
Women with disabilities advocating towards Costa Rican institutions to make changes at national level and in different regions of the country

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Topic area: Awareness-raising.

Background

Women's rights have been advancing in the country, placing Costa Rica in a leading position in relation to the Latin American region. However, women with disabilities had not been involved in the movement to advance women's rights, and women's rights were not addressed by disabled persons' organizations. Women with disabilities themselves lacked knowledge and information about their rights, thus, many of them were being frequently subjected to violence. Their lack of knowledge about their rights made them more vulnerable and unaware of what institutions to seek help from.

Costa Rica's government institutions include the National Institute for Women (Instituto Nacional de la Mujer—INAMU), the social security institution (Caja Costarricense de Seguridad Social—CCSS) which provides sexual and reproductive health services and disability specific health services, and the

National Council for the Disabled (Consejo Nacional de Rehabilitación y Educación Especial—CNREE), among others. None of them considered the rights of women with disabilities as part of their work. Costa Rica ratified the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2008. When considering its articles about women with disabilities (mainly articles 6, 16 and 25), two women with disabilities, Ileana and Shirley saw ratification as a good opportunity to raise awareness in the governmental institutions.

What happened?

In 2009, a group of women with visual disabilities attended a training on CRPD and disability rights, and after the training decided to constitute a working group or commission. They began to replicate that training with other women with visual disabilities. At this early stage, they sought support from the National Institute for Women. The working group of women with visual disabilities gave a list of demands to the Minister for Women's Issues, the list included requests to include women with disabilities in policies about violence, and even more importantly, to be included in discussions on the those policies.

The trainings for women with disabilities on women's rights and violence against women used innovative materials and methodologies.

In 2010, the women with visual disabilities decided they had to include women with other disabilities. As a wider group, they approached the National Council for the Disabled to seek support, using the argument that women with disabilities' issues were human rights issues that had not been included in the disability policies being implemented by the Council. As a result, the Council agreed to provide the financial and technical support to develop capacity building activities in most regions of the country, implementing a total of 11 trainings in the capital city and the country's provinces from 2011 to 2013. Besides the geographic

diversity, women and girls with diverse disabilities and diverse ethnic background, including women of African ancestry. Additionally, the officers of the National Council for the Disabled also became involved in this process and within their own institution, in particular, several of the women officers. The trainings included gender and disability, gender and legislation, violence against women, and other related topics. The National Institute for Women (INAMU) had previously defined, as an institutional policy, affirmative action toward several women's groups, such as indigenous women, girls, and victims of violence, but had not defined any policy for women with disabilities. Many of the trainings implemented during this practice were facilitated by the National Institute for Women.

Meanwhile the National Council for the Disabled (CNREE) had started to draft a national policy for persons with disabilities (Política Nacional en discapacidad or PONADIS), but in 2010 it had not yet considered the inclusion of women with disabilities as a specific group with specific rights. The PONADIS was adopted in 2011 and an achievement was that women with disabilities were included, the policy was adopted in 2011. In September 2012, the first national meeting of women with disabilities took place, with the participation of 60 women with diverse disabilities and from diverse geographic and ethnic background, and the financial and political support from the CNREE. The contents and methodology of this first national meeting was jointly designed and organized by the women with disabilities and the Council's officers, putting into practice CRPD article 4.3. The National Institute also provided technical support. As an outcome document the group drafted 22 recommendations. One of the recommendations was that the Council's staff needed to be trained in these issues. The group also demanded the involvement of more governmental institutions such as the Labour Ministry, and greater involvement of the National Institute for Women.

In 2013, the council created a Gender and Disability unit. In September 2013, the second national meeting of women with disabilities took place, and a forum was organized on 25 November to address issues on violence against women with disabilities, involving INAMU and CNREE. In November 2014, the third national meeting took place. In addition to the public institutions already mentioned, this meeting also included the participation and involvement of Costa Rica's national human rights institution (NHRI).

What worked?

- Women with disabilities have greater awareness about the CRPD.
- Mainstream women's organizations that are part of the governing body of INAMU have learned about the rights of women with disabilities and have begun to involve them in programs.
- The National Institute for Women includes a training module on women with disabilities' issues.
- A study on women with disabilities, funded by the National Council for the Disabled, was completed.
- INAMU considers that the most important impact is that women with disabilities are now included as a specific group of women, and are taken into account in all its actions.
- Within the CNREE, women with disabilities are included in their plans, budget and policies.
- In the NHRI, the work unit responsible for women's rights has monitored health service facilities and has identified lack of accessibility and non accessible equipment as a barrier. As a result of the follow up, new equipment has been acquired in some of the services and accessible gynaecological beds have been purchased. The National Rehabilitation Center (CENARE) will provide specific sexual and reproductive health professionals for persons with disabilities attending their services.

What changed?

The women with disabilities movement also drafted an alternative report for the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. So far, this is the only alternative report drafted exclusively by women with disabilities that the UN Committee on Rights of Persons with Disabilities has received. INAMU now has an affirmative action policy for women with disabilities.

What did we learn?

Women with disabilities were unaware of their rights as women and as persons with disabilities, but most importantly, that the rights of women with disabilities were basically rendered invisible, and thus, those women lacked protections. Neither DPOs nor institutions working for women's rights paid attention to them.

Many of the women reside far from the capital city or in remote areas far from the centers where the regional meetings took place. Transport is not fully accessible, limiting the women's possibilities to travel far distances. Additionally, it wasn't always easy to hire a sign language interpreter, due to the hiring conditions required by the CNREE, institution that was funding the activities.

There is still a big challenge in letting women and girls with intellectual disabilities speak for themselves. Parents still believe their daughters they are not capable of doing so. Officials in the public institutions are often set in their ways of work, and this was an important obstacle when trying to convince them to get involved.

Hiring sign language interpreters was also an obstacle, in the sense that due to institutional policies of CNREE, some sign language interpreters could not qualify to be hired.

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