

CHAPTER 1

Disability and the community



Women with disabilities have a right to good health. Good health depends on enough nutritious food to eat, regular physical activity, and access to information and services to prevent and treat health problems, especially problems of reproductive health. Also, to develop to their full potential, girls and women with disabilities need good education, jobs, and opportunities to be involved in their communities.

When we have the same opportunities, we can contribute to our families and communities, like every other woman.



1 out of every 10 women has a disability that affects daily living.

What is disability?

Many women with disabilities use the term “impairment” to refer to their individual limitations. These limitations may include blindness, deafness, conditions that make it difficult or impossible to walk or to speak, conditions that make it harder to understand or learn, and conditions that can cause seizures.

A woman with a disability may move, see, hear, or learn and understand differently from a woman without a disability. She may take care of the activities of daily living differently when she communicates, eats, bathes, dresses, gets up from lying down, and carries or feeds her baby. Adapting to her limitations is an ordinary part of her life.



Our lower quality of life is not caused by our impairment, but by social realities. The solution does not lie inside our bodies.

Despite each woman’s ability to find solutions to problems caused by her disability, she also faces social, physical, cultural and economic barriers that can stop her from getting health care, education, vocational training and employment.

Attitudes create barriers

Attitudes and wrong ideas about what a disabled woman can or cannot do can prevent a disabled woman from living a full and healthy life, or taking part in the life of her community. They add to her disability by creating barriers that can prevent her from getting education or work, and from having a social life.

For example, a teacher may believe a girl cannot learn because she is blind or deaf. But a girl’s ability to see or hear is not the problem. A girl who is blind can learn by listening and using other senses such as smell and touch. She can learn even more if she has books in Braille or information on audio cassettes. And a girl who is deaf can learn when people use sign language and visual methods of teaching.

Many women with disabilities are hidden away. We aren’t included in community activities because other people think we are less useful and of less value than women without disabilities.



A woman who cannot walk may be capable of having a very good career and be able to earn money to support her family. But if her family or community are ashamed of the way she moves and want her to stay hidden, then it is their feelings of shame that will make her disabled.

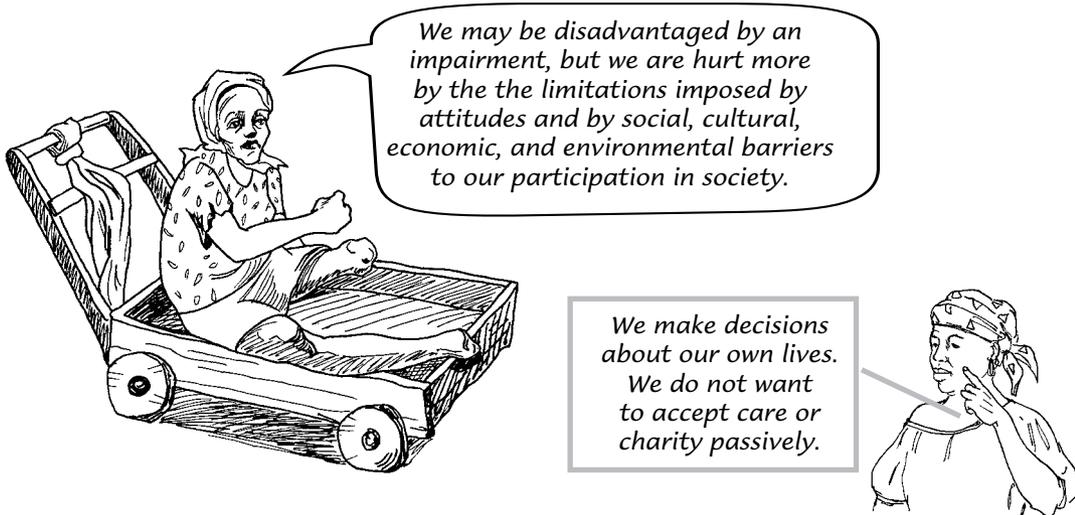
All communities include people with impairments. That is normal. But it is not normal for a person to be discriminated against and excluded because she has an impairment. That is disabling!

The medical understanding of disability

Many doctors and other health workers see only the disability someone may have. They do not see a person with a disability as a total person or woman. They think people with “impairments” have something “wrong” with them and must be cured, rehabilitated, or protected.

When stairs or bad attitudes make hospitals and other public health facilities not useable by everyone, then it is the medical system which has something “wrong” with it and must be cured or rehabilitated. In those cases, it is not a woman’s disability but the medical understanding of disability that makes it impossible for her to live a healthy and fulfilling life.

We will deal with our disabilities, but only you can stop causing the social discrimination we face.



Disability is a natural part of life

There will always be some people born with impairments. And there will always be accidents and illnesses. But governments and communities can work to change the social causes of disability—the limitations imposed on people with disabilities by attitudes, and social, cultural, economic, and physical barriers to their participation in society. The physical and mental health of women with disabilities will improve when communities improve access, challenge prejudice, and create employment opportunities.

