

ADVOCACY
DISABILITY
RIGHTS

ADVOCACY TOOLKIT: HOW TO PLAN AND DELIVER ADVOCACY MESSAGES



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Advocacy Toolkit: How to Plan and Deliver Advocacy Messages

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CONTENTS

| | |
|--|----|
| INTRODUCTION..... | 4 |
| UNDERSTANDING ADVOCACY..... | 5 |
| What is Advocacy | 5 |
| Why Advocacy Matters | 5 |
| Planning an Advocacy Message..... | 6 |
| STEP 1: BUILDING YOUR FOUNDATION..... | 7 |
| Identifying Relevant Policies | 7 |
| Identifying Key Actors and Institutions..... | 9 |
| Knowing Your Rights | 11 |
| STEP 2: MAKING YOUR CASE..... | 12 |
| Types of Evidence..... | 12 |
| STEP 3: PROPOSING A SOLUTION..... | 13 |
| STEP 4: CONVEYING YOUR MESSAGE..... | 14 |
| Attending Meet-the-People Session..... | 14 |
| Writing a Complaint or Feedback letter | 15 |
| Writing a Letter to the Media..... | 16 |
| Using Social Media | 17 |
| Facebook | 17 |

| | |
|---|----|
| Twitter | 18 |
| Blog..... | 18 |
| STEP 5: REINFORCING YOUR MESSAGE..... | 19 |
| APPENDICES..... | 20 |
| Appendix 1: Sample Complaint Letter | 20 |
| Appendix 2: Sample Letter to the Media..... | 21 |
| GLOSSARY | 23 |
| REFERENCES..... | 25 |

INTRODUCTION

The Disabled People's Association, Singapore (DPA) is dedicated to improving the lives of persons with disabilities by working with them to achieve full participation and equal status in the society through independent living.

DPA firmly believes that persons with disabilities and those interested in disability issues should be actively involved in giving feedback on policies, initiatives or any other matters affecting them. It is only when persons with disabilities speak up for themselves and get involved in policy consultation and formulation that any Government scheme that seeks to better their situation will have a chance of being truly effective. (In this toolkit, the term 'policy' is used to refer to all types of laws and regulations.)

With this in mind, DPA designed this toolkit to make disability advocacy more accessible to persons with disabilities and those interested in disability issues so that they can be a part of our efforts toward making Singapore more inclusive.

This toolkit provides easy-to-use tips on planning and delivering advocacy messages such as writing a complaint/feedback letter and a letter to the media. To suit your particular needs, please modify the information and resources provided.

Most of the ideas in this toolkit are simple, common sense suggestions. Advocacy is not always complicated or overtly technical. The most important element is you – your personal experiences, your commitment to help make a difference, and your willingness to communicate with decision-makers.

UNDERSTANDING ADVOCACY

What is Advocacy

There are multiple definitions of advocacy and many ways of doing advocacy.

Fundamentally, an advocate is someone who supports, defends and argues for a cause.

To advocate is to act in support of a particular issue or cause. Advocacy enables those who have previously been ignored or silenced to come to voice. It provides a possible force for change and the promotion of social inclusion, equality and justice.

Anyone can be an advocate. Advocates may be individuals, non-profit organisations, independent agencies or other organisations. As an advocate, you are exercising your right as a citizen to participate in the democratic process.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Disabled People's Association is the only cross-disability organisation in Singapore that focuses on advocacy/policy issues.

Why Advocacy Matters

Despite Singapore's progress in the way it supports people with disabilities, there are still prejudice, exclusion and general misunderstanding about the disability community. In many instances, people with disabilities still do not have equal access to education, healthcare and employment opportunities. They also often do not receive the disability-related services that they require, and experience exclusion from everyday activities.

No matter what the issue is or what reason you are given for it, you always have the right to ask why that is and what can be done about it.

Herein lies the importance of advocacy; it is a way for you to access what you are entitled to within the community and have your rights as an individual upheld the same extent as everyone else's. Here are some more reasons why disability advocacy is important in Singapore:

- The Government, business and civil society actors with decision-making powers do not always know what the needs of persons with disabilities are;
- There are no laws against discrimination on the basis of disability;
- Supportive policies, laws and regulations exist but they lack bite.

