

Gendered disability advocacy: Lessons from the Girl Power Programme in Sierra Leone

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***** FINAL DRAFT *****

Abstract

In this chapter we examine the efforts of a local NGO in Sierra Leone to implement an advocacy campaign designed to promote girl empowerment, which was also relevant for girls with disabilities. We draw on qualitative research in the capital city, which revealed that involving girls with disabilities throughout all phases of the campaign produced three kinds of beneficial effects. First, participation helped to increase girls' confidence, their sense of self-esteem and (self) advocacy skills. Secondly, it helped them build new social relationships and friendships with other girls, something that had not happened before. Thirdly, the girls' involvement in the programme helped to sensitise communities and challenge the widespread misconception that disability equates to inability and restrictions. We argue that gendered disability advocacy must recognise the ways that age, gender and disability interact with other inequalities to define girls' intersectional marginalisation within diverse, and often disabling, contexts.

Introduction

The disproportionate marginalisation of persons with disabilities by type and severity is accentuated for young persons with disabilities, and girls in particular, because as noted by Gilligan (2016) they often have fewer opportunities and are more dependent on their families and caregivers. Disability is profoundly gendered and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) recognises that women and girls with disabilities "are often at greater risk, both within and outside the home, of violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation" (2006: 3). This is the case in the West African country of Sierra Leone, where most young persons with disabilities commonly face exclusion in both the public and private arena. Malinga and Gumbo (2016) note that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) can and do play an important role in raising disability awareness and promoting inclusive policy and practice through advocacy, even in contexts of widespread socio-economic insecurity and constrained state supported social services. However, persons with disabilities

(including youth) are also activists in changing their situations (Morley and Croft, 2011).

Numerous scholars within the UK have highlighted the issue of diversity within the Disabled People's Movement (Campbell & Oliver, 1996; Dodd, 2014). This lack of diversity is consistent with the global politics of knowledge production in which northern scholarship dominates disability literature generally and disability advocacy specifically thus obscuring contextual accounts. According to Mohamed and Shefer (2015: 3), despite an emergent literature predominantly in Southern Africa, overall in the continent, there is a paucity of studies on disability and even fewer studies of disability from a gendered perspective. This gap in literature undoubtedly extends to disability activism highlighting the need for a convergence of disability, gender and diversity of identity in context. We draw on this to highlight the role and importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989,1991) because of diverse shifting ways in which disability intersects with gender, income levels and spatial location to create compounding forms of marginalisation for women. Females with disabilities are overrepresented among the poorly educated, un and under-employed, and those living in poverty (Emmett, 2006; Gershick, 2000; WHO & WB, 2011). The greater impact on females is because of intersections of ability with gender and other sources of social disadvantage including class and spatial location. For female children and youth, age is an additional source of disadvantage due to the subordinate location of young people in social relations.

In this chapter, we add to the emergent literature in the continent on disability generally and gendered disability specifically with a particular focus on disability advocacy by examining how advocacy strategies address multiple identities. Drawing upon qualitative research conducted in Sierra Leone, we examine the efforts of a local NGO, One Family People, which, as part of an international gender advocacy campaign called the Girl Power Programme (GPP), also sought to make the project relevant to girls with disabilities. We focus on the question of whether, and how, the GPP was beneficial to girls with disabilities. In the first part of the chapter, we review the literature on advocacy in relation to disability. In the second section we discuss the disability context and methods used in the study. The third section introduces One Family People and the GPP. In the fourth section we identify three main ways in which the GPP was relevant to girls with disabilities and also highlight limitations of the approach. In the concluding section we summarise and discuss the key findings.

An intersectional perspective on disability and advocacy

We define advocacy as a “wide range of activities conducted to influence decision makers at different levels”, with the overall aim of combatting the structural causes of poverty and injustice (Barret et al., 2016: 15). In the literature on disability advocacy in the global South, there are several recurring themes. A range of authors (Philips, 2009; Zhang, 2017) have examined the emergence, development and nature of disability rights movements in different national contexts, often through a historical lens. Another recurring theme is the potential that international human rights instruments and particularly the CRPD offer for advocacy at the national level (Lord and Stein, 2008; Harpur, 2012). Several studies have examined the conditions under which alliances and collective action contribute to achieving advocacy outcomes (Miles et al., 2012; Chua, 2014; Hann et al., 2015). Another important theme revolves around the adverse effects of international donor funding on disability advocacy and how dynamics of donor-recipient relations are present at different levels (Meyers, 2014; Wehbi, 2011).

