

Building on the assessment: what disability-responsiveness should mean for the Global Compact for Migration (GCM)



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Person-first language

What's in a Word?

Say it Right. Say it with Respect.



PERSON(S)
with disabilities

- ✓ Women with disabilities
- ✓ Children with disabilities
- ✓ Migrants with disabilities
- ✓ Persons without disabilities



- ✗ Sufferer, stricken, wheelchair-bound
- ✗ Physically or mentally challenged
- ✗ Handicapped or special
- ✗ Normal/ abnormal
- ✗ Differently-abled



See the person,
not just the
disability



ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores how the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) can be made more disability-responsive, building on the Disability Migration Network's (DMN) prior analysis and forthcoming DMN and International Labour Organization (ILO) publication on disability and labour migration in ASEAN. While the GCM promotes rights-based migration governance, disability is mentioned only in three of its twenty-three Objectives, leaving significant conceptual and operational gaps. Drawing on four focus group discussions with Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand, the study identifies what disability-responsiveness means in practice and how it can be integrated across migration policy. Findings reveal that migrants with disabilities and acquired disabilities feel marginalised throughout the migration process, facing inaccessible systems, limited participation, and weak institutional support. Participants emphasised that protection and empowerment must function together: protection as a foundation for, not a limit to, inclusion. A disability-responsive GCM therefore requires structural reform, embedding the principles of non-discrimination, accessibility, participation, and equality of opportunity in labour, social protection, and reintegration systems. The study calls for co-designing policies with OPDs, institutionalising accessible support, expanding representation, and treating disability-responsiveness not as goodwill but as a binding human rights obligation.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper builds on findings from the report *Assessing Disability-Responsiveness of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)* (DMN, 2025), which examined in detail how the GCM conceptualises and operationalises disability. Data collected was initially part of the forthcoming DMN and ILO publication *Disability Dimensions of Labour Migration in the ASEAN Region*, but the analysis evolved into an independent report to focus more deeply on what disability-responsiveness should mean within the GCM framework. Drawing on focus group discussions (FGDs) with disability experts from four ASEAN Member States, it explores how disability-responsiveness can be understood and identifies measures to strengthen the inclusion of disability across migration governance.

Disability-responsive migration governance

The GCM, adopted in 2018, is the first intergovernmental agreement under the United Nations to establish a shared framework for managing international migration (United Nations, 2018). It comprises ten cross-cutting principles and twenty-three Objectives aimed at promoting safe, orderly, and regular migration through a rights-based and cooperative approach. Although non-binding, the GCM seeks to uphold the rights and dignity of all migrants across the migration continuum; from origin and transit to destination, integration, or reintegration (GFMD, 2023).

Despite its comprehensive intent, disability is explicitly referenced in only three Objectives: Objective 7 (23a/b) on reducing vulnerabilities, Objective 15 (31a/c) on access to basic services, and Objective 20 (36e) on inclusive financial systems. These provisions introduce the notion of a “disability-responsive” approach, calling for support systems, accessible service points, and inclusive financial mechanisms. However, beyond these limited mentions, there is little conceptual or operational clarity on how disability-responsiveness should be achieved.

Building on previous DMN analysis (DMN, 2025), the GCM demonstrates symbolic recognition of disability but lacks substantive mechanisms to address the barriers faced by migrants with disabilities and acquired disabilities, such as inaccessible services, absence of reasonable accommodation, and limited participation in policy processes (DMN, 2024; DMN & ILO, forthcoming). It falls short of integrating key principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), including non-discrimination, participation, equality of opportunity, and accessibility. Consequently, disability remains marginal within migration governance, and the absence of a clear conceptualisation of disability-responsiveness has hindered practical implementation (DMN, 2025).

Recent developments suggest growing recognition of this gap, with the *Asia-Pacific Migration Report* (ESCAP, 2024) extending the disability lens beyond the GCM’s three Objectives, recommending integration of disability across data disaggregation (Objective 1), climate action (Objective 2), screening and referral (Objective 12), anti-discrimination measures (Objective 17), and sustainable reintegration (Objective 21). This reflects an emerging consensus that disability should be embedded throughout the migration process, rather than confined to vulnerability discourse.

Findings from the DMN’s pilot study in the Philippines reinforce this shift (DMN, 2024), as persons with disabilities emphasised that true disability-responsiveness requires more than supportive attitudes. It demands structural reform: removing restrictive policies, ensuring accessible employment, and engaging Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) in programme design across origin and destination countries. Achieving a genuinely disability-responsive GCM therefore requires moving beyond symbolic recognition towards systemic, inclusive change.