Planning an Advocacy Message

Some of the suggested key steps for planning and delivering an advocacy message are outlined below.



Advocacy is not always a linear process. These steps may not always occur in exactly the same order. But it is important to consider and plan for each step as an integral part of your message development. The following sections of this toolkit will cover each step in detail, providing guidance, tips and tools to help you develop, deliver and reinforce your advocacy message.

STEP 1: BUILDING YOUR FOUNDATION

Identifying Relevant Policies

To be an effective advocate, you must be familiar with the existing disability-related policies. Some of these policies promote the rights of persons with disabilities. These are known as ‘supportive’ policies, and you should cite a supportive policy in your advocacy message to make it more persuasive.

For example, if you are writing to a taxi operator to complain about a picky driver who refused to convey a passenger with a visual disability and his/her guide dog, you should mention the Rapid Transit System Regulations in your message to remind them that guide dogs are allowed on taxis.

For your convenience, the following is a list of laws and regulations affecting persons with disabilities in Singapore:

| LAW OR REGULATION | HOW IT AFFECTS PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES |
|---|---|
| Compulsory Education Act (2000) | The Act codified compulsory education for all Singaporean children of primary school age, but automatically exempts children with special needs. |
| Employment Act (1968) | The Act is the primary legislation that governs employment in Singapore. But it does not protect employees with disabilities from discrimination based on disability. |
| Environment Public Health Act (1987) | This Act permits any guide dog accompanying a person with blindness or a visual disability into food establishments or any toilet of the licensed premises. |
| Mental Capacity Act (2008) | The Act allows for a person with mental capacity to appoint a proxy to make decisions for him should he lose mental capacity in the future. Once mental capacity is lost, the proxy can act or make decisions on the person’s behalf for matters relating to his personal welfare and/or property and finances. Important |

| | |
|--|---|
| | decisions are monitored by the Government and there is a complaint process against a proxy who is not acting in the best interest of the person without mental capacity. |
| Mental Health (Care and Treatment) Act (2008) | The Mental Health Act (hereafter MHA) covers persons with mental illness or mental disorders who can be detained involuntarily at a psychiatric institution for treatment. |
| Parking Places Act (1974) | The Act regulates the use of reserved parking lots, such as the disabled-parking lots. Under the Act, no person shall park in any reserved parking lot unless he is authorised by the Superintendent and unless such authorisation is displayed on the vehicle. Violators are charged a small fine depending on their type of vehicle - a Motor Cycle pays a \$25 fine, Motor Car pays \$50 fine, and Heavy Vehicles pays \$80 fine. |
| Parliamentary Elections Act (1954) | The Act has provisions to assist voters with visual and/or physical disabilities. These include providing stencils to people with a visual disability so that they can mark the ballot paper themselves without assistance, and arranging for an election official to assist voters with visual and/or physical disabilities. |
| Rapid Transit System Regulations (1987) | The regulation permits guide dogs to board public transport such as buses, trains and taxis. But there are no penalties for violators who do not comply with the regulation. |
| Voluntary Sterilisation Act (1974) | The Act legalised the sexual sterilisation of all persons including those with disabilities. The consent of the person with disabilities who has mental capacity to make decisions for himself or herself will be needed for a sexual-sterilisation procedure. For those who lack the mental capacity, a court order has to be made. In the case of minors (persons below 21), the decision to sterilise must be approved by the Hospital Ethics Committee, the minor, and his or her parent or guardian. |

Vulnerable Adult Act (2015)

This Act permits social workers and other professionals to enter the house of a suspected victim to assess the situation and remove him to safety if necessary.

* Numbers in () are the years the laws were enacted

Identifying Key Actors and Institutions

Not all policies are supportive. Some issues may be caused by an absence of a policy, an inadequate policy or an improper enforcement of a policy. In such cases, you should direct your advocacy message to the Government ministry, statutory board or agency responsible for the policy. They are your target audience, or people whom you wish to influence or persuade through your advocacy message.