In this paper we add to this literature by arguing in line with critical disability scholars (Kelly, 2010; Meekosha, 2011) on the imperative of giving attention to intersectionality as an important theoretical lens for examining advocacy on disability rights. Intersectionality theory originates from gender studies and has been used to analyse intersections of marginality on the basis that people have multiple, overlapping and interrelated identities (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Symington (2004: 1) defines intersectionality as “an analytical tool for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege”. Cho et al. (2013) emphasise the importance of relational power analyses for intersectionality. It is thus important to heed the reminder by Bilge (2013) on the significance of locating intersectionality in its proper space, centred on social justice and activism. An intersectional approach is therefore useful for examining how marginalised groups use their positions at the intersections of overlapping categories as a resource for activism and resistance (Konstantoni et al., 2017). We find this framework particularly useful for analysing multiple interrelated challenges confronting girls with disabilities. In many countries, girls with disabilities face exclusion on the basis of their age, gender and impairment (Wendell, 1989; Dhungana, 2006; Hirschmann, 2012). Addressing the root causes of these girls’ marginalisation therefore requires accounting for their overlapping multiple oppressed identities but also the institutions and processes that use identity to exclude and privilege.

In Africa, a few authors have explored intersectionality and how it relates to disability. In South

Africa, Moodley and Graham (2015) explore how gender, race, poverty and disability interact to influence the wellbeing of women with disabilities. A few studies focus on young people's agentic advocacy, for instance, Willemse et al. (2009) present an autobiographical narrative of a male, deaf, HIV positive, gay and poor youth and how he negotiates these diverse identities including spatial location in post-apartheid South Africa. Similarly, Morley and Croft (2015) show how, despite the association of disability with constraints and exclusion, the agency, advocacy and achievement in higher education of young people with disabilities in Tanzania and Ghana offered them opportunities for transforming their stigmatised identities. However, little focus has been given to various advocacy strategies by organisations working with groups with disabilities within the context of intersectionality. This is particularly so for young people where a perspective on intersectional discrimination and addressing it would be important in analysing axes of discrimination beyond the obvious ones to also include age.

In the discussions in this paper, we extend this literature by examining the efforts of a local NGO in Sierra Leone who, as part of an international campaign seeking to empower girls, endeavoured to make their advocacy relevant to girls with disabilities as well. We argue that in order to be effective, disability advocacy should take intersectionality into account. We also make an important caveat. Despite the importance of an intersectionality analysis to our understanding of multiple forms of discrimination, we are aware of critiques that have been levelled against the framework and its utility in addressing intersectional marginalisation. One criticism is that it still tends to be focused on identity but not on relations and processes that create inequality or oppression (Garneau, 2018: 9). Additionally, Chang and Culp (2002: 485) highlight the challenges of working with intersectionality from a methodological perspective by noting the difficulty of identifying intersections. In furthering theoretical and practical knowledge on the utility of an intersectional lens on disability and advocacy, our analysis proceeds from, and works within, these critiques of intersectionality. We accomplish this by being reflexive and positioning girls with disability not as a fixed identity, but we show how diverse processes including community norms on disability, spatial location, and material factors like poverty and access to transport, affect their meaningful participation in diverse spaces. By examining the work of one organisation, One Family People, we also analyse how intersectionality is subjectively experienced and how the role of different processes including participation are factors that impinge on the wellbeing and identity of female youth with disabilities in specific settings.

Background, context and methods

Historically, disability inclusion has proved to be an obstacle for disability rights activists in Sierra Leone, and exclusion of persons with disabilities continues to pervade all facets of public and private life. In a recent survey of persons with disabilities in and around urban areas in Sierra Leone, fewer than half of respondents stated that they were participating in their communities, with more associating their exclusion to discrimination from other community members than to practical issues like accessibility or distance to facilities (Trani et al., 2010). Persons with disabilities are persistently ostracised and constrained from active participation in society and young people in particular experience higher levels of violence. Disability studies has repositioned the exploration of disablement away from a medical discourse to one of social oppression and discrimination. These debates follow from the notion that disability is a social construct resulting from societal structures erected, sometimes unintentionally, due to entrenched attitudes and misperceptions (Bohman, 2005, Hosking, 2008, Goreczny et al., 2011). Many persons with disabilities have internalised the negative attitudes and misperceptions about their disability and suffer from shame and a low sense of self-worth. The stigma surrounding disability is culturally entrenched especially in the rural areas, with a widely held belief that it is caused by a parent's sin or the work of the devil (Powell, 2010). Having a child with a disability is thus a source of shame, and many families of girls with disabilities often hide them from public view.

