

# SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE MOVEMENTS: FUNDING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

*“By including women with disabilities, women’s rights funders have the opportunity to work with dynamic leaders and incorporate new ideas that will increase the strength, size, and effectiveness of the women’s rights movement.”*

—Diana Samarasan  
FOUNDING EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DISABILITY RIGHTS FUND

## WHY FUND THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES?

**LEADING ADVOCATES AND WOMEN’S RIGHTS DONORS** agree that **much more can and needs to be done to include women with disabilities in women’s rights activism, agenda setting, and funding.** This brief explores funding at the intersection of women’s rights and disability rights and offers steps donors can take to ensure that their grantmaking is more inclusive of women with disabilities and to support this emerging movement.

Women with disabilities (nearly 1 in 5 women worldwide) experience multiple forms of discrimination that create additional challenges for their activism and lives. These include barriers to accessing education and employment opportunities, as well as experiencing high levels of violence. Due to discriminatory attitudes and institutional barriers to participation, the voices and lived experiences of women with disabilities have been largely ignored by their communities, societies, and within human rights movements. Many groups of women with disabilities also find it difficult to access funding, as they may lack budgets sufficient for consideration by larger donors or their work may not fit within either women’s rights funding portfolios or those of disability funders.

A recent mapping by [Women Enabled International](#) about the state of advocacy by women with disabilities detailed these challenges and highlighted a gap in funding for organizations

led by women with disabilities. At the same time, this mapping identified a growing number of country-based organizations led by women with disabilities, ready to expand and deepen their work with further investment.<sup>1</sup>

Human rights funders can help address this gap and promote more inclusive and equitable rights movements by ensuring that the groups they already support make visible the diversity of perspectives, knowledge, and leadership of women with disabilities, as well as by bringing much-needed resources to the field. For women’s rights donors, a critical opportunity exists to bridge the women’s rights and disability rights fields and to strengthen partnerships between women with disabilities and mainstream rights organizations.

*“Women disability rights advocates make clear that they are working on all the same issues as other women’s rights groups, as well as on access and inclusion for people with disabilities. If using an intersectional approach is a goal, how can we help these leaders connect to new partners and continue to break down walls between movements?”*

—Katrin Wilde  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CHANNEL FOUNDATION

## TAKING MATTERS INTO THEIR OWN HANDS – LEADERSHIP AND SECURITY FOR WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

### Meerim Ilyas, Senior Program Officer, Urgent Action Fund for Women’s Human Rights (UAF)

As part of a broader effort focusing on collective approaches to security, UAF gave a \$20,000 grant to a group in Kyrgyzstan to support holistic security for women human rights defenders living with disabilities. This pilot project explores the question, “How do we support the activism and leadership of women living with disabilities, while also taking into account the unique security-related challenges they face?” Women living with disabilities in Kyrgyzstan encounter a range of security risks. In many cases, families of women with disabilities limit their freedom of movement by confining them at home, restricting their ability to organize and engage in activism. Women activists with disabilities face mobility challenges due to the lack of accessible sidewalks and transportation systems. They are often stared at, discouraged from entering public spaces, and experience sexual harassment and violence.

This project focuses on building collective leadership through careful examination of local knowledge and capacities of activists in order to design their own approaches to holistic security. A common challenge is leadership continuity when a leader is facing threats and/or burnout. For women with disabilities, there is also a range of challenges related to their internal sense of confidence and thus, leadership abilities. The core project activity is a leadership institute that includes discussion circles where women activists living with disabilities share experiences, discuss the security threats they individually and collectively face, and support one another to amplify their voices.

## WHAT DOES FUNDING THAT BRIDGES DISABILITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS LOOK LIKE?

In 2014, foundations gave **181 grants totaling \$8 Million** in support of the rights of women and girls with disabilities, comprising **0.3% of the overall \$2.7 Billion** in funding for human rights.<sup>2</sup>

- » Only **1.5% of funding for women and girls' rights** focused on women and girls with disabilities
- » Only **9.5% of disability rights funding** focused on women and girls with disabilities

### Sample Grants:

- » **Open Society Foundations** supported **Stars of Hope Society for the Empowerment of Women with Disabilities** in Palestine to strengthen the group's capacity to address violence against women with disabilities and promote access to justice and inclusive education.
- » The **African Women's Development Fund** supported **Malawi Human Rights for Women with Disabilities** to advocate for stronger local laws, conduct educational radio shows and community education to reduce violence against women and girls with disabilities, and undertake income-generating activities.
- » **Abilis Foundation** supported the **National Federation of Women with Disabilities** in Peru to hold a series of capacity building sessions with its members on gender equality and equal opportunities for women with disabilities in order to strengthen the movement.
- » **Mama Cash** gave to **Sentra Advokasi Perempuan Difabel dan Anak** in Indonesia to support village-based groups of disabled women, particularly women who became disabled as a result of recent natural disasters and those living in traditional societies, to form alliances between the women's rights and disability rights movements and strengthen their local and provincial level advocacy.