The following sections outline the scope and methods of this study and present key insights drawn from the FGDs with disability experts, offering grounded perspectives on how the GCM can become more disability-responsive in practice.

SCOPE AND METHOD

This qualitative study examines the GCM through a disability lens to identify what a disability-responsive approach to migration should entail. It aims to provide guidance for GCM stakeholders on how disability-responsiveness can be meaningfully integrated into the GCM's operationalisation. The study draws upon the insights of disability experts and leaders from OPDs across ASEAN.

Data collection

Informed consent was provided for the four FGDs, which were conducted with leaders from OPDs in Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, and Thailand, representing a range of impairment types. Each discussion was semi-structured guided by the disability-relevant dimensions of Objectives 7 (addressing vulnerabilities) and 15 (access to basic services) of the GCM. Three FGDs were held in person (Cambodia, the Philippines, and Thailand) and one online (Myanmar), lasting between one and three hours, with between three and five participants per session. Participant details are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: FGD participant breakdown

Country	Date	Impairment types of participants
Cambodia	13 Dec 2024	3 participants with physical disabilities; 2 disability advocates without disabilities
Myanmar	4 Dec 2024	3 participants with physical disabilities; 1 unknown
Philippines	17 Jan 2025	2 deaf participants; 1 with psychosocial disability; 1 blind
Thailand	12 Dec 2024	2 participants with physical disabilities; 1 blind

Data analysis

All FGD recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. A hybrid thematic coding approach was applied to assess disability-responsiveness. The first round employed deductive coding based on pre-defined categories derived from the CRPD principles. This was followed by inductive coding to identify patterns and themes within these categories. Representative quotations were selected to substantiate key findings.