Data for the research from which this chapter is drawn was collected over a period of nine weeks from June to August 2016, in the capital city of Freetown and the surrounding districts. The study was qualitative and utilised several techniques including twenty-eight semi-structured interviews and eleven focus group discussions with between five and ten participants of the GPP in each group. These were members of the Victory-Girls, referred to as V-Girls (and boys as V-Boys). Overall, there were nine same sex focus groups discussions, five with V-Girls; four with V-Boys, and two mixed focus groups discussions. These were complemented by interviews with and ethnographic observations of One Family People (OFP) staff members, government personnel, village chiefs, civil society organisations and participants of the GPP in the study communities. Of the hundred and thirteen research participants, twenty-one were girls with disabilities that took part in the GPP as members of the V-Girls. Some of the girls participated in focus group discussions with other girls in their community, as well as semi-structured interviews.

The researcher's position as a cultural and linguistic outsider - young, white, middle class, able-bodied female - certainly had an impact on the research which took place in Sierra Leone, a fragile Sub-Saharan African state. While many of the research participants have a disability, the researcher does not, and this added a further layer of distance between the researcher and her participants, especially given the vastly different cultural and contextual meanings of disability. There is a body of literature that points out the need for reflexivity during the research process to consider how one's positionality might impact data collection and findings (Davis et al., 2000; Finlay, 2002). The researcher decided to live and socialise with the research participants throughout the research process to mitigate the initial difficulties of integrating in a way that was necessary for learning and adapting to the beliefs and behaviours of Sierra Leone. This living arrangement allowed the researcher to become familiar with the lives and experiences of the staff and the girls in the GPP. A degree of intimacy developed with the girls over time, and this helped significantly to build relationships of trust and brought deeper layers of understanding that would not have been possible if she had lived separately and interacted intermittently with the participants.

To mitigate the challenges arising from her positionality, the researcher adopted an intersectional approach to the research. She paid particular attention to the gender, (dis)ability, age and spatial location of her participants, and formulated research questions and methods appropriate to the particular participants, and she interpreted the results from an intersectional perspective. This provided "an understanding of the issues that is closer to the lived experiences of the equality groups that you are interested in, thus allowing you to develop effective strategies to address them" (Christoffersen, 2017: 2).

One Family People and the Girl Power Programme

OFP is a small locally-run NGO based in Freetown that was established in 2008. Their work can broadly be divided into two categories: day-to-day needs-based social work for persons with disabilities in the capital as well as wider-reaching and long-term advocacy outreach projects at the district level. OFP's personal and frequent contact with this group and their strong local knowledge of disability issues at the grassroots level have cemented their reputation within the disability community. One government minister explained that OFP "are very close to my heart", while a mother in Calaba Town also shared similar sentiments noting:

“Some NGOs are coming, they talk, talk, talk, but they do not do anything. But One Family People, they come here, they speak to us, they encourage us, and whatever they say, they do it”.

In OFP’s early years, they suffered from a lack of sustainable funding, which made fundraising from foreign donors a major priority. While OFP’s core mission is disability work, key staff members are also feminists which allowed them to seize funding opportunities for gender related activities. This resulted in the partnership with International Child Development Initiatives, a Dutch organisation, who offered them the opportunity to implement the GPP. The GPP was a five-year gender advocacy project that ran from 2011 to 2015 with the objective of increasing the protection of girls against sexual violence, early marriage and teenage pregnancy and to improve their economic and educational opportunities.

Like many countries in West Africa, Sierra Leone has patriarchal cultural roots that dominate social relations. Entrenched socio-cultural norms and values foster an environment in which significant gender inequalities exist, with girls and women having fewer educational and economic opportunities compared with those of boys and men. Women in rural areas have higher rates of illiteracy and marry at an average age of 15.5 years (Schroven, 2006). Teenage pregnancy has long been a problem in the country, with Sierra Leone ranking among the ten nations in the world with the highest teenage pregnancy rates in 2013 (Denney et al., 2017). Sexual violence was widespread during the 1991-2002 civil war, and this practice continued into the fragile post-conflict climate where a lack of legislative and regulatory structures fostered a culture of impunity and stigma surrounding abuse that often shamed victims into silence (Schroven, 2006). The residents of Dwazark, a community on the outskirts of Freetown with a population of approximately 5,000 inhabitants, recalled that in the decade after the civil war there were two or three cases of rape per day. According to one OFP staff member, the GPP was “the right intervention at the right time”.