For example, if you wish to highlight the issue of discrimination in the workplace, you should direct your message to the Ministry of Manpower. In your message, you can cite the Employment Act, and explain how the Act is inadequate in protecting employees from discrimination based on disability.

For your convenience, the following is a list of the Government ministries and statutory boards that are responsible for formulating and implementing disability-related laws and regulations in Singapore:

| Name of Ministries and Statutory Boards | Field | Related Law or Regulation |
|---|---|---------------------------|
| Building and Construction Authority | Develops and regulates disabled-friendly features in built environment. | |
| Housing Development Board | Enforces parking regulation against illegal parking of vehicles at a car park or on a service road. | |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Land Transport Authority | Improves accessibility of public transport facilities, and enforces parking regulations. | |
| Ministry of Education | Mainstreams children with special educational needs into schools willing and able to support them. | Compulsory Education Act |
| Ministry of Manpower | Promotes fair employment practices and addresses workplace discrimination. | Employment Act |
| Ministry of Health | Implements Medishield Life, a national insurance for all, including persons with disabilities. | Environmental Public Health Act, Mental Capacity Act, Mental Health Act, Voluntary Sterilisation Act |
| Ministry of Social and Family Development (National Council of Social Services) | Funds and oversees social-welfare related services for people with disabilities, including special education. | Vulnerable Adult Act, Enabling Masterplan 2012-2016. |
| Ministry of Transport | Improves accessibility of public transport facilities. | Parking Places Act, Rapid Transit System Regulations |
| Prime Minister's Office | Provides accessible features in election rallies and voting booths. | Parliamentary Elections Act |

Knowing Your Rights

As a signatory of the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the Singapore government has to observe the guiding principles that underlie each one of its specific articles. They have to ensure and promote the full realisation of all civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights of persons with disabilities.

Thus if you are writing to the Government about a disability issue, you should refer to the relevant article in the Convention. This will bolster your claim and make your message more authoritative.

For example, if you are writing to the Land Transport Authority (LTA) to complain about taxi drivers who are not sensitive to disability needs, you should mention Article 9 as this Article states that the Government must ensure the accessibility of transportation for persons with disabilities.

See Appendix 1 for an example of how to cite a CRPD article in your message.

Quick Tip:

For more information on the CRPD in Singapore and its specific articles, please read DPA's booklet, *Singapore and the UN CRPD*. It is available on DPA's website at www.dpa.org.sg.

DID YOU KNOW?

DPA published a booklet called *Singapore and the UN CRPD*. In the booklet, DPA listed each article in plain English and gave a short overview of what policies and programmes are in place to realise each article. The booklet also contains DPA's opinion or recommendations on the articles.

STEP 2: MAKING YOUR CASE

In the advocacy world, the burden of proof lies with someone who is making the claim. To be an effective advocate, you will need evidence about the causes and consequences of the barrier, or disabling conditions, you are addressing.

But remember that the evidence does not speak for itself. After you introduce evidence into your message, you must say why and how this evidence supports your claim. In other words, you have to explain the significance of the evidence and its function in your message. Do not assume that your readers know what you are talking about. Your readers cannot read your mind, and will not know what you are trying to say with the evidence unless you explain it.

Types of Evidence

Different ways of delivering your message require different types of evidence. If you are using social media to deliver your message, a video or photo suffice as proof. But if you are writing a letter to the press, you will require a more solid and less easy to refute evidence such as facts or statistics. The following lists the different types of evidence that you can use to support your case:

1. **Facts.** Facts are the strongest type of evidence. They cannot be disputed. It is a fact, for example, that persons with disabilities suffer from disproportionately higher rates of unemployment due to discrimination.
2. **Statistics.** Statistics provide another excellent support for your case. For example, in 2003, a survey of parents revealed that 96% of 2,489 parents of children with special needs were in favour of compulsory education.
3. **Anecdotes.** Anecdotes from your own experience make the problem or issue real. It also makes your message locally relevant and more easily understood by your target audience.
4. **Digital.** Photos and video are digital evidence that you can use to prove your point. For example, if you want to complain about a wheelchair inaccessible pathway, take a picture of that pathway and try to include a street sign, house number, or some other recognisable landmark that establishes the location.

