



Women and Girls Impacted by Disabilities

How Kupenda is addressing the needs of a group facing double discrimination

Population

Women and girls impacted by disabilities include both females with disabilities and mothers of children with disabilities. A billion people in the world, 15% of the population, have a disability severe enough that it limits their participation in family, community, or political life. Among this number, 720 million are women and girls, more than double the number of men and boys with disabilities. In low- and middle-income countries, three quarters of the disabled population are female and one in five women are disabled. These high rates of disability among women and girls are often the result of other challenges, such as poor work conditions, poverty, malnutrition, lack of quality healthcare, and sexual violence. Additionally, women who give birth to children with disabilities are often stigmatized and abandoned, which results in 60% of children with disabilities in the care of single mothers.

Twice as Vulnerable

Women impacted by disabilities are more vulnerable than other women or men with disabilities. This is especially true in low-income countries where most women face discrimination and many believe disability is the result of witchcraft or God's punishment. Both the individual with the disability and their mothers are blamed for this "curse." To "cure" their child's disability, mothers have been forced to participate in sexual acts with spiritual leaders or undergo abusive practices like being buried alive.

In rural areas, women spend much of their time collecting water and firewood, farming, and caring for children. Regardless of the individual's actual capability, communities view women with disabilities as unable to perform these "feminine" tasks and, in turn, somewhat asexual and subhuman. This alienates them from their communities and leads them to experience high rates of abuse, neglect, illiteracy, unemployment, and subsequent poverty.

Violence and Sexual Abuse

Most people with disabilities experience some form of emotional, verbal, or physical mistreatment from a very young age. Eighty-three percent of women with developmental disabilities experience sexual violence compared to 32% of males with similar conditions. Women with disabilities are especially susceptible to human trafficking and sexual violence, despite the asexual stigma often placed on them. Girls with disabilities are up to 10 times more likely to be abused, raped, and assaulted than girls who are not disabled, often by their own families or caregivers. Some of the conditions that exacerbate their vulnerability to abuse include: 1) disabilities that prohibit them from communicating what has happened, 2) intellectual impairments that cause others to distrust their testimonies, 3) lack of awareness about their rights, 4) fear of retribution by their abusers, especially those who are also their caretakers, and 5) an assumption that they are virgins, coupled with a common traditional belief that having sex with a virgin can cure HIV.

Education, Employment, and Poverty

In Kenya and countries with similar socioeconomic structures, people with disabilities are viewed as incapable of achieving academically, even when their disability has no impact on their cognitive abilities. Globally, only 5% of children with disabilities complete primary school, leading to high rates of illiteracy and poverty. Among women with disabilities, only 1% are literate compared to 3% of men with disabilities and 50% of women without disabilities. Even if girls with disabilities are enrolled in school, they tend to drop out before finishing primary school due to pregnancy, early marriage, abuse by teachers, and lack of resources to adequately address their educational needs. These factors contribute to men with disabilities being twice as likely to have jobs than women with disabilities and women with disabilities being 25% more likely to live in poverty than males with similar conditions.

Women and girls with disabilities

- 83% experience sexual violence.
- 99% are illiterate.
- 75% of adults are unemployed.

“Today I am working like any learned young woman.”
~ Teresia Zawadi, social worker, college graduate, and amputee

Kupenda’s Education and Advocacy Solutions

Since 2003, Kupenda for the Children has helped women impacted by disability understand their rights and access education and medical care. We do this by educating families and local leaders about disability and then equipping them with the tools they need to support and include women with disabilities in their communities. At the same time, we empower the women and girls with disabilities themselves by educating them about their rights and supporting them in advocating for those rights alongside their community allies.

Kupenda’s family-based care and community development initiatives provide essential resources for women and girls impacted by disabilities, which result in improved access to education, medical support, and inclusion in loving communities.

Our **Family-Based Care** initiatives include:

- Family assessment and ongoing case management;
- Individual and family counseling;
- Disability awareness and care workshops for parents;
- Parent support groups;
- First aid and sign language training for families;
- Transportation, referrals and fee waivers for medical care;
- Short-term financial assistance;
- Income generating support; and
- Crisis intervention.

Our **Community Development** initiatives include:

- Technical assistance and training for medical and education professionals;
- Awareness-raising through community-based volunteer and Disability Awareness Days;
- Advocacy workshops and trainings for government, religious and community leaders

Global research and our program outcomes support the fact that women, girls, and mothers of children with disabilities experience numerous benefits from these education and advocacy initiatives, including lower rates of early marriage and pregnancy, access to higher paying jobs and better healthcare, increased self-confidence, and greater community inclusion and leadership.

Through this work, women who were once without a voice are now being heard. Mothers of children with disabilities now have the tools and support they need to survive and fight for their children’s education, healthcare, and legal rights at all levels of community and government. These women are also forming and joining support groups that provide emotional support, enhance their earning capacity, and improve the impact of their advocacy efforts.

Each year, more women who were once girls in our programs become teachers, social workers, tailors, hairdressers, and disability advocates who gain the respect of the communities that once shunned them – showing that when you empower women of any ability, you change the world.

Teresia’s Story



Teresia, who was once without hope because of her disability, is now inspiring many girls like herself.

When Teresia was five years old and lost her leg, many in her community ridiculed her saying she was capable of very little and was cursed. Her father abandoned her, leaving her in the care of her very ill mother who could not afford her school fees.

Through Kupenda’s support, Teresia attended primary school and went all the way through college where she earned a degree in social work. She is now a social worker for the Kenyan government and uses her education, skills, and life experience to provide counsel and support to families impacted by disabilities. She says, “Today I am working like any learned young woman.”

Most importantly, her example is inspiring other girls with disabilities to accomplish more than they ever could have imagined.

For more information:

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