Women with disabilities show the way in Bangalore, India

In the southern Indian city of Bangalore, 4 young women with physical disabilities—Shahina, Noori, Devaki and Chandramma—make and fit other women with rehabilitation aids and appliances. They work at the Rehabilitation Aids Workshop by Women with Disabilities (RAWWD) which was started in 1997 by 8 women with disabilities who were trained by an NGO called Mobility India to make mobility aids.



Although there were other facilities, until RAWWD started, only male technicians were available to measure and make the aids, and women with disabilities were hesitant to go to them. They were embarrassed to let men measure and fit them with appliances. Because of this, many women did not use the appliances which would have made them mobile.

RAWWD now makes a wide variety of rehabilitation aids for the ankles, feet and knees. These include crutches, walkers, shoes, belts, and braces, as well as prosthetics (artificial legs and feet).

As the women at RAWWD increased their confidence and skills, they began providing services to other organizations working for people with disabilities, and now also provide services to several hospitals and private doctors in Bangalore.

The women get the materials to make the aids, keep records of the clients, conduct regular follow-up visits, and manage their business. RAWWD also encourages other women with disabilities to become technicians and trains them to make and repair rehabilitation aids and appliances. This promotes equality for women with disabilities, especially women who have been abandoned by their families, and also provides them with a livelihood.

Resources and opportunities

In many communities, women have fewer resources and opportunities than men. This inequality between men and women is also true among people with disabilities.

Wheelchairs, artificial limbs, sign language classes, Braille slates (which enable blind women to read) and other resources are often expensive and less available for disabled women than for disabled men. Without aids like these, girls and women with disabilities have a hard time getting education and doing things for themselves. As a result, they are less able to get jobs, to take control of their own lives, and to take an active part in the life of their communities.

With more resources, we can be seen and heard and have control over our own health.



Physical barriers

Many women with disabilities cannot use community facilities, banks, or hospitals because most buildings have no ramps, handrails, elevators, or lifts. Physical barriers make it difficult for women with disabilities to move around by themselves. When women are stopped by these barriers, they are often unable to get good food, enough exercise, or the health care they need.

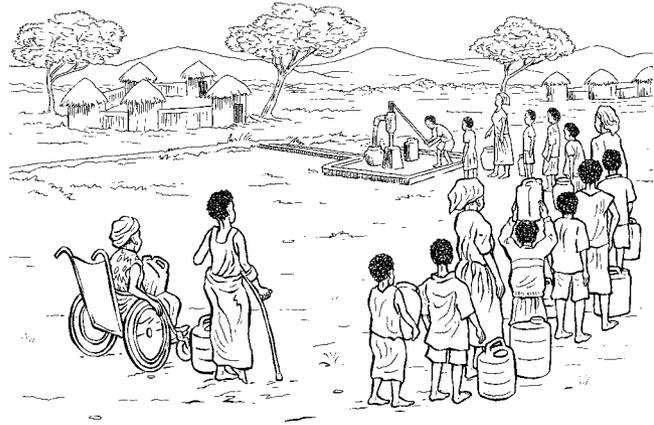
Many people, including health workers, may believe that if a woman who uses a wheelchair cannot get into a building because there are only stairs, then she must learn to wear leg braces, or use crutches, or have someone carry her. It is not her disability, but the physical barriers that make it impossible for her to get into the building. If there was a ramp so she could roll her wheelchair into the building, there would not be a problem.



I am a mother with a physical disability, and I have a son who is also physically disabled. Every time we go to a restaurant or a supermarket or any other place, we have to be carried up and down the stairs. This attracts a lot of attention. It is really degrading and makes us feel less human.

The development workers come to the villages, they come with their projects. And they work with the women there, all the women there. And the disabled woman... she will be raising a family, too. They will put in the water projects that are not accessible to the disabled woman. And she will also want to draw the water. And they do not think about it at all.

— From a Zimbabwean woman attending the 3rd World Conference on Women, Nairobi, 1985



Disabled women have a right to the removal of social and physical barriers.

Causes of disability

Some women have been disabled since birth. Some women become more disabled over time. Some women become disabled suddenly, because of an accident or disease.

It is not possible to prevent all impairments. Some babies form differently inside the womb and no one knows why.

But many disabilities in babies are caused by harmful conditions of women's lives. If women can get enough nutritious food to eat, can protect themselves from work with toxic chemicals, and can get good health care, including care at the time of childbirth, then many disabilities could be prevented.

POVERTY AND MALNUTRITION

Poverty is one of the biggest causes of disability. Poor people are most vulnerable to disability because they are forced to live and work in unsafe environments with poor sanitation, crowded living conditions, and with little access to education, clean water, or enough good food. This makes diseases such as tuberculosis and polio—and the severe disabilities they cause—much more common because diseases get passed from one person to another more easily.