STEP 3: PROPOSING A SOLUTION

One of the greatest frustrations faced by advocates is receiving a form letter or other stock response from their target audience. You can avoid this outcome by providing recommendations or possible solutions to the issue you have identified. This will give the recipient something to work with on their end. You are also more likely to convince your target audience to take action when you have a specific solution in mind.

Here are some tips to keep in mind when coming up with solutions:

- **Specific.** Be exact about who, what and where. And avoid using words that can be interpreted in a variety of ways.
- **Realistic.** Be aware of the limits of available funding and manpower.

Below are some examples of good and bad solutions.

| GOOD EXAMPLES | BAD EXAMPLES |
|--|--|
| LTA should make all bus stops accessible to wheelchair users. If LTA is already aiming to make all bus stops accessible, they should expedite the process and give more information about the project timeline and its expected completion date. | All bus stops should be made accessible to wheelchair users. |
| SMRT Corporation should train their MRT staff to identify a person in more need of the priority seat such as a person with a visual disability so that they may request passengers to give up their seats. | Fine passengers who use priority seats at MRT trains. |
| SMRT Buses and SBS Transit should station trained wardens inside every bus to provide assistance to commuters with disabilities. | Place wardens in buses to assist persons with disabilities. |

STEP 4: CONVEYING YOUR MESSAGE

This section is designed to give you the advice you need to effectively advocate for disability issues through various mediums. It is divided into four sub-sections:

- Attending Meet-the-People Session;
- Writing a Complaint or Feedback Letter;
- Writing a Letter to the Media;
- Using Social Media.

Attending Meet-the-People Session

Meet-the-People Sessions (MPS) is a feedback system in Singapore for citizens to meet their member of parliament (MP). Held once a week, these MPS provides citizens an opportunity to resolve problems that they are having with the bureaucracy.

The process of meeting the MP varies from constituency to constituency. But the standard procedure involves meeting a petition writer who will pen the letter on behalf of the MP, and later meeting the MP who will then vet and send the letter to the relevant ministry, statutory board or any concerned parties. For urgent cases, the MP will type out, sign and hand the letter to the constituent immediately.

Keep the following tips in mind as you correspond with the petition writer or the MP:

- **Be specific.** What is the issue, when did it occur, and who is responsible?
- **Present your evidence.** Your evidence should support your claim.
- **State what outcome or remedy will satisfy you.** What form of compensation do you hope to receive? Be specific and realistic.

Writing a Complaint or Feedback letter

A complaint or feedback letter attempts to persuade the reader to take action. The most effective complaint or feedback letters generally share the following features:

- **Quickly get to the point of your letter.** The first line of your letter should address why you are writing the letter and what your exact complaint is. Provide as many pertinent facts as possible, including the date, time, location or any other relevant details.
- **State the actions desired.** Be specific and realistic about what you want your reader to do.
- **Present your evidence.** These may include photos or videos. Be sure to state in the body of the letter the exact materials you are including. For example, “Please find attached photos of steps along pathway leading to my HDB block.”

In addition, keep the following tips in mind as you write your letter:

- **Be polite.** Your reader will be much more responsive and willing to help when you are gracious and considerate.
- **Be concise.** No one is going to take your letter seriously if you add unnecessary details or go off on long rants. Try to keep your letter on a single page or under 300 words.
- **Be authoritative.** Authoritative letters include a range of things such as the quality of the language used, your knowledge of your rights and the company/organisation’s responsibilities. These letters have more credibility and are taken more seriously.

A sample complaint letter is provided in Appendix 1.

Writing a Letter to the Media

If you want to raise awareness of your issue to get public support and put additional pressure on key decision-makers, you may consider writing a letter for publication in a newspaper.

Letters addressed to a newspaper are short and to the point, and address a specific fact or opinion previously published in that media source. This is a good format if you want to call attention to something that was mistakenly reported, or a specific issue that you can address in just a few paragraphs.

There are important points to remember regarding the substance of your letter.