The programme’s core strategy consisted of mobilising girls and enabling them to advocate for themselves. In the GPP, OFP set up a series of community initiatives that directly targeted 2,704 girls and young women between the ages of ten and twenty-five in thirteen communities in the Western Area and Moyamba District. Two sets of activities were central in these initiatives:

1. Establishing V-Girls, MLPUs and V-Boys. Extra-curricular life-skills training groups known as the Victory Girl clubs, or ‘V-Girls’, were established, providing an experience-sharing self-help platform

for girls and young women and a forum to discuss the laws and rights to protection. Football, music, hairdresser training, dance and drama were among the activities available to the V-Girls, with initiatives such as the Forum Theatre offering space for awareness-raising of issues around sexual violence and early marriage via theatre for development performed in the communities. In addition, 1,000 parents and community leaders were targeted, with the formation of the Mothers-Led Protection Units (MLPUs) to train women in the communities to provide twenty-four hourly support for girls at risk of abuse, and the Service Providers' Network to reinforce the protection of girls as the cases went through the justice system. Over time, OFP brought boys into the project, creating the V-Boys for boys and young men in the communities to learn about the laws around gender-based violence.

2. Legal Awareness and Capacity Building. OFP sensitised communities about the law while drafting a guideline of rules about harassment to engage with disabling norms underlying the problems that were pervasive in the communities before the initiation of the GPP. At the lobbying level, OFP facilitated dialogue meetings between civil society and government stakeholders, engaging policy-makers by calling for better implementation of policies and laws for the protection of girls, and hosted capacity-building workshops of government professionals about the laws against sexual violence. Alongside this, the GPP offered training and support for civil society organisations to work more effectively to promote girls' rights and bridge-building initiatives with representatives from the police to rebuild trust between communities and the police that had broken down since the civil war. At the time the GPP was implemented, Sierra Leone was seeing a collective push by donors, government, civil society and NGOs towards gender equality, and the GPP was one of a number of overseas-funded advocacy interventions to contribute to a changing attitudinal climate towards women and girls in the country.

Positive outcomes

The findings reveal that local stakeholders look positively towards the GPP and its results. Every interviewee the researcher met with, from government ministers and Paramount Chiefs to participants of the GPP and members of the communities, reported the same feedback that the GPP contributed to increased knowledge in the communities on gender equality and helped to change awareness and behaviour on the rights of girls and women in daily life. The girls that participated in the GPP indicated that they felt better equipped to speak out for themselves against abuse, with one thirteen year-old girl exclaiming:

“Now when a boy touches my behind I turn around and say, ‘Eh! Don’t you grab me! I know my rights!’”

The focus groups with the V-Boys signalled a change in their thinking and behaviour towards girls, particularly regarding respecting girls and refraining from sex at a young age. The GPP encouraged girls to share their experiences, and the research found some evidence that this had an impact on the culture of silence and shame around speaking out. As noted by the Paramount Chief in Moyamba:

“Now communities are concerned, they are rejecting abuse, ignorance, those harmful practices against girls”.

Because of the project, girls were now being accompanied to the police station by MLPUs and there has been improved follow-up of reporting by the police and court attendance of civil society members to monitor cases and ensure that prosecution is not prematurely terminated by threats or bribery. In conjunction with numerous other gender and child rights lobbying efforts in Sierra Leone, the GPP pressured the government to take responsibility in addressing gender-based issues. Respondents pointed out that the GPP contributed to the instalment of magistrates in all fourteen districts in Moyamba and played a role in the government passing The Sexual Offences Act in 2012 to close the gaps in the law around gender violence.

Participation of girls with disabilities

Although the GPP was designed for the rights of girls in general, OFP made a particular effort to ensure that girls with disabilities participated in all of the programme’s activities. When OFP staff entered the communities, they located girls with disabilities and actively encouraged them to participate in the GPP by becoming V-Girls, effectively extracting them from their metaphorical hiding places. They consistently reminded the girls that they are just like other girls, and can participate in activities and achieve the same as the other girls can. They spoke with the families of girls with disabilities to emphasise the importance of education for their daughters. They ensured that participants with disabilities were involved at every event, demonstration and performance, and they made efforts to consider practical issues like building accessibility and the need for sign language interpreters at functions. They emphasised that all girls are capable of achieving their

goals, frequently repeating the motto that 'disability is not inability', to boost the girls' morale. At every opportunity, girls with disabilities were given the floor to speak out in support of the need for girls' protection and empowerment, acting as project ambassadors for the GPP. In the communities, they consistently framed the girls not as 'the disabled', but as 'girls', to remove the focus from their disability. Girls with disabilities were given a platform to present themselves as eloquent and confident young individuals who are responsible and capable of standing up for their rights and taking the lead in a community initiative.