### SUPPORTING WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES AT NATIONAL AND GRASSROOTS LEVELS

**Yumi Sera, Director of Partnerships and Communications, Disability Rights Fund/Disability Rights Advocacy Fund (DRF/DRAF)**

In March 2016, after two years of advocacy by a coalition led mainly by women with disabilities, the disability movement in Indonesia celebrated a major win with the passage of the Persons with Disabilities Act. The new bill adopts a human rights approach and complies with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, supporting the rights of 36 million persons with disabilities in Indonesia.

The once male-dominated disability movement is now led by women who are intentionally including those who have historically been at the margins. They are forming alliances with other women's movements and the labor movement to find common ground and goals. Their next target is to ensure that Indonesia's adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals is disability-inclusive and gender-sensitive for women with disabilities.

In Indonesia and other countries, DRF/DRAF country level grantmaking supports national and mid-level coalitions, ensuring the participation of women with disabilities, as well as other marginalized groups, for inclusive policies and programs. At the same time, DRF/DRAF supports emergent organizations led by women with disabilities to mobilize and empower women with disabilities at the grassroots to advocate for their rights.

### SUPPORTING COMMUNITY-LED ORGANIZING

**Bolor Legjeem, Program Director, Mongolian Women's Fund (MONES)**

At Mongolian Women's Fund, supporting women with disabilities and mothers of children with disabilities has been a priority for the past ten years. MONES' small grants of \$1,000-\$1,500 spur collaboration, nurture activists to develop programming to address the issues they face, and build a movement in a context where there are few resources available to support women with disabilities.

MONES initially supports small community-based capacity building trainings and then offers participants seed grants if they are interested in continuing to work together. These seed grants not only support groups to initiate activities, but also help to develop their capacity to scale up their work.

As women with disabilities and mothers of children with disabilities are under-resourced and face such a high level of discrimination, a key lesson that MONES has learned is that donors may need to start by funding a project that may not seem rights-based, such as self-care activities or income generation. In MONES' experience, once trust is established and rights awareness trainings are provided, groups develop their own advocacy strategies focused on structural change.



## INTERVIEW WITH CATALINA DEVANDAS AGUILAR, UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON THE RIGHTS OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES, AND MYRNA CUNNINGHAM KAIN, BOARD MEMBER AND FORMER CHAIR, ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN DEVELOPMENT AND DISABILITY RIGHTS FUND GLOBAL ADVISOR

### Q: How does supporting the rights of women with disabilities strengthen women's rights movements?

**Myrna:** The women's rights movement has matured to a level where it recognizes that there are different ways in which women's rights are exercised. Indigenous women, Afro-descendant women, women with disabilities, lesbians, and transgender women all experience denial of rights, but in different ways. **If the women's rights movement does not include an intersectional approach, it won't be a legitimate movement that reflects what women are experiencing.** I see the most important argument as needing to listen to the voices of all women. If women with disabilities are not at the table, their issues will not be discussed. We need to promote affirmative actions in different movements and not only try to go through the disability rights movement. If we go through only through one sector, we will not change the pattern.

### Q: What are critical opportunities for women's rights donors?

**Catalina:** Donors are so used to working in silos that paying attention to disability is sometimes regarded as adding a complex layer. This is not the case. When advocating for sexual and reproductive rights or against gender-based violence, we must reflect on how to include women with disabilities.

Women's right to make decisions about their own bodies must include the right of women with disabilities to retain their fertility and their legal capacity. Forced sterilization and forced abortions, particularly of young women with intellectual disabilities, are widely accepted practices that violate their bodily integrity. The fight for sexual and

reproductive rights can no longer ignore these grave human rights violations.

Women with disabilities also face extremely high levels of gender-based violence and sexual abuse, but have no access to protection systems due to the lack of accessibility and disability-related stigma.

**Supporting disability-inclusive work will benefit all women.** Donors have a great opportunity to extend the scope of their work to cover all women with fairly simple interventions ... just by calling women with disabilities to participate in all efforts they support, in particular in aforementioned areas.

### Q: Can you share a success story about how a focus on disability rights has strengthened women's rights advocacy?

**Myrna:** An explicit goal of the 2016 AWID Forum was highlighting the perspectives of diverse groups, including a very visible group of women with disabilities. At the Forum, Ipul Powaseu, an indigenous woman with a disability from the Pacific, connected with Women's Environment and Development Organization, a group of women activists working on climate justice. This led to an invitation to attend the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 22). Ipul is a leader in the Indigenous Persons with Disabilities Global Network [a cross-movement initiative of the Disability Rights Advocacy Fund] and at COP, she was selected to speak on behalf of the Women and Gender Constituency. This was an important step for women with disabilities to strategize with women's rights activists working on climate justice. At the end, everyone won.

