

AusAid ACFID Workshop on addressing gender equality and violence against women in development

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Christina Ryan – Getting the voice of women with disabilities heard

Acknowledge traditional owners

Some history (for information, not read)

The global disability rights movement is a relatively new one and has only been around for a few decades since the late twentieth century. As with many movements it started with voluntary labour and relied on those with capacity to take the lead and get work done. As with many movements it was more often men than women who had the resources and capacity to get things moving.

Women With Disabilities Australia was established in 1995 and evolved from the National Women's Network within Disabled People's International Australia (DPIA), where it had been operating as an un-funded Network for some eight years. WWDA was initially established by a group of women with disabilities who felt that their needs and concerns were not being acknowledged or addressed within the broader disability sector, or the women's sector in Australia.

In this WWDA is like many women's organisations and emerged from pressing gender based concerns which were not, and are not, covered by broader organisations which include men. This is still true today. The other organisations cover access issues, like transport and education, while WWDA covers issues that are very gender based like violence and forced sterilisation.

WWDA has been an active participant alongside other national consumer peak bodies engaging in the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. It engages broadly on policy development and reform, but also provides unique gendered analysis on key issues like the national disability insurance scheme, or the changes to welfare payments.

WWDA has grown a small but significant base of women with disabilities who undertake high level policy and representative work across a range of areas. All work as volunteers, although some, like me, are able to combine our day jobs with our WWDA work. We have executives, academics, and specialists engaged on any given day across the country attending roundtables, speaking at conferences, lobbying politicians, or writing papers and submissions.

(Spoken from here)

What the issues are

People with disabilities worldwide are excluded. Our voice is rarely included in forums and we are generally spoken for and about by others who seemingly know more about our lives than we do.

We do not get to make decisions about our lives, and for many people there is a high level of violence and vilification. Education and employment are rarely options, and in some

countries they are simply ruled out. When people do access employment or education they are harassed and bullied and the rate of drop out is therefore very high. The gender disparity is also significant worldwide, including in Australia. If services or supports are available they are usually provided to men with disabilities and women with disabilities miss out. In Australia this rate sits at about 2:1 for services, including employment and education support services.

The issues for women with disabilities are profound. Many are relatively obvious, like having equal access to men with disabilities in areas like employment and education, but others are much more specific and hidden. These include the continuing practice of forced sterilisation, the right to be parents and to be supported to be parents, the much higher rates of violence and sexual assault, and the continuing exclusion from leadership positions in our community.

For some of our sisters in other countries the issues are stark: like the right to actually live, and the right to be a part of the community. Many women and girls with disabilities face life totally segregated from their communities, either through cultural practices or because of continuing deep prejudice associated with less than perfect women. Some end up as hidden slaves doing menial work in back rooms. Most struggle to gain access to, or afford, necessary aids and equipment which further compounds their isolation and marginalisation.

Women and girls with disabilities face consistent levels of sexual exploitation, forced prostitution and pimping, and violence and abuse. For many this is simply an issue of being taken advantage of because they are not valued as people. Violence is the result of inequality, and women with disabilities are some of the least equal people on the planet. In Australia it is acknowledged that women with intellectual disabilities face a sexual assault rate of about 90 per cent.

Women with disabilities struggle to be accepted and valued in our various communities as we are not always the ideal examples of beautiful women+. Prejudice runs deep and it is quite common for women to be vilified for looking stupid+or for being ungraceful. Despite women being highly qualified in many circumstances we are consistently not included in consultations and processes, nor are we appointed to leadership positions.

Additionally, there may be opportunities to participate but only if you can pay to be included. For the vast majority of women with disabilities this is exclusive as most live in poverty or on low incomes. For the ones who might have some money the costs of disability can be very high and this provides further barriers. Many do not qualify for basic supports once they earn money, so they are forced to buy essential support services on the open market at great cost. This further reduces their capacity to participate as other women do.

Latest developments internationally

Women with disabilities in Australia have always engaged with our sisters internationally. More recently, however, this has increased dramatically through the establishment of the International Network of Women with Disabilities (INWWD).

INWWD is a group of international, regional, national or local organizations, groups or networks of women with disabilities, as well as individual women with disabilities and our allies. The mission of the INWWD is to enable women with disabilities to share our knowledge and experience, enhance our capacity to speak up for our rights, empower ourselves to bring about positive change and inclusion in our communities and to promote our involvement in relevant politics at all levels, towards creating a more just and fair world that acknowledges disability and gender, justice, and human rights. We are a group for women only. We invite ALL women with disabilities to join us and we will achieve these goals TOGETHER.+(source: introductory message to INWWD email group)

Women from a plethora of circumstances talk daily on INWWD and share experiences, offer advice, and work collaboratively. The big national peaks are there including WWDA and DAWN amongst others. Also present are some of the smaller organisations in developing countries which have few resources and little capacity, but plenty to say. We have women from all continents both organisations and individuals, some have lobbying expertise, some have absolutely none.

