressure on families, with particular impact on single mothers who are
- forced to carry this burden alone.

3.3 Lack of Communication Accessibility

Kosovo schools and training facilities in general lack:

For Deaf Learners or those with Hearing Difficulties:
- Sign language interpreters
- Visual learning tools
- Captioned materials

For Blind Learners or those with vision difficulties:
- Braille materials
- Audio books
- Large-print materials
- Tactile diagrams
-

Public institutions in general do not have a procurement mechanism for producing accessibl materials/easy-to-read versions materials of school level or institutional notifications.

SHGs evidence confirms:

- Deaf children often rely on family members to interpret;
- Children with visual impairments cannot access the curriculum;
- Teachers do not have training in alternative communication methods.

3.4 Institutional Pressure Toward Special Education

Mothers on SHGs reported being advised by teachers or school administrators to:

- Transfer their children to special classes, which impacts their academic ambitions.

Common reasons include: lack of assistants, teachers feeling unprepared, poor accessibility, insufficient learning materials, and prejudice and stigma. Such practices contradict inclusive education principles and reinforce segregation.

3.5 Lack of Early Intervention and Specialized Services

Children with disabilities benefit significantly from: speech therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and psychotherapy.

However, these services are:
- Concentrated mostly in large municipalities;
- Not covered by Centers for Social Work (CSWs);
- Often dependent on CSO programmes that rely on external donors and constantly struggle to ensure sustainability;
- Private options for covering them are very expensive for families.

3.6 Independent Living Barriers for Women and Girls with Disabilities

Adults with disabilities – especially WGwD – lack:

- **Personal Assistance Services;**
- **Community Rehabilitation Centers;**
- **Accessible public transport;**
- **Assistive devices;**
- **Accessible, community-based housing and independent living arrangements.**
-

Currently, **Kosovo offers none of the core independent living rights outlined in CRPD Article 19** as following:

a) Persons with disabilities have the opportunity to choose their place of residence and where and with whom they live on an equal basis with others and are not obliged to live in a particular living arrangement;

b) Persons with disabilities have access to a range of in-home, residential and other community support services, including personal assistance necessary to support living and inclusion in the community, and to prevent isolation or segregation from the community;

c) Community services and facilities for the general population are available on an equal basis to persons with disabilities and are responsive to their needs.

3.7 Gender-Specific Barriers in Education & Independent Living for WGwD

WGwD face intersectional discrimination arising from gender norms, disability stigma, and structural inequalities across education, family, and community environments. These multiplenlayers of discrimination directly undermine their right to quality education, personal autonomy, and independent living.

They experience significant barriers, including:

- **Families restricting their mobility,** limiting participation in school, community activities, and public life.
- **Reduced investment in their education**, as families often prioritize the schooling of male siblings.
- **Systemic barriers to accessing inclusive education,** including lack of accessible learning materials, insufficient school support, and discriminatory attitudes from educators.

Social assumptions that women with disabilities are "dependent," incapable of pursuing education, employment, or independent living.

- **Higher risk of violence and exploitation**, including within the family and community.

These gender-specific barriers significantly restrict **educational attainment, skill development, social participation, and opportunities for independent living, further deepening inequality** across the life course.

3.8 Gender-Specific Barriers in Education & Independent Living for Single Mothers of Children with Disabilities

Single mothers of ChwD experience **multiple, overlapping, and compounded forms of discrimination** linked to gender norms, unpaid care work, disability stigma, and socioeconomic exclusion. Their challenges extend far beyond individual responsibilities and stem from deep structural gaps in Kosovo's social protection, education, and employment systems.

They face systemic barriers, including:

- **Full caregiving responsibility 24/7**, without access to personal assistance, respite care, or community-based services.
- **Exclusion from employment and academic advancement**, as caregiving obligations prevent participation in higher education, vocational training, or the labor market.

- **Dependence on inadequate social assistance schemes**, which do not cover the real costs of disability or enable long-term economic stability.
- **Increased exposure to poverty and social isolation**, as unpaid care work restricts mobility and public participation.
- **Institutional discrimination**, where policies and programs fail to recognize the economic and social value of unpaid caregiving.