Many babies who are born in poor families may be born with disabilities or may die in infancy. This may be because the mother did not get enough to eat when she was pregnant. Or it may be because she did not get enough to eat when she was a girl. Starting in childhood, a girl is often given less food to eat than a boy. As a result, she may grow more slowly and her bones may not develop properly, which can later cause difficulty during childbirth—especially if she does not receive good health care.

If a baby or young child does not get enough good food to eat, she or he may become blind or have trouble learning or understanding.



While she was pregnant, the mother of this girl with cleft lip and palate did not get enough food to eat containing folic acid and calcium (such as dark green leafy vegetables, beans, and eggs).

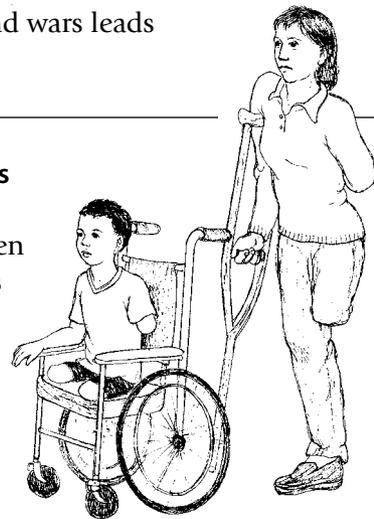
WAR

In today's wars, more civilians than soldiers are killed or disabled, and most of them are women and children. Explosions cause people to become deaf, blind, and lose their limbs, as well as causing other injuries. Their mental health is also badly affected by the violence. The destruction of homes, schools, health centers, and means of livelihood that results from conflicts and wars leads to increased disability, poverty, and disease.

Land mines, cluster bombs, bullets, and chemicals used in wars cause more disabilities in the world today than anything else. They often injure women who are carrying out their daily activities, such as farming, or gathering water and wood.

Explosions and landmines cause many leg and arm injuries, and often a child's or a woman's leg has to be amputated. But only about 1 of every 4 amputees gets an artificial leg to replace a lost leg, because they are usually expensive or difficult to get. The Mukti and Satti limbs and the Jaipur Foot are good quality, low-cost, artificial legs made by groups in India. For more information about these, see page 377.

The international treaty to outlaw land mines could save many lives and prevent many disabilities, but some governments still refuse to sign it. If it has not, pressure your government to sign it.



NUCLEAR ACCIDENTS

Many people have suffered after being exposed to massive amounts of radiation. This happened after accidents in nuclear power plants at Three Mile Island in the USA in 1979, and at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in 1986. And it also happened when the USA dropped nuclear bombs on Japan in 1945. These incidents caused widespread destruction and death from exposure to radiation.

The people who survived these accidents and bombing attacks have suffered mainly from cancers—either tumors in various parts of the body, especially in the thyroid gland—or leukemia (cancer of the blood), all of which bring an early death. In communities where these nuclear incidents happened, there has also been an increase in the number of children born with learning difficulties, such as Down syndrome.

POOR ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

Good health care can prevent many disabilities. Difficult labor and birth can cause a baby to be born with a disability such as cerebral palsy. Trained birth attendants who can identify risks and handle emergencies can prevent babies from being born with many disabilities. Immunization can also prevent many disabilities. But many times vaccines are not available, or people who are poor or live far from cities cannot afford them, or there are not enough for everyone.

ILLNESS

Some illnesses a pregnant woman may get can cause physical or learning problems when her baby is born. Illnesses that can cause birth defects include German measles (rubella), which is a common cause of deafness in newborn babies. There is a vaccine that gives protection against rubella, but a woman who gets an immunization of the rubella vaccine should not get pregnant for one month afterward.

Syphilis (see page 163), herpes (see page 165), and HIV (see page 169) can also be passed from a mother to her baby and can cause birth defects. So women need to be tested and treated for sexually transmitted infections to protect the baby developing in the womb.

Some illnesses a baby or small child may get can also cause disability, such as meningitis, polio, and measles. It is important for newborn babies to get immunizations for protection (see page 276). Children who live in places where leprosy (Hansen's disease) is common need to be tested as early as possible.

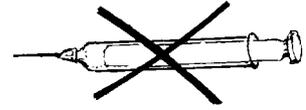


If a woman gets German measles (rubella) during the first 3 months of pregnancy, her child may be born deaf.

MEDICINES AND INJECTIONS

When used correctly, certain injected medicines, like some vaccinations, are important to protect health and prevent disability. However, there is a worldwide epidemic of unnecessary injections. Each year these unnecessary injections sicken, kill, or disable millions of persons, especially children.