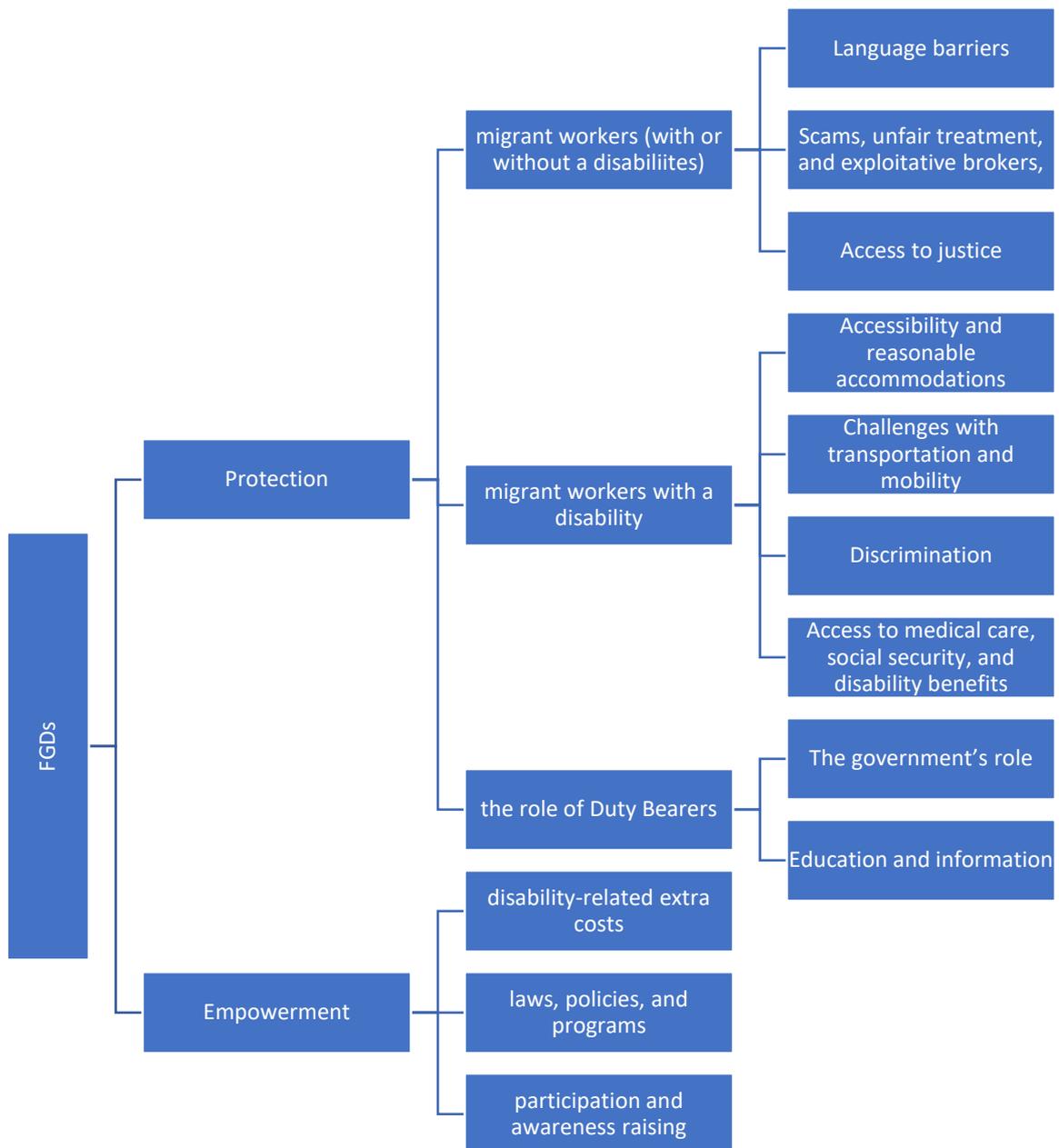
Limitations

The study draws on a small, non-representative sample and may not capture the full heterogeneity of persons with disabilities experiences across ASEAN. Recruitment through the DMN and ILO TRIANGLE networks may have introduced selection bias, underrepresenting harder-to-reach populations. Furthermore, nuances may have been lost during translation. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the results.

RESULTS

The Four FGDs discussions aimed to spark dialogue and inform the implementation of the GCM framework, with emphasis on Objectives 7 (addressing vulnerabilities) and 15 (access to basic services). From the discussions, two overarching themes were identified: (1) Protection, and (2) Empowerment. These overarching themes reflect both the immediate safeguarding needs and the longer-term inclusion goals required to support migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities. Each theme was further broken down into specific categories to structure the analysis, as detailed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Key themes and categories from FGDs



From Protection

Protection is a central component of the GCM, as at its core it aims to protect migrant workers from different vulnerabilities and ensure the full realisation of their fundamental human rights. The importance of this commitment was reflected by the FGD participants' comments, who shared their expertise and lived experiences as persons with disabilities. However, the analysis reveals a tension, when protection is not coupled with empowerment, it can inadvertently lead to restrictions. Well-intentioned safeguards can end up limiting opportunities for persons with disabilities rather than enabling them. To reflect these nuances, the analysis is structured: as a migrant worker (with or without a disability), as a migrant worker with a disability, and the role of Duty Bearers.

The protection of migrant workers (with or without a disabilities)

Across all FGDs, participants identified a core set of vulnerabilities commonly faced by all migrant workers (with and without disabilities) throughout the migration cycle. These included (a) language barriers, (b) exposure to scams, unfair treatment, and exploitative intermediaries, and (c) limited access to justice.

(a) Language barriers: Participants emphasised the challenge of language barriers that migrant workers face especially when it comes to filling in paperwork, understanding their contracts, and accessing medical care.

“Language barriers for migrant workers with disabilities may be expected. [They may] struggle with filling out paperwork; requiring someone to assist them in explaining their medical condition to [or from] doctors” (Thailand FGD).

“If they (migrant workers) don't know Thai, they sign their documents - they actually don't know what's written there... so the information on the document, it's not accessible” (Thailand FGD).

Here, language is not just a communication barrier, it becomes a structural form of exclusion that compromises informed consent, autonomy, and can impact both the access to and quality of basic services. This includes the need for sign language and other forms of communication. This concern was also highlighted in the DMN & ILO (forthcoming) study where several migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities recounted having to use their smartphones to translate medical terms, undergoing medical treatments without fully understanding their purpose, and even suspecting their employers of lying to them about their own medical diagnoses that were given in a foreign language.

(b) Scams, unfair treatment, and exploitative brokers: FGD participants cited how migrant workers are targeted by deceptive or exploitative practices, from paying inflated fees to brokers to facing discriminatory treatment in the workplace. These conditions reflect not just individual wrongdoing but also the absence of legal and institutional accountability.

“Thai people have more access compared to migrant workers and there are people who take advantage of migrant workers, for example, they ask them to pay more for some services” (Thailand FGD).

“It's hard to communicate with the broker. Sometimes it is very hard when we don't know how to communicate with them” (Cambodia FGD).

“There are no people to ensure our safety when we arrive there [countries of destination]” (Cambodia FGD).

Such exploitation could be exacerbated for migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities, who may be perceived as easier targets due to social stigma leading to dependency on others for information or mobility.

