

Empowering Women with Disabilities as Leaders

Background

Women with disabilities account for one-fifth of all women globally, yet are one of the most underserved populations worldwide and have a greater risk of abuse and poor health outcomes. Many disabled women have shown tremendous leadership potential and the ability to transform communities after receiving targeted training.

Since 1997, Mobility International USA (MIUSA) has been running and refining an intense 3-week program called the Women's Institute on Leadership and Disability (WILD), bringing over 200 women with disabilities from over 80 countries to Eugene, Oregon since the start of the program. Participants hone their skills as advocates for people with disabilities and gain confidence in their role as change makers in their home countries and the world.

After six months from an average WILD training of 30 women with disabilities:

- > **67% are published**, interviewed, featured in television, radio, print, and/or Internet media.
- > **76% receive new funding or in-kind support**, drawing on resources acquired through WILD.
- > **WILD women train more than 500 women with disabilities** in disability leadership in their countries.
- > **More than 4,000 people are reached** by presentations made for disability-related audiences.

Objectives

Between 2012 and 2016, MIUSA partnered with the USAID-funded Leadership, Management, and Governance (LMG) Project to evaluate and strengthen the WILD program. Key developments to the program during this period included adding stronger action planning and monitoring and evaluation components to the training. One of the major recommendations from this partnership was to expand the reach of the program by empowering disabled women leaders to replicate parts or all of the training in their own communities.

Results

By creating the **Loud, Proud and Passionate!® Facilitator's Guide** and training WILD alumni through a training-of-trainers approach, MIUSA and the LMG Project were able to reach **397 women with the WILD approach in one year**.

Seventy-seven percent of in-country WILD participants created action plans by the end of the trainings, with **65% having completed the first steps of their action plans at the end of the 30-day follow-up period**. Common action plans proposed by participants included:

- > trainings and workshops for women and girls with disabilities, similar to the WILD training model;
- > awareness raising/educational presentations on disability rights and inclusion; and
- > advocacy plans for specific policy and legislation changes.

The target audiences identified included: Ministry of Health officials; hospital and health clinic staff; library staff; police officers; Ministry of Education officials; school officials; members of the business community; Ministry of Women officials; parents of children with disabilities; and media professionals.

Popular action plan themes were:

- > reproductive health;
- > inclusive education;
- > economic empowerment; and
- > accessible public transportation.

"I'm very satisfied with this training and words cannot express my feeling on the benefits I gained from the whole process, especially from the sessions on the empowerment program and the sport and recreation. It boosted my confidence and psychology. The training has to be provided for other women with disabilities as well."

—WILD Ethiopia Participant

Among the 20 in-country WILD trainers, **95% expressed plans to seek funding to continue providing similar trainings in their country**, many targeting specific priority populations. For example, in Zambia, WILD Trainers and alumni seek to conduct another WILD training specifically for young girls with disabilities, and in Nigeria, alumni seek to tailor the WILD approach to meet the needs of poor rural women. Following the WILD training in Barbados, the Barbados Council for the Disabled recognized the need for increased access to sexual and reproductive health information, and it now plans to develop an ongoing Sexual and Reproductive Health program in partnership with the Barbados Family Planning Association and public and private sector health entities.

In some countries, the in-country WILD training served as a launching pad for **new networks of women with disabilities** to drive collective action at the country level:

- > The network of women with disabilities in Mongolia is planning to submit comments on the newly drafted Human Rights Law of Disabled Persons of Mongolia. The WILD trainer was also selected as one of fifteen leaders of Mongolian women's NGOs to meet with the President of Mongolia.
- > In El Salvador, the newly formed disabled women's network will send a letter to the Counsel for the Defense of Human Rights to advocate for better inclusion of women with disabilities in workplaces, with a focus on enforcing the existing laws.
- > In Armenia, a national network of women with disabilities has formed. They created a Facebook group to facilitate ongoing communication.

Methodology

The WILD training method combines four key elements to offer a unique and impactful leadership training.

1. **Enhancing knowledge:** At WILD workshops, critical information on topics such as reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, violence prevention, and inclusive education is presented. Historically, this information has not been provided to women with disabilities.
2. **Skill building:** Public speaking, advocacy for policy change, cross-cultural communication, cross-disability organizing and action planning are key skills gained during WILD, which are critical for leadership development.
3. **Experiential learning:** WILD is an opportunity for women with disabilities to challenge society's - and sometimes even their own - preconceived notions about what is possible. They climb 70 feet in the air, raft down rapids, present their ideas to hundreds of people, learn self-defense, and adapt to another culture by living with a host family.
4. **Fostering networks of support:** WILD is a place for reciprocal exchange and relationship building between WILD participants themselves, as well as with international development professionals. A key goal of WILD is catalyzing development policies and practices to be more inclusive of women with disabilities.

With the support of the LMG Project, MIUSA developed a facilitator's guide to enable disabled women leaders to replicate the WILD approach in diverse countries and settings. Using the guide, MIUSA and LMG conducted a 12-day training-of-trainers in Eugene, Oregon in June 2015, to prepare 20 select WILD alumni from 19 countries as WILD trainers. Small grants were made available to allow the new trainers to pilot the facilitator's guide in their home countries.

The WILD curriculum is designed to be flexible, and can be adapted to focus on specific sectors. The action plans created by in-country WILD participants were extremely diverse, with themes ranging from education to health to leadership to culture and the arts. **This allows the approach to respond to priorities in a given context**, and WILD alumni can partner with development organizations to offer trainings or create ongoing programs that **align with priority development areas in each country**.

Following these in-country trainings, MIUSA collected feedback from these trainers and used it to further improve the **Loud, Proud and Passionate!® Facilitator's Guide**, which is now available for even wider use.



"WILD has succeeded in raising strong and dynamic women who are assertive enough to engage their community leaders to promote the issues of women and girls with disabilities in their countries. I am such an example: my level of confidence has tripled since WILD."

—Ekaete Umoh
WILD-Nigeria Trainer



Conclusions and Recommendations

Seventeen out of twenty in-country WILD trainers selected the Women's Health, Wellness and Safety module as a priority to include in their contexts, and several WILD in-country participants noted that **they were accessing sexual and reproductive health information for the first time**. Access to this information remains a major gap for disabled women in a wide range of contexts, and this module within the **Loud, Proud and Passionate!® Facilitator's Guide** is available to help close this gap.

The in-country WILD trainers emphasized the importance of certain components that make the WILD approach unique:

1. **The inclusion of deliberate "empowerment" activities** that are intentionally designed to create a transformative experience so that participants feel that being a woman and disabled are positive parts of their identities. Common empowerment activities included dancing and swimming, but all trainers were able to find activities that were appropriate for their context.
2. **The WILD principles.** These sixteen explicit principles are centered around creating an inclusive environment, creating a sense of empowerment, utilizing strategic approaches, and promoting inclusive development. Together, they tie the diverse modules together into a cohesive whole.

In a WILD training, international development organization staff are invited to engage with participants during one of the modules and MIUSA and the WILD alumni have found this to be an effective means to promote inclusive development. Following the WILD training in 2013, **92% of the staff from the international development organizations who participated reported that they had taken action toward disability inclusion within six months**, including 75% connecting WILD alumni to serve as resources to their colleagues. To make this even easier, MIUSA has now surveyed alumni and created a **rich database detailing their expertise** as a resource for the international development community.

With the **Loud, Proud and Passionate!® Facilitator's Guide** now available and WILD alumni database operational, disabled women leaders are now taking WILD further than ever before.



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