Giving injections with an unclean needle or syringe is a common cause of infection and can pass the germs that cause serious diseases such as HIV/AIDS or hepatitis. Unclean injections are also a common cause of infection that can lead to paralysis or spinal cord injury or death. Also, some injected medicines can cause dangerous allergic reactions, poisoning, and deafness to a baby in the mother's womb.



Avoid unnecessary injections.

A needle or syringe must never be used to inject more than one person without disinfecting it each time.

Some medicines and drugs taken during pregnancy can cause disability in the baby. The overuse of injectable medicines, such as oxytocin, to speed up childbirth and 'give force' to the mother's labor, deprives the baby of oxygen during birth. It is a major cause of brain damage. Alcohol and tobacco used during pregnancy can also damage a developing baby.

Everyone must consider the possible risks and benefits of using any medication. Doctors, nurses, other health workers, pharmacists, and everyone else must stop the misuse and overuse of medicines—especially of injections. For ideas on teaching about the danger of unnecessary injections, see *Helping Health Workers Learn*, Chapters 18, 19, and 27.

DANGEROUS WORK CONDITIONS

Women who work long hours without enough rest are likely to have accidents. Women who work in factories, mines or on agricultural plantations can be exposed to dangerous machinery, tools, or chemicals. Accidents, overwork and exposure to chemicals can all cause disability.

A growing number of women have also been permanently injured due to violence at work. Supervisors sometimes use violence and threats to try and make women work harder and faster. Sometimes the authorities bring in the military or police to stop women from striking or protesting unsafe working conditions.

ACCIDENTS

Many women and children get disabling injuries at home by burns from cooking fires, falls, road accidents, and breathing or drinking toxic chemicals. Workplace accidents, especially in less regulated sectors such as construction, agriculture, mining, and smaller businesses, are a common source of disability.

POISONS AND PESTICIDES

Poisons such as lead found in paints, pesticides such as rat poison, and other chemicals can cause disabilities in people and cause birth defects in babies growing in the womb. Smoking or chewing tobacco, breathing smoke, and drinking alcohol during pregnancy can also harm a child before she is born.

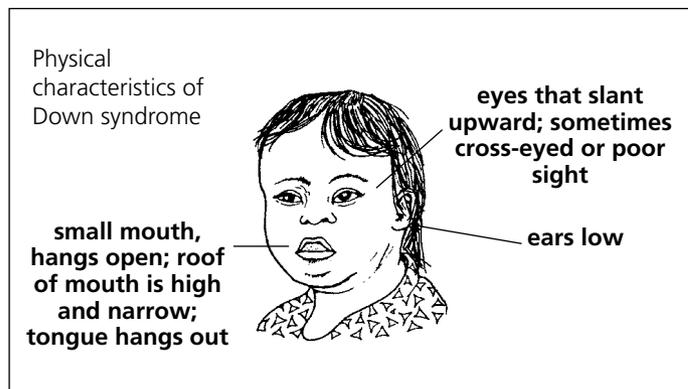
Workers often use chemicals on the job or in the fields without being taught how to use them safely, or without even knowing if they are dangerous. Accidents in factories can release poisons into the air, water, or ground, causing terrible health problems, including permanent disabilities.



This woman was a farm worker and was exposed to dangerous chemicals when she was pregnant. This affected her baby while he was in the womb, and he was born with a disability.

INHERITED DISABILITIES

Some disabilities are known to be inherited, such as spinal muscular atrophy and muscular dystrophy (diseases of the muscles and nerves). Women who already have one or more children with an inherited disability are more likely to give birth to another child with the same problem. Other disabilities can result when close blood relatives (such as brothers and sisters, first cousins, or parents and children) have children together. Children born to mothers 40 years of age or older are more likely to have Down syndrome. **However, most disabilities are not inherited.** In most cases, the parents of a baby born with a disability did nothing to cause the disability. They should never be blamed.



Wrong ideas and myths about disability

Local customs and beliefs may include wrong and harmful ideas about disability. Some people think a woman gets a disability if she or her parents did something bad in a former life, or that they displeased their ancestors, or one of her parents had a sexual relationship outside their marriage. Usually people blame the mother. But **mothers are not to blame for a child's disability**. And blaming anyone for a disability does not help.

Another harmful idea about disability is the belief that anybody who is 'different' should be excluded, mocked and criticized. Some people think a person with a disability is a bad omen or will bring bad luck. Women with disabilities are often abused, or forced to become beggars or do sex work for a living. Sometimes women with disabilities are sexually abused because people believe they are free of HIV/AIDS or that having sex with a disabled woman can cure HIV/AIDS.

But the truth is: No woman with a disability should ever be abused. Disability is **never** a punishment. Disability is **not** caused by witchcraft or a curse. Disability is **not** infectious and cannot spread to other people.