This network is proving to be a major resource for many women. It has ensured that we can share the experiences of individuals as they occur. For example my daily bulletins from CSW earlier this year were posted to the group. Women in several African countries have connected through the group and commenced local work together. Experts in one country have shared knowledge with experts from other countries about violence resulting in a major paper which was recently published in a major international journal.

This past fortnight we have been discussing tactics to ensure the UN CEDAW committee considers women with disabilities across all of its work. We have also been supporting some women in drafting their Shadow reports for CRPD or CEDAW reporting processes.

A recent global action saw advocates in North America pushing for UN Women to include women with disabilities at all levels of their work and planning. This resulted in several national peaks and rights organisations from around the globe, including WWDA, writing to (UN Under Secretary General) Michelle Bachelet to push the point.

We have started to lobby internationally; to expect to be heard at all levels in all forums, and to push for it. Recent work at the United Nations has provided ground breaking Outcomes from treaty reporting bodies, and from CSW. All of this is feeding into greater recognition and a greater skill base for women with disabilities.

The Australian Government is getting the message and has included women with disabilities where we have never been before. They have also started to heed the international community and collect data and make it available.

In the past year Australian women with disabilities have made significant advances which have ramifications for women with disabilities globally. For the first time women with disabilities have been a part of Australian delegations to the United Nations in areas that are not about disability, namely the NGO delegation to our CEDAW reporting, and most recently the Australian delegation to CSW 55. Disability is now being discussed where it has not been discussed before and women with disabilities are part of international fora where we have never been seen. The word disability has appeared in Outcomes from the UN for the first time, and UN Women is also noticing and starting to talk about how it can be inclusive.

This has provided significant impetus for having our issues recognised domestically, including forced sterilisation, exclusion from vital services and supports, and of course violence. Women in other countries have also highlighted how Australia's work has ensured they are able to raise issues, both at the UN and domestically, which they felt unable to in the past. It has also provided greater expertise within the INWWD and a growing empowerment through that.

Another major focus recently has been ensuring that the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is actually realised through other treaties like CEDAW, the CRoC, and other UN processes like UPRs. Getting the various secretariats talking to each other, and to UN Women about women with disabilities and the intersecting disadvantage experienced by us, is going to take a while but we're onto it.

Ensuring that disability is now seen through a social model, rather than medicalised, is a big part of this challenge and culturally very difficult in some countries. A recent UN Guidance Note addresses this, and I've provided a link to conference organisers for your reference.

So, from the local up to the global and back to the local level again.

Where to from here?

Finally having some voice and credibility is one thing, but sustaining it is another. The very recent gains are tenuous and delicate and will need careful nurturing and encouragement. They will rely on friends to become more inclusive and understanding of what is needed. Many in the community still don't accept our involvement and are very uncomfortable with our presence in the public debate.

Australia is leading the way in leadership for women with disabilities, but it has been very hard to achieve, and it cannot be assumed that the gains made here are replicated in other countries. This is not the case and our sisters around the world are still marginalised and mistreated as many of us still are here. It must also be pointed out that our recent gains are coming from a very low base, so we are still largely excluded and dismissed in Australia, even in the disability community.

Many of our issues remain hidden, like violence, sterilisation, and child removal. We are starting to speak louder about these issues and to brief our friends in public positions to do the same, but we are often vilified for doing so. The broader community doesn't appreciate knowing about our issues and tells us we should be locked away and silenced, as in the past.

We continue to push for gender analysis, and disaggregated data collection across all areas of government policy and programs. This can be applied to all the work of government including aid provision. Are measures benefitting women equally to men? Are budget initiatives creating or removing barriers to women's participation? Has any consideration been given to the approach being taken and whether it is a barrier in itself? Are women with disabilities part of developing programs and projects?

As aid workers you will be familiar with the concept of culturally appropriate service provision, but is that extending to being appropriate for women with disabilities? Remember that many may be hidden within their communities and not publicly evident. Most will lack basic skills in advocating for themselves and expressing their own wishes as with their sisters in Australia. Some may never have been asked what they want from their lives, or know what options are available to them. It is likely that they have always been spoken for.

Women with disabilities have traditionally been isolated and marginalised at all levels of the community. There is little recognition that intersecting disadvantage is a substantial and ongoing barrier that will take whole of community responses and real time. This is an exciting time for women with disabilities but the challenges remain enormous.

Thank you