The above raises the question of what the effects were of OFP's efforts to ensure the participation of girls with disabilities throughout all phases of the project. During the research it became clear that the encouragement of girls with disabilities to take part in the project at its development, organisation and delivery stages produced three main kinds of positive effects, alongside the project's intended outcomes in the field of gender equality: (1) it helped to increase girls' confidence, their sense of self-esteem and (self) advocacy skills; (2) it helped them build new social relationships and friendships with other girls, and (3) the girls' involvement in the programme helped to sensitise communities and challenge the widespread misconception that disability equates to inability and restrictions. Girls with disabilities were more enthusiastic about these changes than the changes that occurred regarding gender equality.

Improved confidence, sense of self-esteem and (self) advocacy skills

The girls with disabilities who took part in the GPP stated that participation helped to increase their confidence and their sense of self-esteem after years of internalising negative feelings about their self-worth, and helped them to develop their self-advocacy skills to a point that they began to defend and speak out for themselves in the face of discrimination about their disability. The act of participating in this project, regardless of the project's content or objectives, has played a vital role in helping girls with disabilities grow in confidence, maturity and self-esteem. By taking part in the self-help groups and speaking out on issues of sexual violence and early marriage, girls with disabilities gradually learned to how to speak out in a public forum. They learned new skills of leadership and teamwork and they found their voice, recognising that they, too, have the potential to contribute to discussions and decision-making, which significantly helped the girls to regard themselves more positively. "It helped us know who we are, how we really belong in society", said one girl with a disability about the GPP. Participating in the project helped to foster more

constructive attitudes among those with disabilities who took part, including a participant who expressed the following:

“To change the mentality must have to start with ourselves. We have to change our own attitudes. We can’t just expect people to be coming to give us everything.”

Inclusion of girls with disabilities in the program with their peers was empowering and boosted their self-image. Data collected from the interviews indicated that the girls who took part are less shy and less inclined to distance themselves from social situations, which they formerly believed were inaccessible to them because they were not worthy of joining in. A nineteen year-old girl with a severe disability acquired as a result of childhood polio noted,

“Before I knew this organisation, I was ashamed. I thought when I talked, people would never even consider me”.

The staff repeatedly reminded the girls that their disability was not caused by sin, and that they were capable of joining in just like their peers. The deeply held sense of shame that often damages the self-esteem of persons with disabilities in Sierra Leone seems to have been significantly lessened among the girls who participated in the GPP. The notion of pride is incredibly important within advocacy and activism (Grimm & Pilkington, 2015), and by realising that their disability did not have to be such a barrier to their participation, their confidence and sense of self began to improve.

By repeatedly speaking out on issues of sexual violence and early marriage in the GPP, girls with disabilities gradually learned how to speak out and articulate their frustrations related to their intersectional identities. Persons with disabilities are a frequent target for verbal abuse on the streets of Sierra Leone, but the girls who participated in the project indicated that they felt more equipped to speak out for themselves in the face of insults, as explained by one girl with a physical disability:

“Before Girl Power, I would just keep my head looking down. But now if someone discriminates against me, I use this as an opportunity to defend myself and educate them!”

Participant observation data revealed that girls who had participated in the project carried themselves with pride and dignity in a way that is rarely seen from other persons with disabilities in Freetown.

In the project's baseline survey, OFP noticed that there were no role models that existed to act as inspiration for girls with disabilities in the communities. Scholars who have investigated the impact of role models on individuals have highlighted their importance in provoking self-enhancement and inspiration (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997; Johnson et al., 2016). When OFP entered the communities to deliver the project, their staff with disabilities who led the workshops and discussions inspired and impacted the mind-sets of the girls with disabilities. Over the course of the project, the girls with disabilities themselves began to act as role models, in turn becoming a source of inspiration to their peers including girls with and without disabilities. Their status as role models was a part they played with pride, typified in the following statement from one of the project's participants:

"Disabled girls were admiring us! They were thinking, 'These girls are disabled and they are speaking out against sexual violence. If they can stand up and say 'No' to violence, then so can we!"