People may also not understand what a disabled woman can or cannot do. They may not realize that:

- you are an adult and can make decisions.
- you need an education.
- you need health care.
- you can also get diseases, such as cancer and HIV/AIDS.
- you need opportunities and respect, not pity and sympathy.
- you can work. You can be a professional and have a career.
- you can earn, own property and raise and support your family.
- you think, feel and have emotions.
- you can dance and exercise.
- you can take responsibilities, make decisions and take a leadership role and involve yourself in your community.
- you can have close relationships with anyone. You can love or be loved by a person without disabilities or a person with a disability.

Some pregnant women keep away from my shop because they think their baby will be born deaf like me.



I am not a child and I do not need you to think or act for me.

- you have sexual desires, and you can be sexually active.
- you can marry and have children.
- you are capable of having sex, but may not want to have sex.
- if you have difficulty learning or understanding, you have neither more nor fewer sexual needs than other women.
- you will most often give birth to babies who do not have disabilities, just like other women.
- you are a good mother.
- if you have a physical impairment or a learning disability, you are not mentally sick or unstable.
- you do not curse people or curse children and you are not a bad omen to be avoided.

*It's too bad
Kranti made
the gods
unhappy.*

*I didn't make the gods
unhappy. I was injected
with a dirty needle when
I was a baby. That's why
my leg is paralyzed.*



Working for change

A woman's disability affects not just herself. It affects many people: her family, friends, and most of all, her community. A woman with a disability can become more healthy when those around value and support her. Changing the way women with disabilities are treated is hard work. But it is not impossible.

I dream of a day when people from around the world finally understand that having a disability is not the same as being sick; and that we are usually very healthy. And like all women, we need to stay healthy.



WHAT WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES CAN DO

Make your voices heard by advocating for your rights and making sure disability issues become a priority.

- Refuse to be confined to one place. Be adventurous and welcome different experiences.
- Learn business skills, and empower yourself economically.

Finding security in the market

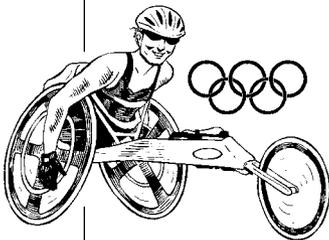
Oppah Ndlovu from Zimbabwe is a wheelchair user and is a respected member of her community. She started a successful project selling vegetables and tomatoes. Now, community groups purchase vegetables from her. With this steady income, Oppah has managed to buy a house.

- Insist on participating at all levels in the community.
- Become role models for other girls and women.
- Speak about your disabilities.
- Offer to accompany other disabled girls and women to where they need to go.
- Take part in sports.

Share your stories.



Olympic-level athletes



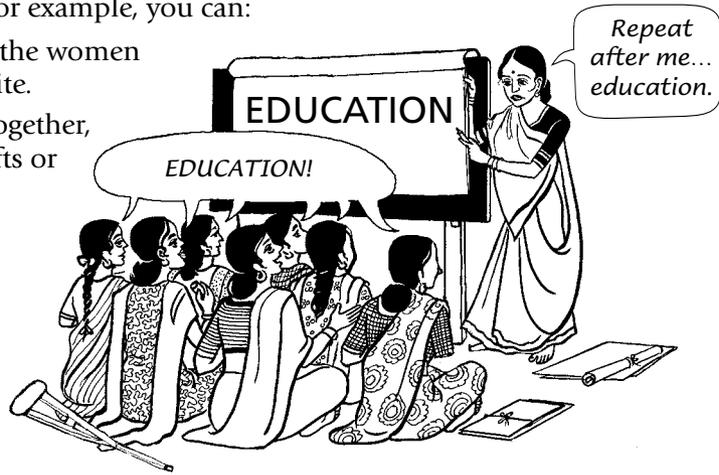
An increasing number of women are taking part in the Paralympic Games, an international sporting competition for athletes with disabilities including mobility disabilities, amputations, visual disabilities, and cerebral palsy. The Paralympic Games are held every 4 years, following the Olympic Games. It is an eye-opener for many people to see women with disabilities compete with confidence and skill.

Bowler dispels myths

Constance Sibanda, a blind bowler, was nominated the Sportsperson of the Year in Uganda, dispelling myths that as a woman with a disability she was “long dead and useless.” Constance won a double gold medal in a world competition. Since then she has amassed more medals in blind bowling and participated in competitions in South Africa, Scotland, and the United Kingdom. Constance challenges all women and girls to explore their hidden talents.

Together you can decide what things in your community can be changed in order to make life better for all. For example, you can:

- start a literacy class for the women who cannot read or write.
- start a small business together, making and selling crafts or tools.
- share information with each other about community services and work together to make them more accessible.
- try to get funds—either through a low-interest loan or through a donation—to begin an income-earning project or to make the community more accessible.
- raise awareness about disabilities and advocate for new ways of thinking about independence.
- work with local leaders or the government to get better treatment for women with disabilities.



