

Improving access to social protection services and the realization of rights – Rwanda

Organization: RNADW (Rwanda National Association of Deaf Women)

Background

According to the National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda:

- There were 225,303 women with disabilities in the country in 2012¹
- 22.3% of women aged 15-49 years have experienced sexual violence.²

Although there are no data on the specific situation of women and girls with disabilities in Rwanda with regards to violence, it is continuously reported that they face a higher risk of sexual violence and less access to services.

Rwandan women and girls with hearing impairments face specific challenges. The use of speakerphones to disseminate information prevents their access to information and they are therefore excluded from social mobilization. They have unequal access to education since families with limited resources prefer to send their sons to school rather than their daughters, leading to high rates of illiteracy and poor job prospects, which contributes to their exclusion from the community. Women and girls with hearing impairments and limited financial means are at higher risk of sexual exploitation and abuse due to their economic situation and social isolation. Regarding marriage, women with hearing impairments in Rwanda are rarely formally married to their partners and/or the fathers of their children. This means that these women do not benefit from the legal rights and protection accorded to wives under Rwandan law.



Eza Nkaka, Program Officer

The Rwanda National Association of Deaf Women (RNADW) was founded in 2005 by a group of 27 women with hearing impairments. The first activities took place in the Kamonyi and Ruhango districts in 2017. The organization was created in response to a desire to raise societal awareness of the situation of women with hearing impairments, to reduce stigmatization and isolation, and to increase their understanding of their rights and access to services. It was also seen by the founders as a response to the lack of representation of women's issues and female leadership in the public sphere. RNADW chose to prioritize access to services such as education and welfare, to ensure the practical needs of women with hearing impairments at institutional levels are met and their empowerment is encouraged. The motivation for the activities was the cases of women with hearing impairments who had never received Rwandan national identification cards, or who were commonly called offensive names instead of their real names.

¹ [National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda, RPHC4 Thematic Report: Socio-economic Characteristics of Persons with Disabilities, 2012](#)

² [Demographic Health Survey Rwanda, 2014-2015](#)

What happened?

The practice mobilizes women with hearing impairments and tasks them with delivering training on disability rights, access to health insurance, state benefits and family planning services. Awareness-raising and disability-sensitivity training sessions, implemented once a year, targeted 49 women and girls with hearing impairments in the Ruhango district and 52 in the Kamonyi district. The awareness-raising meetings and different training on rights and access to services focused attention on the need for women and girls with disabilities to have a national identification card. This national identification card is not only a legal obligation for every Rwandan citizen but also constitutes the entry point for accessing a number of services. For persons with disabilities, the national identity card is a form of legitimacy and recognition of their value and role within Rwandan society. The awareness-raising sessions cover a broad spectrum of subjects: disability rights, family planning, healthcare services and state benefits. This contributes to fully empowering the women and girls with disabilities attending the sessions.

Awareness about state programs and access to services can empower women with disabilities and allow them to access the benefits. Information about the national programs that target persons with disabilities available in Rwanda is shared during the awareness-raising meetings. Focus is put in the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme, launched in 2008. This program aims to: develop public works; provide vulnerable people with direct support through cash transfers and financial services; provide mutualized health insurance funds for the poorest individuals which aim to provide persons in situations of economic vulnerability with affordable access to healthcare; and distribute disability cards to persons with disabilities, which are required to access services and state benefits.

What changed?

Women with hearing impairments living in rural areas who faced stigmatization and communication barriers perceived a significant reduction in their social isolation through the awareness-raising training. They developed their knowledge and felt empowered; they reported being able to better advocate for their needs.

A change in attitudes, behaviors and practices among the community was observed following the training. Less fear, discrimination and stigma and increased sensitivity to the needs of persons with auditory impairments were reported by the practice beneficiaries, as well as the local authorities and civil society organizations.

Notable Successes

- Six women with hearing impairments who did not have a Rwandan National Identification Card were identified and documented as Rwandan citizens as a direct result of the practice. Of these six cases, one woman was supported through the process to obtain a national identification card registration, enabling her to urgently access state-subsidized health insurance. This case was especially urgent as she was pregnant and therefore had an imminent need to access health care services.
- The local authorities at district level have agreed to implement changes to be more inclusive in their daily work. They are in constant communication with RNADW to share information and organize meetings. They have also agreed to provide sign language

interpretation at a meeting with the district mayor for the first time in order to allow RNADW representatives to participate.

Key Success Factors

- **Leadership by women with hearing impairments** for and with women with hearing impairments is a key success factor because these women are viewed as role models and sources of inspiration by their peers. It also makes them legitimate actors to advocate for their needs and make their voices heard through different platforms; for instance, women with hearing impairments were responsible for electing RNADW board members.
- **The community-based approach** is very important to the success of this project; women with hearing impairments in rural areas often live in almost complete isolation - in both geographical and communication terms. RNADW's actions aim to mobilize almost all of their target group through home visits, liaising with local authorities and networking through the community of peers. Their outreach efforts benefit women who may not be able to read or write, may not speak sign language, may have multiple disabilities, and may lack awareness of the services and opportunities available to them.
- **The organization's partnerships** have helped strengthen the political and legislative landscape in Rwanda around gender and disability through collaboration with the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD),³ and through their membership in the National Union of Disability Organizations in Rwanda (NUDOR).⁴ The awareness-raising sessions cover a broad spectrum of subjects: disability rights, family planning, healthcare services and state benefits. This contributes to fully empowering the women and girls with disabilities attending the sessions.

³ National body working under the Ministry of Local Governance, that oversees and coordinates all national actions that contribute to social and economic development of persons with disabilities.

⁴ Civil society organization established in 2010 by eight national organizations of persons with disabilities.