

Promoting a safer, Gender-Based Violence free environment for women and girls with disabilities in Lilongwe, Malawi

→ Implemented by Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA), Malawi

Background

DIWA was initially founded in Tanzania to promote the inclusion of the gender perspective in the disability rights movements. In 2014, the organization received funding to reinforce their involvement in Gender-Based Violence (GBV). They sought to address this violence at different levels in society to ensure no one is left behind. A baseline survey conducted by DIWA showed that 64% of the women with disabilities surveyed had experienced abuse and only 17% of them had actually reported itⁱ. It drew out the causes of the silence surrounding abuse which is a key part of the work against GBV. Consequently, DIWA has implemented a social practice based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), aiming for women and girls with disabilities' full participation in the process. DIWA also seeks to cooperate with mainstream organizations and partners with the Rights Advice Center (RAC) and with Passion with Women and Children (PAWOC) which has helped to extend the geographic scope of their work across three districts of Malawi.

What happened?

DIWA's actions to tackle GBV were developed at community level and in collaboration with the official and traditional authorities. Their program involve a multi-level (from community to national) and multi-stakeholder approach (women with disabilities, police, judiciary, policy-makers, leaders).

DIWA set up groups of women with disabilities at the Traditional Authoritiesⁱⁱ level, which play a key role in addressing the communities' concerns. Women from the groups were trained by DIWA on GBV and on the different types of violence. Women with disabilities devised stories through poetry and theatre writing based on their life experiences and shared these with the community to raise awareness and use their experience as an advocacy tool.

As a result of these performances, the women with disabilities pushed for the creation of new "by-laws" which are parallel rules created and accepted within the community. By-laws were drafted collectively after discussions between the groups of women with disabilities, the Traditional Authorities, community policing counsellors, and the Village Development Committees. These by-laws are promoted by DIWA because they create compensation systems in addition to the existing legal penalties issued by the Court and are a way for a community as a whole to take responsibility for the protection of women with disabilities.

DIWA has also implemented activities to improve the way cases of GBV against women and girls with disabilities are handled by the police and by the legal system. To this end, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed

between DIWA and the Malawi police, Central Region. The organization made a commitment to report cases of violence and train the police. Under this MoU, the police committed to more rapid responses to cases of GBV involving women and girls with disabilities. “Before being trained by DIWA, we were not comfortable with disability issues: we only knew about physical disabilities and did not know how to handle anyone with a mental and/or invisible disability” testified Jane Mkangala, an inspector in the Community Policing and Victim Support Unit. DIWA also decided to train magistrates, prosecutors and clerks on the topic of inclusion and on sign language, in collaboration with the Malawi National Association for the Deaf. In addition, DIWA is involved in the case management of survivors of GBV, to ensure that cases are properly investigated and not simply dismissed.



“Protection starts in the community, because that is where the abuse happens”.

Ruth Mkutumula, Director of DIWA Malawi

What changed?

The groups of women with disabilities constitute a safe space to help build their confidence to face the world and report their issues. They provide better support for women and girls with disabilities, thus shattering the silence surrounding GBV. For instance, a young woman with intellectual disabilities who was sexually abused turned to the Traditional Authorities after her parents failed to take her allegations seriously. The woman got effective support from the group to press

charges against her abuser whereas her parents wanted her to marry him. “The group is a space where I can discuss my problems and find collective support to overcome them,” testified Cecilia another DIWA group member.

The police units trained by DIWA improved their coordination with the organization and their preparedness to receive women with disabilities. In order to ensure relevant and sustainable access to the police services for women with disabilities, the Victim Support Unit contacts DIWA every time a case involving a woman or girl with disabilities is identified. Also, the Malawi police force in the Central Region is committed to collecting and sharing data on cases of GBV involving women and girls with disabilities.

What worked?

The key strength of DIWA is that they work at all levels of society and with different stakeholders. The activities cut across the Malawian society as a whole by targeting official and traditional structures. In DIWA’s grassroots practice, communities are put into contact with the police units, the Traditional Authorities, and all community actors, including community policing.

DIWA also aims to effect systemic change as illustrated by the MoU with the Malawi police in the Central Region, and in addition to this practice with thorough assessments of the accessibility of the justice system.

Finally, DIWA successfully adapted their awareness-raising work to the context in which they intervened. Interactive drama and poetry have proven to be a well-accepted way of communicating

important, emotional messages. Women and girls with disabilities were therefore empowered to raise awareness and become self-advocates.

For more information, please visit:

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ⁱ DIWA – Exploitation, Violence and Abuse among women and girls with disabilities Baseline survey (2014)

<https://www.womenenabled.org/pdfs/mapping/DIWA%20Exploitation%20Violence%20and%20Abuse%20among%20women%20and%20girls%20with%20Disabilities.pdf>

ⁱⁱ “Traditional Authorities act as custodians of the cultural and traditional values of the community”, see Food and Agriculture Organization, Gender and Land Rights Database

http://www.fao.org/gender-landrights-database/country-profiles/countries-list/customary-law/traditional-authorities-and-customary-institutions/en/?country_iso3=MWI