These intersecting barriers severely limit their access t**o education, economic independence, decision-making power, and opportunities for long-term development**, placing single mothers of ChwD among the most vulnerable groups in Kosovo.

Summary of key findings

1. Inclusive education policies cannot be implemented due to lack of resources, staff, and accessible materials.
2. School infrastructure is largely inaccessible and unsafe for ChwD.
3. There is no availability of sign language interpretation or Braille materials in public schools.
4. Specialized services are insufficient and largely CSO dependent for vulnerable groups, including WGwD and single mothers of ChwD.
5. Institutional bias pushes ChwD toward special classes.
6. Systemic barriers to inclusive education and access to specialized services for ChwD further intensify the emotional hardship and financial strain of families, particularly single mothers of ChwD.
7. Adults with disabilities lack any formal independent living support system.
8. WGwD face additional discrimination due to gender norms.
9. Single mothers of ChwD are one of the most structurally excluded groups in Kosovo, carrying full-time caregiving responsibilities without access to formal support services.
10. Municipalities lack budgets and expertise for disability inclusion.

4. Recommendations

4.1 Inclusive and accessible education

- Teaching Assistants must be: full-time, trained in disability-inclusive education and provided for individualized needs.

4.2 Develop Accessible Teaching Materials

Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) should ensure the following accessible teaching materials: Braille books, e-print materials, audio books, tactile learning tools, digital resources based on accessible communications standards/easy-to-read materials.

4.3 Prohibit Advise from School staff on Transfers to Special Classes

- Introduce oversight mechanisms to monitor discriminatory referral practices.

4.4 Municipalities must make All Schools Accessible

- Annual accessibility audits and renovations must include: ramps, elevators, accessible toilets and tactile signage.

4.5 Create Municipal Early Intervention Teams

Teams should include: speech therapists, psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists.

4.6 Provide Accessible Transportation

ChwD must have access to safe and reliable school transportation, while WGwD should be provided with equally accessible transport to pursue their academic studies or vocational training.

4.7 Specialized Services and Financial Support

- Provide free specialized home-based services for WGwD and single mothers of ChwD.
- Introduce the concept of compensation for single mothers of ChwD for taking care 24/7 for their children.

5. Conclusion

The evidence from self-help groups clearly shows that, in Kosovo, inclusive education and independent living for women and girls with disabilities (WGwD) and children with disabilities (ChwD) remain promises on paper rather than rights realized in practice. Systemic barriers in schools, the absence of accessible materials and communication support, architectural inaccessibility, and the near-complete lack of independent living services collectively produce long-term exclusion from education, employment, community life, and decision-making. These gaps are not individual failures, but the result of structural shortcomings in social protection, education, and labor market systems.

The situation of single mothers of ChwD is particularly alarming. Their unpaid 24/7 caregiving, in the absence of personal assistance, respite care, specialized services, or adequate financial support, pushes many into poverty, isolation, and dependency on inadequate social schemes. When children with disabilities cannot access the educational institutions, specialized services, and supports they need, the burden of unmet needs falls almost entirely on mothers, who are often unable to secure these services privately due to financial constraints. This reality places single mothers of ChwD among the most structurally excluded groups in Kosovo. Kosovo has already committed, through its legislation and ratification of the CRPD, to ensuring inclusive education (Article 24) and independent living and community inclusion (Article 19). Implementing the recommendations in this policy paper—strengthening inclusive education, expanding early intervention and specialized services, ensuring accessibility, establishing independent living supports, and introducing targeted financial and social protection measures for WGwD and single mothers of ChwD—is both a legal obligation and a moral imperative. Moving forward requires coordinated action by central and local institutions, in partnership with CSOs, organizations of persons with disabilities, and women's groups. Most importantly, WGwD and single mothers of ChwD must be recognized as rights-holders and active partners in policy design, implementation, and monitoring. Only by centering their voices and dismantling the structural barriers they face can Kosovo move from declarations of inclusion to tangible, lived equality for all persons with disabilities.

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