(c) Access to justice: Legal redress was outlined to be out of reach for many migrant workers. When rights violations occur, participants highlighted the potential lack of legal support, language interpretation, and procedural safeguards. It was thought that detention or deportation could happen without due process.

“The last issue is the legal access whether they are migrants or not. Especially if you're a migrant and your rights have been violated, that's a big problem - [getting] access to justice” (Thailand FGD).

“When the police arrest us [migrant workers], it is very hard to solve because we don't have any insurance. We don't have any [access to someone who knows the] official language to [help us] advocate with the police, so we have to stay in jail or prison” (Cambodia FGD).

Barriers to accessing justice may disproportionately affect migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities, due to the absence of disability-responsive protection mechanisms, such as accessible complaint systems, disability-sensitised labour inspectors, and lack of awareness among intermediaries and employers. Nevertheless, solutions should not solely focus on protection to compensate for situations of vulnerability. Efforts should be made to empower migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities with disability-sensitive monitoring and enforcement systems, ensuring that persons with disabilities can not only access legal remedies but also channels to advocacy and accountability.

The protection of migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities

FGD participants pointed out common challenges experienced for prospective and active migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities. These include (a) accessibility and reasonable accommodations throughout the migration cycle, (b) challenges with transportation and mobility, (c) discrimination, and (d) access to medical care, social security, and disability benefits in their countries of destination.

(a) Accessibility and reasonable accommodations throughout the migration cycle: FGD participants pointed out the probable issues when there is a lack of accessibility and reasonable accommodations available for persons with disabilities across every phase of the

migration cycle. These include issues pertaining to accessing basic services such as obtaining a passport, visiting the embassy and job sites, and housing in the countries of destination.

“The first part is accessibility. Embassies have staircases [and no ramps or lifts]. Maybe it's impossible for wheelchair users to access the building” (Thailand FGD).

“We need convenience for them when they stay, when they work abroad regarding going into the higher floors or going down before or after work time” (Cambodia FGD).

FGD participants felt responsibility often falls on persons with disabilities themselves, who must research, prepare for, and navigate these barriers independently. This issue is present even before they can think of going abroad or before applying to a job.

“People with disabilities, we need to check what kind of rooms are there and basically what is happening” (Myanmar FGD).

“[What I am] most worried about is where I will stay [if I go abroad]. The reason I am worried about this is because I have no information and people there may not know what kind [of help and reasonable accommodations], people with disabilities need” (Thailand FGD).

(b) Challenges with transportation and mobility: Connected to concerns about reasonable accommodations are the challenges associated with transportation and mobility, both for logistics (e.g. inaccessible local transport) and safety (e.g. lack of trained personnel during transit). These challenges could increase the cost and complexity of migration and may even prevent participation.

“Public transport may not be available or accessible. They [persons with disabilities] rely on taxis which are more expensive” (Thailand FGD).

A participant pointed out that if transportation is not accessible, this essentially means that persons with disabilities, especially those that live in rural areas, will not be able to avail even basic services that are needed for (or within) migration.

“If they [persons with disabilities] can't access even basic education or basic transportation - even tricycles - which is the most prevalent form of transportation, especially in the rural areas, then they [basic services] are not accessible” (Philippine FGD).

Participants also described air travel as particularly problematic, with personnel often unaware of how to assist appropriately based on the type of disability.

“The barriers that I can think of are in the airplane because the crew may not be oriented about persons with disabilities, especially the visually impaired... I was going to visit my province, the main problem is that we

can't be guided by them [airport personnel], or we can't hold on to them [airport personnel]" (Philippine FGD).

"It is very difficult for us [persons with impaired hearing] to go abroad and at the airport or in transit, they [airport personnel] do not understand that we do not really need the wheelchair, but they still bring it. They usually bring us a wheelchair, and they ask us to sit on it. Actually, what we need is communication. People lack the knowledge of what kind of assistance persons with disabilities need" (Myanmar FGD).

"It is very difficult for a person with a disability to move. We cannot move if we don't have any personal assistant. For a person with a severe disability, we don't have experience moving abroad" (Cambodia FGD).

The DMN and ILO (forthcoming) survey results coincided with these findings, where transportation challenges are exacerbated when taking irregular routes by land or sea as protective proactive protocol and organised services are typically absent. Though ad hoc, reactive support may be provided when an issue arises, this may impact the dignity of persons with disabilities (e.g. being carried). The shift of responsibility on to individuals to mitigate risks, increases the likelihood of persons with disabilities facing situations of vulnerability due to the lack of support and assistance.