In the third year of the project, OFP created the Gold Champions after-school club for standout girls of the GPP, the majority of whom were girls with disabilities. The intention of the programme was to enhance their status as role models by training the girls to lead their own GPP self-help groups for girls in the communities thereby becoming mentors themselves. Participation brought an opportunity to develop self-advocacy skills, a necessary pre-condition for activism if these girls are to fight for their disability rights in future.

New social relationships and friendships

Participation in the programme also helped girls with disabilities to build new social relationships and friendships with other girls. The GPP provided girls with disabilities the opportunity to frequently interact with girls without disabilities, something which did not happen before. Participation at after-school clubs and recurring events with such interactions alleviated girls with disabilities' sense of social exclusion and segregation from other young people. Friendships between girls with disabilities and girls without disabilities have been formed and they are allies in transforming mind-sets about persons with disabilities. Many of these friendships had continued at

the time the research was undertaken, even though the programme had concluded. One girl with a mobility impairment who lives in central Freetown was delighted by the fact that her new friends now defend and support her at school when other students insult her about her disability:

“With Girl Power we have created a friendly relationship with them [girls without disabilities]. Now when I am in trouble with people, they say, ‘Eh! Do not disturb her, she is our sister!’”

Much of the discrimination that surrounds girls with disabilities is borne out of fear and ignorance, but the inclusion of girls with disabilities in the GPP has contributed to reducing the distance and social barriers that often exclude them. The reticence and stigma of being friends with persons with disabilities also seems to have decreased. Data from interviews with a cross-section of study participants suggest they are now regarded more as individuals and less defined primarily by their disability identity. Social norms that discourage friendships between persons with and without disabilities can often be more disabling than the disability itself. Inclusion and social connections has undoubtedly improved the emotional and psychological wellbeing of the girls with disabilities, who were deprived of these things for so long.

Sensitise communities

Finally, the girls’ involvement in the programme helped to sensitise communities and challenge the widespread misconception that disability equates to shortcomings and difference. One of the most successful outcomes of participation of girls with disabilities in the GPP according to interviewees has been the sensitisation and change in mind-sets in the communities about persons with disabilities. To illustrate the extent to which social norms in Sierra Leone discourage friendships between people with and without disabilities, one schoolboy said that when he first visited the OFP office and saw persons with disabilities there,

“I wanted to run! I became shocked because I never knew this organisation was working for disableds. I made up my mind never to go again”.

However, as a result of his participation in the GPP, he is now friends with the children he initially wanted to escape from, demonstrating the attitudinal shift that has occurred among those taking part in the project. The change in mind-set was also noted by adults as stated by one government official:

“Before I met One Family People, I was the same as everyone. I only felt pity for the disabled. But since I met One Family People, my perception changed. I see them as being unique and they have lots to offer, but are not given the chance”.

For the first time, these girls were seen in a new light as eloquent and capable young rights-holders taking the lead in a community initiative tackling gender equality. This marked a stark departure from their previous conceptualisation merely as victims. Conceived to improve the rights of girls including girls with disabilities, an unintended outcome and consequence of the project has been disability sensitisation. Witnessing a group of girls with disabilities in this new way, being active alongside their peers, has helped to leave a symbolic contribution on audiences about what it means to have a disability. For many, it changed the way they perceived and related with persons with disabilities. The participating girls with disabilities were treated more as responsible and capable individuals, many for the very first time: “Being part of the Girl Power was the first time we got respect in our community”, noted one young woman in her early twenties with a physical impairment at Kissy Shell in Eastern Freetown.

This elevation in status also occurred within their own families. Several girls with disabilities who participated in the GPP reported that they had gained more esteem within the family setting. A young girl with a disability in Moyamba explained:

“My parents did not consider me before. Whenever there was a kind of, decision-making, they would only consider my brothers and sister. It’s much better now. My father now trusts me to give me a key to the house”.

The project instigated the need for a change in attitudes towards persons with disabilities as reliable and responsible individuals. In this way, the GPP has facilitated the challenging of disabling social norms and negative stereotypes about persons with disabilities through inclusion of girls with disabilities in the activities of the programme and enabling the creation of allies among girls with and without disabilities. The shifts in constraining norms and beliefs about disability point to potentially transformative pathways for advocacy that was facilitated by these girls’ inclusion and participation.

The importance of an intersectional approach

The preceding shows how intersections of gender, age, socio-economic status and disability create multiple layers of discrimination for girls in Sierra Leone, because as noted by Symington (2004) they work together to produce a distinct experience of marginality. Intersectionality is thus an important analytical tool for working across strands of identity as well as institutions and norms that use identity to exclude. By opening up spaces for girls with disabilities to re-position themselves as (self) advocates, the GPP enabled the realisation of positive outcomes for these girls, playing an important facilitative role in opening the door to reconstructing misperceptions about disability, and thus can be seen as an exemplar of disability advocacy.