- **State your position.** After referring to a recent event in your community or to an argument made in a recent article, state the position you are taking on the issue.
- **Make your most important point up front.** If your letter is edited, it will be cut from the bottom up.
- **Present your evidence.** Evidence include, but is not limited to, recent events in the community, statistics, data or an anecdote from your own experience.
- **Present a possible solution.** Perhaps you just want to raise awareness of the issue in the community, but there may be other ways people can address the issue and get involved.
- **Simple closing.** Use one sentence to summarise and drive home your main point.

In addition, keep the following tips in mind as you write your letter:

- **Focus on one major issue.** Your letter is too short to cover much ground. Give your letter more focus by focusing on only one issue and make a strong case for that.
- **Check the guidelines of the paper you have chosen.** Most papers will have guidelines for the types of letters they will publish such as the letter's length. They also typically ask that you include your name and contact details for verification.

- **Name names in your letter.** If your letter is intended to influence a ministry or corporation to take a specific action, name that ministry or corporation. These people are more likely to read your letter if you name them specifically.
- **Be simple and concise.** Cut out unnecessary phrases or overly formal language.
- **Include your affiliation if you are writing in your professional capacity.** By doing so, you are implicitly stating that you are speaking on behalf of the organisation.
- **Be respectful.** It is fine to disagree with someone, but do not make personal attacks.
- **Be authoritative.** Authoritative letters are well written (good grammar, spelling and punctuation), and include knowledge of your rights and the company/organisation's responsibilities.

A sample letter to the media is provided in Appendix 2.

Using Social Media

Social media helps boost advocacy efforts by potentially reaching more people, in more places, faster than ever before. Common platforms for advocacy include Facebook, Twitter and blogs. Below are some tips for using Facebook, Twitter and blogs for advocacy:

Facebook

- Keep it short and conversational. Post your opinion about the disability issue/cause in three paragraphs or less.
- Include any relevant links in your post.
- Include an image or video whenever possible. It is a great way to grab the viewers' attention.
- Ask people to share your content through Facebook.

Twitter

- Share links to press releases, images from events, and other information in 140 characters or less.
- Tweet directly to relevant individuals or organisations involved in your issue or cause.
- Use hashtags, such as #disability, #advocacy, #UNCRPD

Blog

There are many ways of writing blogs. The format and writing style of blogs differ from writer to writer. But the most popular blogsites generally share the following features:

- **Unique.** Do not rewrite blog posts from famous blogs. Choose a topic that you know and are truly passionate about, one that other people can relate to.
- **Reliable.** Share quality content from trusted sources, and avoid amplifying erroneous messages from unreliable sources.
- **Simple.** Make sure someone who does not know the subject can easily understand the information.
- **Conversational.** Write your own commentary. What do you think of an issue? Offer your views and analysis, and then ask your readers for their opinions. Do they agree or disagree with you? Let them comment on your articles.
- **Well-written.** Avoid grammar and spelling mistakes. Get someone else to proofread your blog.

Quick Tip:

If you do not have a blog, you can contribute your article to DPA's wordpress at <https://disabledpeoplesassociation.wordpress.com/>. DPA accepts any article that makes observations on the social, economic and political trends that might inform and affect the disability community. Submit your article to advocacy@dpa.org.sg.

STEP 5: REINFORCING YOUR MESSAGE

Often, advocacy does not provide immediate results. It may take years of constant dialogue with your target audience before anything changes. But this does not mean that you should sit back and hope for the best.

After communicating with your target audience, there are several actions you can take to reinforce your message over time.

1. **Re-send the message.** If you did not receive any reply, send the message again yourself, or better yet, rely on other influential people or organisations to do it for you. You may also wish to attend the Meet-the-People Session to get the MP to write a petition letter on your behalf. These letters carry more weight and are more likely to get a response from your target audience.
2. **Build alliance.** It is often hard to achieve results when working alone, especially if the issue concerns a policy. Policymakers are usually more interested in what you have to say if your cause affects a large number of people. The more people and organisations that support your advocacy initiative, the more likely your voice will be heard. Thus you should look for potential supporters to sign off your advocacy message.
3. **Deliver your message through a different channel.** If your letter is not published by the media, look for other channels to deliver your message such as a blog or Facebook.