(c) Discrimination: Participants shared typical situations of vulnerability where they had experienced discrimination, mainly centred around negative assumptions at home, during job applications, immigration processing, and airport and airline interactions. These experiences reveal bias that not only restrict opportunities but also heighten the situations of vulnerability of persons with disabilities. Rather than being supported with equal protection and accommodations, they are often excluded or subjected to unnecessary scrutiny based solely on their disability. For instance:

"A [had a] little bit of [an] issue upon entering the country of destination... Since I'm a deaf person and they [em/immigration] do not use sign language, they communicate with me using their verbal voice, but they are not allowing me to communicate with them using pen and paper or writings. They are like forcing me to speak out" (Philippine FGD).

"In Viet Nam, I went to their immigration and then I explained that I'm a deaf person. There's no persons with disabilities section [counter] in their place. There's no one who will assist us" (Philippine FGD).

Other FGD participants outlined that persons with disabilities also experience discrimination from their own neighbours and communities who have limiting beliefs about what occupations they can do and their ability to migrate as workers. In Cambodia, FGD participants echoed the sentiments expressed in the DMN & ILO (forthcoming) study that persons with disabilities can be told that their only option for migrating is to beg, reinforcing harmful stereotypes about their economic potential.

“The most discrimination is as a person with a disability... I was born in a poor family. They tried to negotiate for me to work in Thailand as a beggar. But I say no” (Cambodia FGD).

Upon return, migrant workers can face judgment for not having saved money during their time abroad. These comments highlight the persistent stigma and unrealistic expectations placed on migrant workers, compounding their vulnerabilities.

“[We can receive] discrimination from our neighbours when we arrive back to our home country. For example, if we go to a second country, we want to have more benefits right? But when we come home, their [family, friends and neighbours] hands are in their pockets. Many people around us now just do not value us [if we return with no money]” (Cambodia FGD).

FGD participants from Myanmar also experienced personal discrimination during their passport application, where the officer would ask questions, ask for money and doubt the ability of the person with disabilities to travel and work abroad.

“The problem starts as soon as we start applying for the passport... In my case, in immigration and when I started applying for the passport for visit, at the time they already started to raise questions: ‘Why are you going abroad? What are you going to do?’ They’re not happy with my answers and they wanted to ask for money. And there’s another scenario. One of my acquaintances has a disability and she wanted to go and work in other countries... at the time it was very difficult to submit the application and also very difficult to receive the permission. They asked for so many documents to submit and when we submitted the application they started to say, ‘it’s impossible’ and ‘which company are you going to work for? What are you going to do there? do you have previous experience? It is not possible for them [persons with disabilities] to go and work in other countries?’. Immigration officers, they felt very strange or weird, and they did not want to issue their passport for a job” (Myanmar FGD).

“The immigration officers scrutinise very strictly and at the passport office, they do not believe that these people really have impaired hearing, and you have to explain a lot when you go to another country” (Myanmar FGD).

Airlines were also identified as sources of discrimination, with FGD participants reported being denied boarding or required to have a companion even when they were capable of independent travel. These actions reflect harmful assumptions about autonomy and safety.

“Six months ago, I tried to go abroad alone, and I mentioned that I would go with a wheelchair, and I would like to go solo. But the airline insists that there is no way to do this and that I must have a companion who is going to support me, so they refuse to let me board the plane” (Myanmar FGD).

“Three years ago, I was on a flight from <airport> to Yangon and one of the passengers was with impaired vision disability. The air hostess insisted that no, she couldn't board. She will be left behind. At that time the person with the impaired vision said is there any restriction for the disabled person to fly? And the airline and air hostess could not produce any documents. At the time he was with a companion, somebody was with him” (Myanmar FGD).

Overall FGD participants described situations that increased their vulnerability, from negative experiences with job placements and passports, to being denied the right to board a plane, not due to skill or eligibility, but because of negative assumptions about disability. These layers of bureaucratic and attitudinal discrimination increase the risk to miss opportunities, and this can lead to social exclusion.

(d) Access to medical care, social security, and disability benefits in their countries of destination: Participants outlined concerns regarding the lack of continuity in health care and social protection systems once persons with disabilities arrive in the countries of destination. They cited the differences of medical care and social security benefits across different countries which may be hard to navigate for migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities.

“[Medical care] differs from country to country... accessing the required treatment or education can be difficult” (Thailand FGD).

“For persons without disabilities from another country or those with acquired disability... the main problem [is] that they cannot access the social protection programme” (Thailand FGD).

A prevalent message was that even when systems of protection exist, employers may refuse to cooperate, and rights such as retraining or reemployment support are rarely extended to migrants with disabilities and acquired disabilities.

