

Gender-Based Violence prevention through a grassroots initiative led by women with disabilities

→ Implemented by *Umuryango Nyarwanda w'Abagore Bafite Ubumuga* (UNABU) – Rwandan Organization of Women with Disabilities, Rwanda

Background

In 2012, according to the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, there were 225,303 women with disabilities in Rwanda. Most of these women are at a high risk of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). UNABU is an organization led by women with disabilities which has formed groups of women with disabilities living in rural communities in four districts of the country. The groups were initially dedicated to discussing the legal rights of women with disabilities under Rwandan law, as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The government of Rwanda has made a strong commitment to preventing GBV. A national law on the Prevention and Punishment of GBV was passed in 2008, after the country's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW). In 2011, the government launched a National Policy against GBV. The same year, a government office issued a report revealing that one in five women in Rwanda experience sexual violence. Although it is well known that disability can increase the risk of GBV, this report included risk factors such as

poverty and lack of education, but not disability.ⁱ

Rwanda also has advanced policies on the protection of the rights of people with disabilities. For example, representatives of the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) are included at all administrative levels. Nevertheless, these laws, policies and government plans seldom refer to the intersections between gender and disability. Women with disabilities are not specifically taken into account in the National Policy against GBV. Furthermore, there is no gender component in the 2007 law "Relating to Protection of Disabled Persons in General". In this context, the work of UNABU, the only Rwandan organization composed of women with all types of disabilities, and led by women with disabilities, is particularly important.



"I learnt that I was undergoing violence that I was not even aware of".

Espérance, member of UNABU

What happened?

UNABU organized girls and women with disabilities into community self-advocacy groups. The discussions in these groups allowed UNABU to collect information on the issues faced by women with disabilities, including a high incidence of unintended pregnancies, often as the result of rape. Following these discussions, the women developed a determination to fight GBV together.

With the support of the Disability Rights Fund, in 2016 UNABU developed a community-based program to empower

local women and girls with disabilities. The organization identified community mobilizers at district level in cooperation with the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD). UNABU's staff trained the mobilizers and women in the community with disabilities on women's rights issues, and GBV, using a method drawn up based on a guide edited by the Rwandan Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion (MIGEPROF), to which they added a disability component. The community mobilizers are in charge of setting up additional groups of women with disabilities, as well as mothers of girls with disabilities. When necessary, they conduct home visits to address the women's social isolation. A total of 27 different groups have been formed, allowing more than 680 women to share their personal experiences and speak about the sexual, physical, economic and/or psychological violence they faced.

Each case of violence is handled through a multi-stakeholder process, starting with referral to the One Stop Centers offering medical care for survivors of sexual violence, involving the police in cases of physical violence, and providing legal support as required.

UNABU has also taken up the challenge of supporting women with disabilities to take legal action against the perpetrators of violence. Women have been supported in accessing legal assistance programs, such as the NCPD programs that provide pro-bono legal support in cooperation with the Rwanda Bar Association, or the Access to Justice Bureaus (*Maisons d'Accès à la Justice*) in each district.

In addition to supporting legal action against the perpetrators of violence, the women in the groups developed ideas to generate income with their meagre savings. For example, some groups

opened a joint bank account to set up a micro-credit system to support their activities and help resolve their personal financial issues. Group members also train each other in running a range of economic activities.

UNABU's position as the only Disabled Persons' Organization (DPO) led by women with disabilities in Rwanda has raised awareness about the need for gender and disability advocacy. UNABU voices the concerns of women with disabilities at national level, in relevant forums including the National Women's Council. Furthermore, in 2016, UNABU collaborated with two organizations, Human Rights First Rwanda and Uwezo Youth Empowerment, to submit a joint submission to the CEDAW Committee addressing the discrimination faced by women with disabilities in Rwanda.

What changed?

As a result of UNABU's work, countless women with disabilities now feel more empowered and supported. They have greater self-esteem and have begun to recognize their own value as human beings. *"Some members of the group were not even registered [in the civil registers; they thought they had no value]"* explains Marie-Antoinette, a community mobilizer.

The women with disabilities in the groups also were able to identify violence and realize that they had sometimes been victims of violence that they were unaware of. Some of the women have become more confident about confronting their abusers. Séraphine, a group member gave a striking testimony: *"Thanks to the group, I could tell my husband that I now knew he was being violent towards me."*

This scared him, and he changed his behavior.” Indeed, many of the women with disabilities in the groups have been able to start defending themselves as they knew how to identify violence and how to report it.

In addition to the positive social and personal outcomes, the program has also shown results in terms of economic empowerment. Some women are also subjected to violence in the form of denial of income or inheritance. In Rwanda, economic violence is experienced by women who are excluded from the *ascending partition* (“an act accomplished by parents while they are still alive, by which they share their estate”ⁱⁱ). The violation of this right is worse for women with disabilities who may have no other means of securing their right to family property. UNABU therefore decided to defend the rights of these women in the courts. Most of the cases brought by UNABU were successful, allowing the women to own parcels of land and earn income from them, for the very first time.

What worked?

The leadership of women with disabilities is the key to creating sustainable groups of women with disabilities in the local communities. These leaders are trusted and encourage others to join in. Opening up the groups exclusively to women with disabilities and the mothers of girls with disabilities also allowed the members of the groups to freely voice their concerns and share in a way they had never previously experienced. Christine is one of these women: *“Joining the group, I felt free to talk about everything that happened to me in the past, including during the genocide. I had never felt this free before.”*

Moreover, the self-governance of the community groups was a key factor in ensuring their success and empowering their members. UNABU’s staff left it to the women in the groups to decide which handicraft activities they wanted to develop, according to their potential and their abilities.

The work of UNABU has also shown the importance of national advocacy. UNABU took advantage of the positive momentum created around the 2008 GBV Law, which paved the way for further innovative actions and programs. This legal development created a favorable context for developing official partnerships with local authorities and informal cooperation with a range of health actors.

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ⁱ For instance, low level of wealth and education are factors which put women at a greater risk of GBV, but the report did not investigate the disability factor. National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda – Demographic and Health Survey, chapter 17, page 244 (2010) <https://www.dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/R259/FR259.pdf>

ⁱⁱ 1999 Rwandan Law on Succession and Patrimony, revised in 2016, No. 22/1999 of 12/11/1999, art 42.