POTENTIAL SUPPORTERS ARE:

- People who would stand to benefit substantially from your proposal.
- Organisations already involved in policy debates on your issue.
- Human rights organisations.
- Voluntary welfare organisations.
- Public figures who actively support your cause.
- Donors.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Sample Complaint Letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am a wheelchair user and for many years I have faced blatant discrimination from taxi drivers who refused to convey me.

Yesterday, I was again denied service from numerous empty taxis, which provoked me to write this complaint letter. These drivers displayed the green “Taxi” sign. But once they spotted me, they either drove off swiftly or switched their sign to “Busy”. I had to wait for more than 30 minutes before a taxi finally stopped for me! This was very frustrating and disappointing.

Your website states clearly that taxi drivers are not allowed to “refuse to convey passengers without valid reason, when the taxi rooftop is displaying the “Taxi” sign.” But countless taxi drivers are flagrantly violating this rule. Clearly, there is a lack of proper enforcement on your part.

Singapore is a signatory of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Under Article 9, the Government is obliged to ensure the accessibility of transportation for persons with disabilities. I hope that LTA will fulfill this obligation and do something about this issue.

I would suggest that LTA enforce the rule by penalising picky drivers such as giving them demerit points. Or, LTA should encourage taxi drivers to pick wheelchair users by providing them robust sensitivity training and disability awareness training. LTA could also motivate taxi drivers to pick wheelchair users by providing them portable ramps to facilitate easy boarding and alighting for wheelchair users.

I look forward to your reply and prompt action on this issue.

Yours faithfully,

Thomas Lee

Appendix 2: Sample Letter to the Media

MOE CAN TAKE ON LARGER ROLE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Straits Times Forum, 9 October 2014

THE Disabled People's Association (DPA) agrees with the points raised by Mr Wee Yeong Wei ("It's about the kids with special needs"; last Saturday) and Mrs Leaena Tambyah ("Kids with special needs have right to education"; Tuesday).

We also agree that children with disabilities should not be automatically exempted from the Compulsory Education Act.

Although more can be done to improve the educational opportunities for children with disabilities, it is important to acknowledge what is currently being done by the Government.

We appreciate that the Ministry of Education (MOE) has started to take greater ownership over special education, working with special education (Sped) schools to develop their curricula to have markers for ensuring that the students show development from year to year.

The MOE has also been upgrading the accessibility of mainstream schools to accommodate more children with disabilities.

The ministry, along with the National Council of Social Service, provides funding for Sped schools to help with the higher cost of accommodating some special needs.

Although children with disabilities are automatically exempted from compulsory education, in practice most of them are enrolled either in mainstream schools or Sped schools.

However, there are long waiting lists for places in Sped schools. If all children with disabilities were not automatically exempted from compulsory education, there would be a legal responsibility for the Government to ensure they have a place in an educational institution, be it a mainstream school or Sped school.

One unexpected issue that arises from automatic exemption from compulsory education is how one deals with truancy at Sped schools. Because of the exemption, there is no real legal recourse for Sped schools when children fail to attend classes. If the child is covered by compulsory education and fails to attend school, his parent/guardian may be guilty of an offence.

The DPA hopes the MOE will continue to take on more roles in the governance of Sped schools, not because all such schools necessarily need greater supervision, but because all students' education should be the ministry's responsibility.

Despite all the good work of everyone involved in special education, one should consider the symbolic meaning of having the education of many of those with disabilities being taken care of largely by welfare organisations rather than the MOE.

Marissa Lee Medjeral-Mills (Dr)
Executive Director
Disabled People's Association

GLOSSARY

- Advocate:** In the disability context, an advocate refers to someone who speaks or intercedes for persons with disabilities.
- Advocacy:** The deliberate process of supporting and enabling people to express their views, to access information and services, to find out about options and make decisions, and to secure their rights.
- Alliance:** Short term relationships among members who are focused on a specific objective.
- Audience:** A person or people to whom information is conveyed or messages are directed.
- Credibility:** Having the trust of others so that they will believe and value what you have to say.
- Exclusion:** The process in which individuals or entire communities of people are systemically blocked from (or denied full access to) various rights, opportunities and resources that are normally available to members of a different group, and which are fundamental to social integration within that particular group (e.g., housing, employment, healthcare, civic engagement, democratic participation, and due process).
- Hashtag:** A linked search item within a social media posting, typically used on Twitter. A hashtag is created when a pound sign (#) is placed in front of a word. Advocates use hashtags to help categorise information on Twitter so individuals can quickly see all public posts about the topics they are

interested in.