“Without a disability card they [persons with disabilities] cannot access rehabilitation services at all, and migrant workers with disabilities are also often overlooked and asked to return to their home countries. Employers refuse to sign necessary documents. The situation becomes even worse because Social Security should aim to support everyone to return to the workforce. This includes providing opportunities for retraining, securing new skills and facilitating shifts for migrants to work. This also extends to migrant workers with disabilities to ensure that they have equal access to services like rehabilitation and employment opportunities” (Thailand FGD).

“Benefits of persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities should be the same. Like the incentive, the wages, and everything, and overtime” (Cambodia FGD).

The prevailing understanding in the FGD, is that there is limited access to basic services, such as healthcare or rehabilitation. In cases, this may reflect a lack of information rather than an

absence of basic services, as the DMN and ILO (forthcoming) study showed participants (particularly migrant workers with acquired disabilities) did report accessing basic support (mainly in healthcare and rehabilitation). However, when it comes to re-entering the workforce after acquiring a disability or accessing social protection in countries of destination, participants reported limited to no access. These gaps sharply increase situations of vulnerability and limit persons with disabilities ability to recover and reintegrate.

Protection and the role of Duty Bearers

This subsection examines how FGD participants view Duty Bearers' role in the protection of migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities. It was emphasised that respective governments of countries of origin and countries of destination not only play a huge role in ensuring safe, orderly and regular migration but also in empowering accessible migration. Yet it was acknowledged that without systemic inclusion of persons with disabilities in policymaking and access to disability-responsive information and education pertinent to migration, protection efforts risk reinforcing tokenism.

(a) The government's role: FGD participants called for stronger leadership among policymakers to design migration policies that include and engage with persons with disabilities, to make sure safeguards reflect their lived experiences.

“Our leaders need to be obliged to follow and to do their jobs as leaders... to look at the ability and not just the disability. I think we need to see disability rights and welfare as a part of human capital management because we are also humans” (Philippine FGD).

Crucially, it was emphasised that migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities must be included in decision-making processes, ensuring that policies reflect lived realities rather than based on assumptions.

“What I would like to see in the policy, who will make this [policy] should be an expert. There must be a person with a disability present” (Philippine FGD).

Yet it was consistently noted that Duty Bearers are currently uninformed and unaware of the basic needs of persons with disabilities, leading to inaccessible services and discriminatory interactions.

“The main problem is that most government workers are not oriented [in disability education and needs]” (Philippine FGD).

“The leaders should know that they need to have improvement for us to acquire basic services. For the deaf, [we need] interpreters and it's also good if there are closed captions” (Philippine FGD).

FGD Participants also requested that the government should support accessible and safe migration for persons with disabilities throughout the whole migration cycle.

“The government should guarantee that when there are problems, there will be someone who will help them on time in a different country. And they can ask for information from the government or the agency in the country that they migrate to” (Cambodia FGD).

“They [Duty Bearers] should support migration to be accessible or to be easier than [it is] now” (Myanmar FGD).

“I would like to talk about the home service, especially from the Duty Bearers side. They have all these services to be provided on paper but there's nothing on the ground... [The] home service [program] means they are going to help you until you arrive home... But if you reach out to them, they don't have any service available in reality. I never received the home service passport” (Myanmar FGD).

The experience and opinions of FGD participants, aligns with the DMN and ILO (forthcoming) findings, as it was noted that confidence in broader institutional support was quite low, furthermore, participants cited limited awareness of the government’s available support.

(b) Education and information: FGD participants spoke about the importance of education and information for prospective migrant workers with disabilities. Having information that is accessible and understandable, that will support persons with disabilities to make empowered decisions about migration is key.

“Knowledge and information about the destination country is very important” (Cambodia FGD).

“One of the duties that Duty Bearers can do is to provide orientation and an environment to learn [for persons with disabilities]” (Thailand FGD).

“Blind individuals must have access to documents first and the Duty Bearers must ensure that documents and information are accessible and understandable for blind people to make life in a foreign country much easier for them and alternatively, human assistance may be required, for example, assistance reading documents and services like these should be made available” (Thailand FGD).

Information must also be available by type of disability, with clear guidance on employment opportunities, accommodations, and legal rights.

“Depending on their type of disability, if it is more physical, hearing or a vision impairment - they should be receiving information about their employment opportunities... The job openings should be indicated for persons with disability; it is also included in the CRPD and ASEAN [Enabling]

Masterplan¹. We have already developed these documents, but we have to enforce them” (Myanmar FGD).