You can also help community groups:

- Look at the different causes of health problems that you and other women with disabilities face, and decide which ones the community can change.
- Take action by advocating for activities and services that make life better for everyone, including better health care, education, and transport for people with disabilities. Insist on accessible facilities.
- Set up a small group. The voice of an organization is stronger than the voice of an individual. Make a plan about what the group will do and what steps the group will take to carry out each of these ideas.
- Raise your voice against policies and laws that discriminate against you.



At one time, deaf people in Uganda were not allowed to drive. But because we protested, we can now buy cars and are allowed to drive.

Educating people to get access

Dorothy, a wheelchair user in Bangalore, a state capital in India, found that the building which housed the chief minister's offices had no ramps. Also, the entrance to the building was too narrow for her to enter. She spoke about this to the guards and insisted they help her keep her appointment.

Afterwards, Dorothy sent hundreds of emails to tell people what had happened. This increased the pressure on the government to make changes.

At another time, Dorothy attended a cricket match, where the police asked her, "Why do you want to come here and watch the cricket match live? You might as well sit at home and watch the match on TV comfortably." She replied that, just like others, she too wanted to see the match live.

WHAT FAMILIES CAN DO

The way women with disabilities are treated by their families, friends, and other people who assist them makes a big difference. Many times a girl with a disability is seen as stupid, dependent, unable to help herself and others, and therefore does not deserve any resources. Sometimes families also see her as a shameful burden to be hidden away, and they deny her the right to be heard or to make her own decisions. If this happens in a family or community, the problem is not with a girl or woman with disability, but with the people around her.

Even though women work longer hours than men, we are always seen as liabilities. No one will give time, expenses, or effort to meet the needs of girls with disabilities.

No one ever lets me hold a baby. Because I have a disability, they think the baby won't be safe.

When someone comes, first thing my family does is to ask me to go inside. Even my sister is ashamed to introduce me to her friends.

My family has too much expectation of me. They are not satisfied unless I do very well in my studies. They say, "God has given Mai something special to compensate for taking away a good thing from her."

Nurture confidence

When Christine was 13 years old, her leg was amputated because of an illness. At first, Christine thought it was the end of her dreams. But her parents treated her well and soon Christine’s confidence was restored. At first Christine’s parents overprotected her, but she insisted they treat her like her other siblings. Christine was able to finish her college and received awards for excellence. The change in Christine made the rest of her family and community realize that Christine’s missing leg would not keep her from fulfilling her dreams.

The only thing that can change these attitudes is social awareness. Women and girls with disabilities need good food, education, health care, and opportunities to be involved in physical and social activities. See the chapters on ‘Mental Health’ and ‘Support for Caregivers.’



You can develop many skills

Hong Ha from Laos had polio when she was 2 years old. With the support of her family, she was able to graduate from university with a degree in French. When Hong Ha could not find a job, she learned to sew and then opened a sewing shop at home. Together with sewing, she started to study English. With a friend, Hong Ha then opened a small English training center at her home. She is also a coordinator of a program on disability.

Early assistance

In their first years of life, all children will learn more physical, mental, communication, and social skills and learn them more quickly and easily than at any other time in their lives. Since a baby starts learning as soon as she is born, it is important that families begin giving extra attention to help children with disabilities as soon as possible.

This is important because each new skill a child learns builds on the skills she already has. Each new skill also makes it possible for her to learn other, more difficult skills. So when a child does not learn a skill, she cannot learn other skills that depend on it.

Start a support group for parents of disabled children

Women with disabled children are often deserted by their partners and have to bring up their children by themselves. Parent support groups can help. Adult women with disabilities can offer advice on the types of concerns that girls with disabilities will face as they are growing. This can help their mothers support them better.

You can also start a support group for teenage girls with disabilities so they can help and support each other.

WHAT COMMUNITIES CAN DO

Community groups can help government, health workers, teachers, community-based rehabilitation workers, and community leaders learn about disability issues. They can also make the public aware through street plays, discussions, and



When health workers, teachers, community leaders, our families, and neighbors change their attitude to disability, we can do our work, have strong relationships, and make our communities rich and strong.

in other ways that women with disabilities have the same rights to education, health care and transportation as non-disabled people. Communities can create employment opportunities and give information about services for women with disabilities.

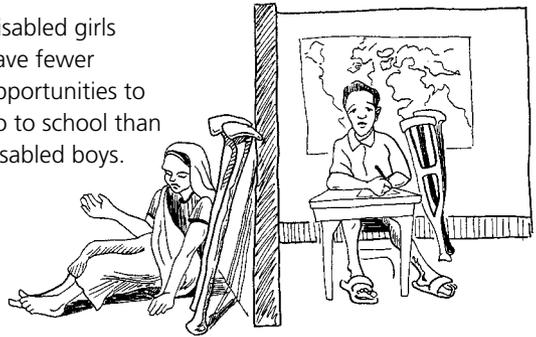
Girls and women with disabilities become confident, believe in themselves, and grow to their full potential when parents and families love and accept them, and when they can get education, jobs, and health care. All community resources, such as schools, banks, religious places, hospitals, and clinics must also become accessible for everyone.