In this section we argue for the need to strengthen the participation approach by building disability advocacy that is intersectional. This requires an intentional recognition of the ways that age, gender, income level and (dis)ability work together with other facets of identity, along with an engagement with the structures that exclude on the basis of identity.

Transport

This research revealed the multiplicity of constraints that girls with disabilities were dealing with that hindered their full participation in advocacy activities. One such constraint was the practical matter of transportation. In the hectic pace of life in Freetown, transport is a major problem for persons with physical disabilities, because 'poda-podas' (minibuses) are hesitant to pick them up if it involves additional time waiting for them to disassemble their wheelchairs. This meant that the programme's participants with physical impairments often arrived later to GPP events, and sometimes did not arrive at all, curbing their active involvement and meaning their voices were absent from the advocacy discussions. Intersectional work would require intensification of advocacy and engagement with the minibus drivers as allies, as well as with members of the community, local government and other stakeholders to resolve these and other systemic challenges.

Sexuality

The GPP's stated aims were the reduction of early sexual relationships, teen pregnancy and sexual violence. A key rationale behind OFP's drive to include girls with disabilities in the advocacy project was their consideration that girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation while lacking information and access to services. Indeed, as the researcher grew to know the girls with whom she lived during fieldwork, it became evident that the girls with disabilities

who participated in the GPP have a more nuanced and complex relationship to their sexuality, but that this risked being overlooked. In many cases, girls with disabilities are vulnerable to and succumb to relationships at a young age because they have been abandoned or ignored by their families, or viewed as asexual due to their disability. One girl in her early twenties wanted a relationship but bemoaned the fact that boys never showed her any attention because of the disability she had contracted as a result of childhood polio. Another V-Girl claimed that her relationship with her boyfriend and the father of the child she bore at age fifteen is sacred, as “he was the first person to ever show me love.”

High rates of teenage pregnancy among girls with disabilities are, in many cases, related to their marginalisation from the socio-economic, educational and health sectors. Furthermore, girls with disabilities will sometimes have (many) children to show that they are sexual beings, in an attempt to disprove the assumption that persons with disabilities are asexual and infantile (Murphy & Young, 2005; Nam, 2012). Alternatively, they might have multiple children at a young age, believing that their offspring will provide care for them (Majiet, 1996; Tepper, 2000). As one participant whose polio left her debilitated from the waist down, explained, “my son is my legs” for household tasks, including bathing and shopping. Another reason for bearing children is the belief that children can earn more money from begging which is a dominant livelihood strategy for many persons with disabilities in Sierra Leone.

A number of studies have identified a connection between disability and sexual and physical abuse (Alriksson-Schmidt et al., 2010; Mays, 2006), and this is consistent with the researcher’s findings from Sierra Leone. Referring to rape, a V-Girl with a disability in her early twenties explained,

“Some men think, since this person is a disabled, she will not be able to fight me. So, they just come in and go away”.

Clearly, the intersection of disability with other factors exacerbates their situation. This is consistent with studies that have found that women with disabilities are more likely to stay in abusive relationships because they have internalised negative attitudes about themselves or because they believe that a violent partner is better than none at all (Amalo, 2013; Peta, 2017).

This points to the need for an intersectional approach to engage with these multiple dimensions of girls' lives that highlights the heterogeneity of girls generally and girls with disabilities specifically. The intersectional experiences of girls with disabilities requires an intersectional approach which includes messages and strategies that are tailored to their to their specific vulnerabilities and pays attention to their articulated needs. Importantly, an intersectional approach also requires that interventions problematise the diverse and often disabling contexts in which these girls are located rather than focusing on the individuals themselves. Such an approach complements participation with transformative strategies allowing advocates to achieve full inclusion. One of the project's success stories, for instance, is a girl with a severe physical disability who excelled in the GPP and rose to a leadership position, and who regularly spoke out to large audiences at the programme's events. Since the project has ended, she is now studying at university, and is one of just twenty students in the country taking advantage of the government's policy of free tertiary education for persons with disabilities. This was only possible because, alongside the project's female empowerment advocacy messages, she was able to seek and receive a scholarship from a Western donor organisation to attend high school enabling her to continue her education and eventually join university. This highlights the importance of considering multiple intersecting dimensions of injustice including ability, class and spatial location, and how they come together to define marginality in different ways for different people.