FGD participants again emphasised that information and education about disability must also be given to stakeholders.

“We can explain disability rights and welfare in a way that is meaningful to everyone” (Philippine FGD).

“And we should have a wide dissemination for all people about clear information, for bringing people to work abroad” (Cambodia FGD).

Participants challenged the idea that disability automatically equates to dependency or exclusion from the labour market. What they seek is not special treatment, but fair access, opportunity and recognition as workers.

“[What] I thought about is the readiness of persons with disabilities to work. Because most of the time, the government operates on a dole-out system. If you notice, the government right now is talking about [providing] discounts for persons with disabilities, but actually, persons with disabilities do not want discounts. Persons with disabilities like me are asking for employment” (Philippine FGD).

“We are persons with disabilities. We are skilled. We are full of talents that may be used to improve our society” (Philippine FGD).

The current implementation of the GCM may frame protection as prevention emphasising risk avoidance rather than creating enabling environments. However, this approach does not sufficiently account for the layered and specific vulnerabilities that prospective, active, and returning migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities face. Well-intentioned safeguards can unintentionally become barriers, rooted in the persistent assumption that persons with disabilities do not migrate or cannot do so safely. As a result, persons with disabilities are frequently excluded from migration systems, not because of inability, but due to inaccessible information, outdated perceptions of disability, and the lack of institutional support. This reveals this critical tension, that when protection is narrowly defined, it limits rather than expands opportunity. Participants in the FGDs clearly expressed a willingness and readiness to work and migrate but felt sidelined by rigid interpretations of risk and outdated ideas about capacity. For example, restrictive medical screenings, visa denials, and discriminatory job application processes all reinforce a view of disability as incompatible with migration (DMN and ILO, forthcoming). Therefore, the question is not whether persons with disabilities should be protected but how protection can be reframed to also empower. Rather than using protection to justify exclusion, policies and systems must aim to make labour migration accessible and inclusive. The goal should not be to prevent migration, but to ensure

¹ <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/publication-asean-enabling-masterplan-2025-1.pdf>

that migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities can move safely, with dignity and support, across every stage of the migration cycle.

To Empowerment

The approach on migration ought to switch from a rigid perspective of protection to that of empowerment. For this to happen, FGD participants identified three common themes that can be taken into consideration: (a) disability-related costs including assistive devices and personal assistants, (b) laws, policies, and programs, and (c) participation and awareness raising.

(a) Disability-related costs including assistive devices and personal assistants: Empowerment begins with acknowledging that additional costs, such as interpreters, assistive devices, and personal assistants are essential, not optional, for the protection of persons with disabilities and for them to participate equally and be empowered in migration processes.

“They [Duty Bearers] need to have a budget for interpreters, so it's not our responsibility to get an interpreter and pay for them... For example, during the interview. The process should include an interpreter for the deaf. And the person who is interviewing should be aware about the system, the process of interviewing a deaf” (Philippine FGD).

FGD participants also called for system-wide provisions, including call centres, inclusive communication platforms, and pre-arranged support services.

“We need to make a list and then we have to share it with their employers and also in policy change we need to provide inclusiveness for the person with disability and if there is anything required, any assistance we need to establish like appliances or call centres for them” (Myanmar FGD).

(b) Laws, policies, and programs: Participants strongly called for a shift from charity-based approaches to a rights-based paradigm in labour migration policy. Legal and policy frameworks must enable the full and equal participation of persons with disabilities and should be aligned with the CRPD and the International Labour Standards (ILS). This shift involves not only revising domestic legislation but also creating disability-responsive Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLA) and ensuring access to benefits for migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities, regardless of citizenship status. A consistent theme across FGDs was that laws and programs, while often present on paper, lack implementation and meaningful inclusion of persons with disabilities. There is a call to move beyond token policy references and toward systemic changes that reflect lived realities, such as addressing barriers in migration procedures, the lack of disability data, and the exclusion of persons with disabilities from key policy discussions. FGD participants also advocated for inclusive labour migration policies that are practical, enforceable, and capable of addressing the specific needs of different types of disabilities. Tools to identify and dismantle structural barriers were seen as essential, along with training for government institutions and policy-makers to build disability competency and accountability.

“The number one policy that the government will have to change is that we must go from a dole out policy to rights-based policy” (Philippine FGD).

“Government agreements and bilateral agreements... will allow integration of benefits between [countries of origin and destination] for collection of information” (Thailand FGD).

“[A] big policy change is harnessing the positives and potentials of persons with disability, through different trainings and educational curriculum” (Philippine FGD).