Education

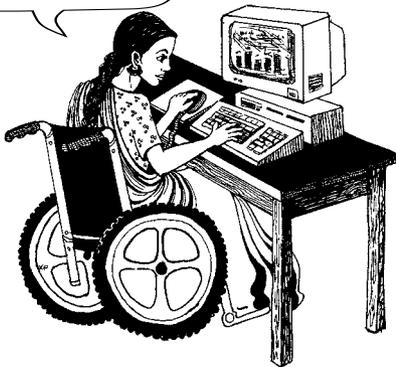
Education is very important for girls with disabilities, including education in sign language and Braille or audio cassettes, for girls who are deaf, or blind.

In many poor countries, if disabled girls are not able to go to school and get an education, they may end up begging to survive when they are adults.

Disabled girls have fewer opportunities to go to school than disabled boys.



Knowing how to read and write makes it possible for me to earn a living with dignity.



It can make a big difference when a whole community works for educational rights for people with disabilities.

Community-based groups can discuss problems and encourage everyone, including other children, to welcome and respect girls with disabilities. They can arrange opportunities for early childhood education, or access government grants, or help in other ways.

With education, girls with disabilities can support and enrich their communities.

Make communities accessible for everyone

All around the world, women with disabilities are organizing to help make clinics, schools, markets, city streets, buses, and communities more accessible for people with disabilities.

Communities can make sure buildings and roads are accessible when they are first built rather than changing them later. This way all public facilities are as usable as possible by as many people as possible regardless of age, ability, or situation. They will serve people who are young or old, with excellent or limited abilities, in ideal or difficult circumstances (see pages 38 to 40).

I feel helpless. I always have to rely on other people to help me leave the house. If there was a ramp down from our house and ramps to enter public buildings I could get around on my own. I could go out when I want, and I would not always have to wait for other people.



But access is about more than physical things such as ramps. Accessibility also means everyone can communicate and understand what is happening. Then a woman with a disability can do more things for herself and more people will see that disability is a natural part of life. When disabled women are valuable members of the community, the community will start thinking differently about disability.

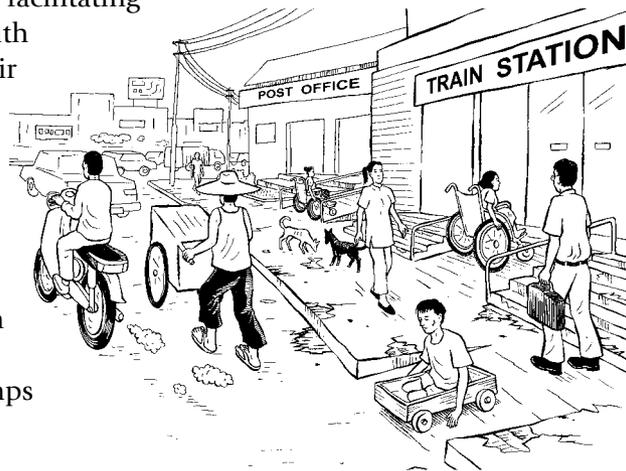
Governments must provide the resources necessary to make transportation systems, buildings, public programs and facilities easy to use for everyone, including women with disabilities. Some governments penalize those who refuse to cooperate.



Here are examples of how women with disabilities have made changes in their communities.

Getting the government to make changes

After taking part in a workshop on barrier-free access, the Lao Disabled Women's Development Center produced a videotape about barrier-free access for people with disabilities. They started talking to the different government sectors about facilitating participation of people with disabilities in society. Their ideas were approved by the Prime Minister's office, the ministries of communication, transportation, post and construction, labor and social welfare, and foreign affairs. They were able to get funds to construct ramps at 47 places in the capital city, Vientiane.



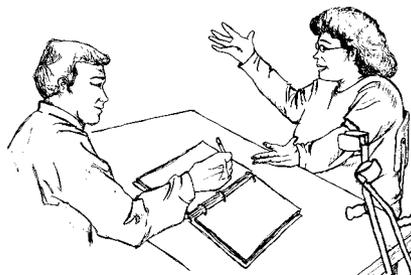
Making access possible

As a child, Alicia Contreras of Mexico became disabled from polio. A wise therapist counseled Alicia's parents on the importance of motivating her to be independent. Her parents arranged for her to attend regular school from childcare through high school. Alicia was the first student with a disability in her school, and her success there opened the schoolhouse doors to more children with disabilities.