Identity and beyond to a relational approach

Disability is a widely heterogeneous term covering a broad variation in the type and severity of different impairments. In the GPP, girls with certain types of disabilities benefited more than others: girls with physical disabilities, for instance, were over-represented in the GPP, while girls with other types of disabilities, including speech and hearing impairments and severe learning disabilities, were under-represented or left out altogether. For more inclusive and effective participation, practitioners must adopt an intersectional approach in their work, which takes into account the heterogeneous nature of disability including identifying and providing support based on the differential needs which are gendered. In other words, by taking intersectionality into account, (self) advocacy can be made more inclusive. Participation, when implemented with a deliberate focus on the awareness of the multidimensionality of marginalised identities, offers a transformative opportunity if practitioners are specifically cognizant of the unique and intersecting obstacles, differences, needs and perspectives of the participants that sit at the nodes of exclusion. Intersectionality signals the importance of forging new group identities and creating new alliances

beyond a single issue, with the linking of the disability movement to the gender movement being just one example of such an alliance. Ultimately, group identities are vital for collective mobilisations for rights, resources, and recognition, which can pave the way for new solidarities beyond disability alone (Della Porta & Diani, 2006).

Overall, much has been accomplished in the GPP for girls with disabilities, especially when taking into account that it was designed for the rights of girls in general. Our analysis, however, also identified some important constraints and limitations of the GPP and showed how the marginalisation of girls with disabilities in the programme is intersectional and related to structural institutionalised powers and processes (see Hickel, 2014). We therefore assert that future advocacy can achieve even more by going beyond identity and agency to examine these social relations, institutions and processes that create inequality or oppression. We argue that truly transformative change for girls with disabilities must go beyond the inherent value of amplifying their voice and agency and changing (mis)perceptions about their ability. This requires efforts to also engage with and shift disabling gender and social norms as well as linkages with complementary efforts including policies and projects that help communities and females specifically, to overcome structural constraints that actively disempower them. The role of the state in addressing structural vulnerability should not be obscured (Penn, 2017; Okwany, 2016). This is consistent with the contention by (Cho et al., 2013; Garneau, 2018) that a critical starting point of intersectional inquiry must go beyond individual subjects and identity to engage with social relations and institutions of power.

Conclusions and way forward

This chapter has examined the advocacy efforts of a local NGO in Sierra Leone, which, as part of an international campaign seeking to empower girls, tried to make their work relevant to girls with disabilities as well. Taking an intersectional approach, we explored whether, and how, the programme was beneficial to and cognizant of the multidimensional lives of girls with disabilities. The findings affirm that disability is profoundly gendered and for females, is associated with constraints including social discrimination and marginalisation. The subordination of young people in social relations means that for female youth, age intersects with their gendered disability to accentuate their socio-economic marginalisation in life including in advocacy activities. We contend that looking at disability advocacy through an intersectional lens offers fresh insights and a new way forward for taking the participation approach even further, through greater recognition of the

intersectional nature of disability. Indeed, findings revealed that despite the association of disability with constraints, discrimination and exclusion, the project had significant beneficial impacts.

Notably, three kinds of positive effects for girls with disabilities were identified that were directly related to their participation in the advocacy activities. First, the study showed that by involving girls with disabilities in activities that develop their self-advocacy skills, their participation contributed to an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence. Secondly, through sustained interaction between girls with and without disabilities, participation contributed to inclusion and the formation of new social ties. Third, by giving girls with disabilities a public platform and framing them in a positive light, participation contributed to community awareness while inspiring other girls with and without disabilities. Where multiple identities are associated with interrelated mechanisms of discrimination, it makes sense for advocates working for different causes to join forces and strengthen their case. This points to the importance of cross-issue alliance building.

While these findings show that gender advocacy can be made disability relevant and that it is possible to address multiple identities within a single advocacy campaign, we also highlight limitations, which have implications for effective disability advocacy, particularly in instances where there are constrained funding opportunities for disability-specific projects. Advocacy strategies are rooted in an understanding of what drives exclusion and identities and experiences are complex expressions of intersecting social forces and structural power relations. Thus for advocacy to be more inclusive and effective, we draw on our analysis to argue that for programmes like the GPP. Intersectional thinking must go beyond a focus on identity and increasing the agency and advocacy of girls, by offering pathways for examining the processes that shape the structural relations and processes that infuse and define inequality and oppression in socio-economic life.

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