“There should be a clear policy and procedure if we want to work abroad” (Cambodia FGD).

“Policies should be precise and practical... organisations such as ILO play a major role in reviewing and developing” (Myanmar FGD).

“We need to identify the barriers persons with disabilities face and find tools and methods to remove them. We must understand migration laws and how to make them accessible” (Myanmar FGD).

(c) Participation and awareness raising: Empowerment requires more than policies, it requires participation. FGD participants strongly advocated for a whole-of-society approach, where persons with disabilities are not only recipients of support but also active agents shaping policy and community responses to migration. True inclusion means dismantling paternalistic attitudes and ensuring that persons with disabilities have platforms to voice their priorities and exercise agency. FGD participants identified gaps in civic engagement, emphasising the need to educate all stakeholders, including government, employers, trade unions, recruitment agencies, families and persons with disabilities themselves on labour rights and inclusive migration pathways. They also called for inter-agency cooperation and stronger roles for OPDs in both the countries of origin and destination.

“We should educate them [persons with disabilities] regarding their labour laws... and we also need civic engagement, because when the government developed all the policies, people with disability were not invited” (Thailand FGD).

“It’s not just about the government alone... OPDs must also take a role in supporting migrant workers with disabilities” (Thailand FGD).

“The best way to change, that is to empower the persons with disabilities themselves” (Philippine FGD).

“Not only the policy, but we need to educate agencies ... they are developing the policy for persons with disability. But the ‘normal people’ [persons without disabilities] are developing policies without including those with disabilities to share their views” (Philippine FGD).

“We have to conduct advocacy and awareness raising - not only with the government but also with the parents [families] of the person with disability” (Myanmar FGD).

Protection must not become the ceiling; it should be the foundation. Without being coupled with empowerment, protection risks becoming a rationale for exclusion. Ensuring persons with disabilities are actively involved in shaping, accessing, and benefiting from labour migration systems is essential to dismantling structural inequality.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Persons with disabilities continue to feel marginalised within migration governance. Their voices are rarely included in decision-making, and they are too often seen through a lens of vulnerability rather than as rights-holders with agency and expertise. The GCM recognises disability symbolically, but without a clear conceptualisation of disability-responsiveness, implementation remains limited and fragmented (DMN, 2025). Findings from the FGDs reveal that protection and empowerment must be understood as mutually reinforcing principles. When protection is framed solely as prevention, it can unintentionally restrict opportunities, limiting rather than enabling participation. Participants described how inaccessible systems, discriminatory attitudes, and procedural barriers, from recruitment to return compound exclusion. Language barriers, lack of reasonable accommodation, and inaccessible complaint mechanisms leave many without effective recourse or support. Employers and intermediaries are often unaware or untrained about disability-inclusive practices, while governments lack disability-responsive mechanisms within labour, social protection, and migration systems. Protection must not become the ceiling but the foundation for empowerment. Participants emphasised that empowerment requires systemic reforms, addressing accessibility, ensuring inclusive employment pathways, and recognising disability-related costs such as assistive devices, personal assistants, and interpreters as essential rather than optional. Migrant workers with disabilities and acquired disabilities seek not special treatment but equal opportunity, fair access, and recognition as workers. Their meaningful participation in policymaking, training, and social dialogue is central to achieving genuine inclusion. A disability-responsive GCM therefore requires a shift from welfare-based or charity approaches toward rights-based governance. This includes embedding principles of non-discrimination, accessibility, participation, and equality of opportunity across all stages of the migration cycle and ensuring that both protection and empowerment are operationalised in practice. Governments, employers, and civil society must act as informed Duty Bearers, ensuring that protective measures do not reinforce dependency but instead create enabling environments for independent living and decent work. Building inclusive migration systems demands collective action and accountability among tripartite actors with OPDs. Disability-responsiveness should no longer be viewed as an act of goodwill but as a fundamental human rights obligation. Recommendations are as follows:

- Co-design and communication: Engage persons with disabilities and their families in developing accessible, inclusive, and relevant information and programmes.
- Institutionalised support: Ensure disability-responsive provisions such as portability of assistive devices, interpreters, and personal assistants across the migration process.
- Representation and participation: Resource OPDs and migrant workers with disabilities to take part in policymaking, trade unions, and collective bargaining.
- Partnerships and empowerment: Adopt collaboration between tripartite actors, OPDs, and migrant-led groups to promote peer support, mental health, and independent living after return.
- Research and evidence: Expand evidence on disability-related costs, accessibility barriers, and inclusion practices to inform equitable policy and resource allocation.

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