Eventually, Alicia went on to university. She had a class on the third floor, and it wasn't easy to climb the stairs using crutches. Alicia went to the university director and asked him to move the class from the third floor to the first. He agreed right away. "They had another room available," Alicia recalled. "But the director had never thought about how students with disabilities would not be able to get to classrooms on upper floors, and I never thought to ask." Other times, Alicia had to fight harder to make changes.

Alicia became a member of a disability association called "Free Access." The group believed people with disabilities had the same rights as everybody else and worked to make the community more accessible. For example, they discussed with city transportation officials how difficult it was for people with disabilities to move around the city. As a result, the city adapted some buses to make them accessible to people with physical disabilities.

Free Access is still active today. Since 1993, it has worked with government officials and non-governmental organizations to promote changes to better the lives of people with disabilities. And there is still so much more to be done!



Changing policies is not easy. It can be long and complicated. It can take many years and a lot of effort by many people. You must understand the costs, the people affected, and the politics that affect the conditions you want to change. It is easy to feel discouraged if you are organizing for change. When you feel overwhelmed or discouraged, try to seek advice from other women with disabilities elsewhere in your country, and even outside your country. And remember you have a right to use all public facilities. You can create an accessible community.

Here is a story about people with disabilities who formed a group that made great change in their city.

Making a city accessible

In Ekaterinburg, Russia, the Freedom of Movement Society has been working together with the city government to make their city more accessible. Russian law requires that people with disabilities should be able to use public buildings and buses, but many places are still not accessible. The city government in Ekaterinburg developed a disability program to make buildings accessible.

But a group of people with disabilities who use wheelchairs or crutches realized that, even though the government had been trying to help, many of the places they had changed were still hard for disabled people to use. They realized the government could not do it without the help of people with disabilities.

So the people with disabilities formed the Freedom of Movement Society. They started by making a list of the most important places in the city to make accessible. They met with city officials, and showed them the list. The city realized they needed the advice of people with disabilities. The Freedom of Movement Society made sure their members were included in the city committee that became responsible for improving access. The people with disabilities had to approve any project the committee decided to do.



The Freedom of Movement Society created guidelines that architects could use to make buildings accessible. They were able to take photographs of buildings they wanted to fix, and then draw clear pictures of how to make changes.

Now, the old buildings are slowly being changed. And the new guidelines are used all over the city. Because of the work of the Freedom of Movement Society, all new office buildings and many other buildings are accessible to people with disabilities. New sidewalks are lowered in places for people who use wheelchairs. The new city mall is easy for people with disabilities to use. The Freedom of Movement Society also got the city to make several schools as well as the city's movie theater accessible.

—*Disability World*

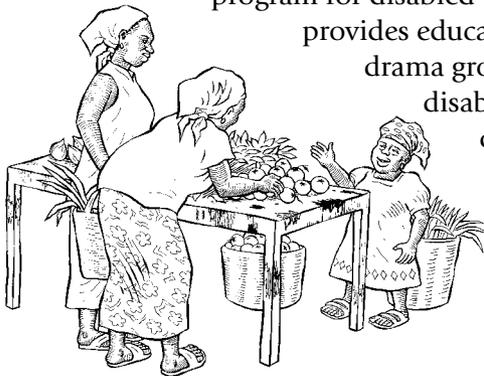
Taking action

- Organize social activities that help disabled girls come out of their homes and meet other people with disabilities and other young girls.
- Share information about finding or creating work.
- Support women who are treated badly at home or in public or in the workplace.
- Offer training in leadership and social skills.



Providing resources for change in Uganda

The Uganda Disabled Women’s Association maintains a revolving loan program for disabled women to start their own businesses, provides education and mobility aids, and runs a drama group to raise public awareness about disabled women. They strive to increase disabled women’s rights and well-being, to advocate for better education for disabled children, to teach independent living skills, to share reproductive health information, and “to fight poverty, ignorance, social differences, and disease.”



Women make change happen in El Salvador

In El Salvador, the disability rights group ACOGIPRI has organized women’s programs since 1987, bringing together disabled women from diverse backgrounds to hold discussions about sexuality and other issues. They also:

- provide literacy and leadership training.
- make aids and services available to girls and women with any form of disability.
- prevent discrimination and violence.



Communities are stronger when everyone is included



Despite barriers of prejudice, ignorance and discrimination, women with disabilities around the world are improving their skills for self-sufficiency.

Women with disabilities must be heard when decisions are made at every level and about every issue—not just disability issues. No one has all the answers. Everyone, women and men, both with and without disabilities, people who struggle for human rights, and for the rights of workers and for the dignity of women in all parts of the world must join together to support women with disabilities to live healthy, independent, and productive lives. By making sure we nurture life in each of us, and learn from each other, we can build a more just world for all of us.

Let's discuss what changes in our community will help everyone become more involved and help all people have better health.



