

# Issues in gender-sensitive and disability-responsive policy research, training and action

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Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka compares a Nigerian opera called Waramba to Die Zauberflöte [The Magic Flute] or Turandot. Waramba is about the pending marriage of two royal West Africans - Prince Waramba and Princess Sani - who are the children of competing kingdoms. Their wedding is called off when the king discovers that the prospective bridegroom is a cripple. Prince Waramba nonetheless wants to rule, and rule wisely, so he overcomes his disability and learns to walk. Of course, the opera closes with the long-postponed wedding.[1]

Not all of us who have disabilities come from such royal stock. And not all of us can set aside our disability as the Prince did. But we do seek opportunity to earn our own livelihoods. We seek human rights rather than pity, a chance for employment rather than welfare, and participation rather than dependency.

A poem from Botswana sums it up: "Guarantee me an opportunity, not a charity ticket".[2]

Human rights is the critical issue for all persons with disabilities.

However, there are additional, gendered issues that make contending with disability a far tougher task for women. Three such issues come to mind:

The first gendered issue: women everywhere -disabled or not - need as fair a chance to earn their own livelihoods as men; and they do not usually get it even though they often contribute a substantial share (50 percent or more) of family income and invest it in the new generation. For anyone needing evidence, consider the huge loss of a country's income that results from failure to provide girls equal education as do boys:

"Countries in which the ratio of female to male enrolment in primary or secondary education is less than 0.75 can expect levels of GNP that are roughly 25 percent lower than countries in which there is less gender disparity".[3]

Against that finding, consider that only two percent of the recipients of loans give by the World Bank to on-loan to entrepreneurs through the Bank of Uganda were women a couple of years ago.[4] The same situation prevails in the United States, where women started business at twice the rate of men but received just two percent of the institutional venture capital money.[5]

The second gendered issue: most persons with disabilities who live in low-income countries have two strikes against them - poverty and disability. We have to ask ourselves: Will we let women with disabilities have a third strike against them? Poverty, disability and gender too?

Why should there be three strikes? Because the poverty that underlies much of disability is not gender neutral. Poverty hits harder on girls and women:[6]

Women and children are more likely to be abused and suffer violence when disabled. A deaf man writes: "Deaf men do not have to fight as hard against traditional prejudices as deaf women. Girls' chances for education are limited ... they are denied a chance to excel".[7]

A third gendered issue: women with disabilities are just as able as men to create employment and sustainable livelihoods.

The women building wheelchairs in Kenya say: "We are a women's group that uses some help from men. The women are in charge".[8]

In Uganda, women with disabilities have started MADE - Mobility Appliances by Disabled Women Entrepreneurs - with technical assistance and encouragement from "Whirlwind Women" - a private, voluntary organisation - and grant assistance from the United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability.

Micro-finance institutions are getting small-scale credit to women, who are proven worldwide to be better credit risks than men are. That is a great step but must be carefully monitored. The issue is business. It includes management skills, technical skills and sufficient start-up capital.

An over-riding issue for persons with disabilities and women among them is less visible to the eye. It is the debts and debt-interest that poor countries owe to private and multilateral donors - such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Such debts have done great harm to national economies and have hit women especially hard:

- in Ecuador the debt is US\$14 billion - equal to 84 percent of Gross National Product (GNP), and
- in Mali the debt is US\$3.1 billion - equal to 132 percent of GNP.[9]

Such debts of low-income countries stifle investment in human development. They siphon funds away from health services and education, increasing the number of cases of the "three M's": measles, meningitis and malaria - the chief causes of deafness in Africa. Polio and tuberculosis multiply. Children do not get inside school doors. And when there is not enough money in the national coffers for ordinary education and health expenses, will there be money for persons with disabilities? Will women have equal chances with men? Girls with boys?

We need a new definition of development that puts the development of people as the end and economic growth as its means if we are to expand the freedom and well being of an estimated 13 percent of the world's people - those with disabilities.

Individual countries and the United Nations are taking action to make opportunities available to persons with disabilities. Some low-income countries reserve seats in their Parliaments for persons with disabilities - Uganda identifies five such seats and reserves one seat from each district of the country for a woman representative.

The United Nations Voluntary Fund on Disability finances a range of catalytic projects: sign language dictionaries, wheelchair manufacturing, leadership training and the training of trainers for equalisation of opportunities.

Much more could be done. The over-riding issues are economic justice and human rights for all.

As the Whirlwind Women's Wheelchair makers say: "One revolution at a time".

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### *Notes*

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[1] Soyinka, Wole, "African traditions at home in the Opera House", New York Times, 25 April 1999.

- [2] Makgekgenene, K. 1993. Mamba Arts Commune, Botswana, in No Application Form: poems and stories by women with disabilities from Southern Africa. Improved Livelihood for Disabled Women: a regional promotional programme for Southern African Countries. Harare, Zimbabwe.
- [3] Hill, A. and E. King. "Women's Education and Economic Well Being, vol. 1, no. 2 (1995), as quoted by the World Bank.
- [4] Snyder, Margaret. 1999. The Burning Sun: Uganda's businesswomen. Fountain Publishers, Kampala.
- [5] New York Times, 26 July 1998.
- [6] United Nations. 1995. Women in a Changing World: 1994 World Survey on Women, "Poverty", chapter II (United Nations publication, sales no. E.95.IV.1). See also the discussion on the "gender-related development index" in Human Development Report 1995. (Oxford University Press for the United Nations Development Programme, New York, 1995).
- [7] Mutabazi, Uganda National Association of the Deaf. DENIVA News, vol. 5, nos. 3, 4 (1997) Kampala.
- [8] Whirlwind Women News, vol. 1, no. 1 (1999). Published by Whirlwind International, San Francisco State University (California, USA), at <http://www.rehab-international.org/publications/whirlwind.html>.
- [9] "World Development Tables", table 17, "External debt". World Development Report 1997. (Oxford University Press for the World Bank, Washington, DC, 1997). Note: data are for 1995.