- Inclusion:** Inclusion addresses the need for cultural transformation, and advocates that any person with a disability should be accommodated freely, openly and without pity, without restrictions or limitations of any kind. It also emphasises universal design for policy-oriented physical accessibility issues.
- Law:** A system of rules which regulates the actions of its citizens and which may enforce by the imposition of penalties.
- Policy:** A principle or (set of) rules to guide decisions and achieve rational and predictable outcome(s). In this toolkit, 'policy' also refers to all types of laws and regulations.
- Prejudice:** Preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.
- Regulation:** A rule or directive made and maintained by an authority.

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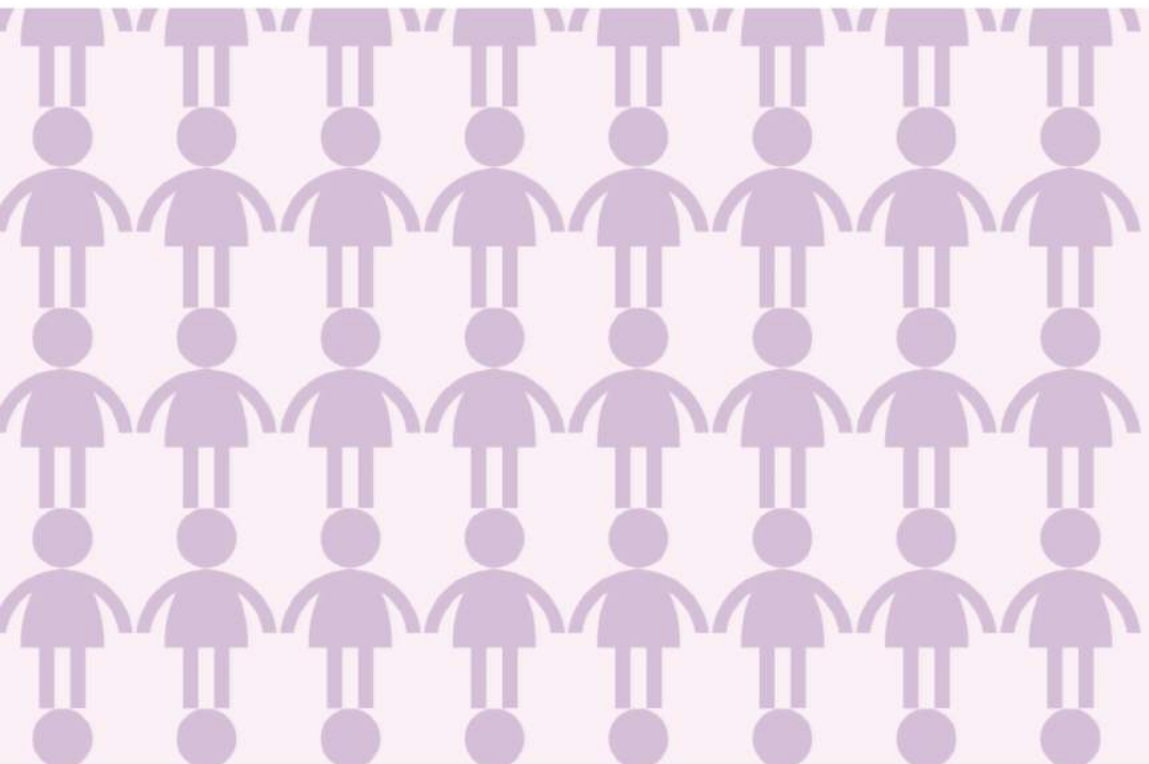
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