

Conference Voices:

Disability Justice

This series of mini briefings lifts up the voices and perspectives from workshops, plenaries, and breakout sessions at the 10th Africa Conference on Sexual Health and Rights (ACSHR). You can access the full set of briefings and framing reflections [on the ACSHR website](#).

“When we are talking about disability justice, we are talking about dismantling all the bias and stigma, we are talking about us as full humans. For so long we are seen as less than, deficient, not fully ‘able’ or as ‘superhero’ stories.”

- Phylis Mbeke of [@WomenSpaces on Twitter](#)

A world free from sexual and gender based violence requires disability justice. At the intersection of patriarchy and ableism, girls and women with disabilities face a heightened risk of gender based violence. Systems based on ableism create challenges for girls and women with disabilities when they attempt to access basic services. Disabled girls and women must contend with assumptions and stigma surrounding their bodies and sexuality. From physical accessibility to conscious and unconscious biases of the service providers who are supposed to serve them, they face specific barriers to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

“I want to enjoy sex like everyone else, why should I not be helped when I want to access contraception? People think that if you have a disability you are not entitled to have sex.”

- Agness Chindimba, [@AgnessChindimba on Twitter](#)

Yet, despite the well-known links between patriarchal violence and the devaluation and exclusion of disabled people, the voices of girls and women with disabilities are not always included in conversations about sexual and gender based violence. This leaves marginalisation and injustice unchallenged. Instead, we call for taking a disability justice lens to the policies, programmes, laws and systems that continue to sideline girls and women with disabilities. Only by naming this erasure can we start to build and generate a collective knowledge base about what it means to bring a disability justice approach to our work to end sexual and gender based violence and secure access to sexual and reproductive rights.

We knew that centering disability justice and rights in the 10th ACSHR was essential. A meaningful conversation about violence or sexual and reproductive health must be inclusive of girls and women with disabilities and engage with disability justice. A side event or single panel was not enough. People with disabilities were represented on the steering committees organising the youth and main conference, and disability rights activists were invited to participate across panels throughout the conference.

Far from victims in need of ‘saving’, feminist disability rights activists are leading powerful efforts for justice and liberation. Their strategies are building solidarity,

breaking down isolation and moving resources to girls and women with disabilities. All feminist activists can learn from disability rights activists in the collective work to build a world in which everyone can live in their full dignity.

The session *'What Constitutes "Evidence" for Women and Girls with Disabilities? The Gaps and Way Forward'* sought to unpack this erasure and start to map a way forward. It featured these panelists:

- Agness Chindimba, Founder and Director, Deaf Women Included
- Phylis Mbeke, Founder and Executive Director Women Spaces Africa
- Nana Abuelsoud, Programs and Advocacy Coordinator, RESURJ
- Anisie Byukusenge, Programme Assistant, Purposeful

Panelists highlighted the need to dismantle the systems of bias and stigma that represent people with disabilities as less than human, not fully able, as victims of their situations. This system of oppression felt stronger than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the world of public health started to kick into gear, churning out educational material and information to equip people with the knowledge to protect themselves from infection, little thought seemed to be given to adapting communication in ways that everyone can access, or what the prevention measures, such as lockdowns, might mean for girls and women with disabilities. Audience members echoed this failing.

"The biggest challenge, especially during COVID lockdowns, was income. What men would do to women with disabilities is offer a dollar in exchange for sex."

- [@AgnessChindimba](#)

One participant named ableism as the root cause of the oppression faced by people with disabilities - highlighting that only by recognising this on the same level as racism and classism can we truly move towards achieving disability justice.

Panelists and participants recognise the role research has in powering the fight for disability justice, but this research has to move from the traditional to being flexible and responsive and including both the qualitative and quantitative picture. We need to document the violence experienced by girls and women with disabilities so we can raise awareness and demand policies and laws intentionally that protect against this. Where policies and laws already exist, we need to document why they aren't working for girls and women with disabilities.

“Research says women with disabilities are three times more likely to face SGBV. When we have research on that intersection and have us represented in policy-making, targeted interventions will bridge that gap.”

- Phylis Ndolo of [@WomenSpaces on Twitter](#)

Panelists highlighted the diversity amongst girls and women with disabilities, and cautioned against generalising that one person's experience across all disabled girls and women.

The discussion highlighted the importance of beginning programme and policy design with an accessibility and inclusion commitment and people with disabilities at the table. Without this commitment, there is an accessibility gap from the beginning.

“Laws often perpetuate more violence against women with disabilities. How do we, as feminist organisers, avoid replicating that violence?”

- Nana Abuelsoud of RESURJ

Without disability justice at the centre, sexual and gender based violence will never be eliminated. During the Youth Pre-Conference, Anisie Byukusenge demands collective action through her poetry.

WHO SHOULD I BLAME?

An extract

Who should I blame?

Who should I accuse?

These names of stigma and dehumanisation they call us

Look! In front of some people's eyes

Seems like we are not valued human beings

We are just objects

Which are only there to just satisfy men's sexual desires

They insult and underestimate us with no shame

Hey people!

Hey Society! We want you to change

Change, change, change,

Either your blood

Or our blood
All is red.
Remember! We, girls and women with disabilities
We deserve dignity
We deserve respect
We deserve to live without any kind of violence
Regardless of gender, disability and sexual orientations.
And this is not a favour
I swear!
It is completely our rights.

An extract of a poem written and performed by Anisie Byukusenge

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