## GIVING SEED GRANTS TO CATALYZE PARTNERSHIP

### Katrin Wilde, Executive Director, Channel Foundation

Channel Foundation started funding the rights of women with disabilities by supporting the launch of Mobility International USA (MIUSA)'s first Seed Grants Program in 2012 in conjunction with their multi-week Women's Institute on Leadership and Disability (WILD), designed to build capacity and strengthen the emerging global, cross-disability movement. Recognizing the potential for WILD graduates to create wide ripples of change, MIUSA devised a program to get funds directly to these activists for projects of their own creation. The program was designed to encourage inclusion and "infiltration" of the mainstream and emphasize rights not charity: the seed grants facilitate partnerships between women leaders with disabilities and non-disability development and human rights organizations. As one example:

- Action on Youth with Disability for Development in Cambodia used a seed grant of \$1,000 to implement a workshop (in partnership with Girl Guides Association of Cambodia) for 106 young people with and without disabilities, covering the rights, experiences, and relevant laws pertaining to girls and women with disabilities, as well as examples of successful leadership. The Ministry of Women's Affairs publicly recognized the workshop and the need for full inclusion of women with disabilities in development planning processes. Local media shared the experiences of girls and women with disabilities with an even broader audience.

As a small donor, Channel would never have been able to identify and develop relationships with each of the advocates on their own, nor could they have administered so many small grants. In addition, Channel invited other partners to WILD graduate-sponsored events that focused on convening and powerfully highlighting women activists with disabilities.

## HOW TO BEGIN? TIPS FROM PEER DONORS AND WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES<sup>3</sup>

### “NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US.”

#### 1 LISTEN TO AND INVOLVE WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

- » Ensure that the expertise and experiences of women with disabilities inform grantmaking by consulting with an advisory council or groups led by women with disabilities
- » Inquire whether grantees collaborate with groups led by women with disabilities or include women with disabilities in their decision-making and activities
- » Engage in hiring practices that reach out to women with disabilities as consultants or staff

#### 2 PRACTICE INCLUSION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

- » Train staff on disability awareness, including diversity within the disability community
- » List women with disabilities among supported populations in application materials
- » Add questions to applications and reporting materials about how applicants and grantees include women with disabilities in their organizations and activities
- » Conduct outreach and disseminate information about funding priorities and calls for proposals via disability rights networks
- » Review websites and communication materials for accessibility
- » Ensure that office and meeting spaces are accessible

#### 3 FUND PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

- » Use the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities as a guide for all grantmaking
- » Directly support groups led by women with disabilities
- » Ensure that the design and implementation of policies and activities do not adversely impact women with disabilities
- » Encourage collaboration between the women’s rights movement and disability movement, for example, by inviting women with disabilities to participate in or speak at civil society and grantee meetings
- » Support leadership development and capacity building for women with disabilities, such as through catalytic seed grants in countries where women with disability-led groups are emerging
- » Include a budget for accessibility and reasonable accommodation in every grant

#### 4 LEARN AND PARTNER WITH PEER DONORS TO INCREASE IMPACT

- » Speak with peer donors who fund women with disabilities to learn from their experiences
- » Consider different funding strategies to reach grassroots groups, such as creating a collaborative pooled fund or supporting local donors
- » Collaborate with peer donors to address social biases and structural barriers that discriminate against women with disabilities

“Sometimes even a rights-aware mainstream organization needs additional expertise and time to fully understand the depth of this intersection and reflect on its own practices.”

—Herta Toth  
SENIOR PROGRAM OFFICER, OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS



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1. “Enabling a Global Human Rights Movement for Women and Girls with Disabilities: Global Disabled Women’s Rights Advocacy Report”. Women Enabled International. March 2016. <<http://www.womenenabled.org/mapping.html>>

2. Figures based on a manual review of the Foundation Center/International Human Rights Funders Group data set of 729 foundations that made at least 1 human rights grant in 2014. Totals for human rights funding for women and girls with disabilities include grants coded with both “women and girls” and “persons with disabilities” as populations supported by that grant.

3. These tips are based on interviews with 15 donors and experts, “Beyond Charity: A Donor’s Guide to Inclusion.” <<http://www.disabilityrightsfund.org/for-donors/donor-guide-to-inclusion/>> and “Funding a diverse movement – How to engage women with disabilities. Recommendations from organizations of women with disabilities.” <<https://www.womensrefugeecommission.org/populations/disabilities/research-and-resources/document/download/1426>>