



## International Women's Day 2014:

*Equality for women is progress for all*



International  
Labour  
Organization



In countries around the world, many women with disabilities are forging new paths in opening access to education, jobs, skills and legal rights for other women and girls around the world. In the process, they overcome negative attitudes, mistaken assumptions, legal and political obstacles and discrimination to fully participate in their communities. They forge support networks to help other women with disabilities in their own communities and other countries. They raise their voices to clearly articulate their needs and issues to the world around them. They are strong advocates for equal rights and opportunities for all people with disabilities.

*International Women's Day is a global celebration of the economic, political and social achievements of all women, including women with disabilities. This year, we recall past struggles and accomplishments, and look ahead to the potential opportunities that await future generations of women.*

On International Women's Day, the ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme on disability recognizes the leadership and achievements of individual disabled women in selected countries. In particular, it acknowledges their accomplishments and shares their stories on promoting equality for women with disabilities. Since the early 2000s, the Partnership Programme has recognized and prioritized disability as essential to meeting the UN Millennium Development goals, with the goal of *Promoting gender equality and empowering women* being a strong theme of the partnership's activities. The Partnership Programme seeks to reduce poverty, promote gender equality and empower women in the present while extending this empowerment and equality into the future for all women – disabled or non-disabled.

### **Facts & figures**

- Over one billion people—15 per cent of the world's population—have a disability<sup>i</sup>.
- Approximately 300 million women and girls around the world have some form of intellectual, mental, sensory and/or physical disability<sup>ii</sup>.
- Many face double discrimination based on sex and disability.
- Disabled women are at greater risk of poverty than disabled men<sup>iii</sup>. Their poverty is linked to less access to education and skills development.
- Men with disabilities are twice as likely to have employment and earn more than women with disabilities<sup>iv</sup>.
- Excluding people with disabilities from the labour force results in an estimated loss of 3 to 7 percent in GDP losses<sup>v</sup>.

### **Stories from the field**

#### ***Yetnebersh Nigussie - Ethiopia***

*Yetnebersh Nigussie is Executive Director of the Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD) in Addis Ababa. Active in more than 20 volunteer groups dedicated to issues ranging from persons with disabilities to girls' education to youth, she also chairs the Ethiopian National Association of the Blind Women's Wing. She was recently appointed Goodwill Ambassador for 2013-14 by the National*



*Disaster Risk Reduction and Management organizing committee of Ethiopia.*

As a community leader, businesswoman, and volunteer, Yetnebersh has achieved much at the young age of 32. After losing her eyesight at the age of five, her mother found a school that would change her path in life and provide an education denied to many of her peers. She has completed a Bachelor of Laws degree (LLB) and Master's degree in social work at Addis Ababa University (AAU). During her years at the University she became an activist, funding the Addis Ababa University Female Students' Association and eventually becoming its first president. She chaired the AAU Anti-AIDS movement, and has received a number of national and international awards including the *AMANITARE* award for sexual and reproductive health advocates.

Studying law catalyzed her determination to be a voice for the voiceless and to fight to improve the condition of vulnerable and socially excluded groups. Soon after graduating with her LLB, she helped establish and then became Executive Director of the Ethiopian Center for Disability and Development (ECDD), a non-governmental organization that applies its knowledge of disability and development to enabling others to include people with disabilities in mainstream social and economic programmes. ILO-Irish Aid is among the donors that have supported the ECDD.

Among her proudest achievements, Yetnebersh points to her involvement in helping to establish accessibility directives for Ethiopia's building code, which now ensure that all new buildings are accessible to persons with disabilities. She's also advocated for Ethiopia's ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, a comprehensive human rights instrument for protecting the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. Recently, she opened the Yetnebersh Academy for underprivileged children, overcoming parents' fears that she could not effectively handle their children and increasing the number of students from 29 to 190. "We need to develop young leaders," she says. "They will grow up to be tomorrow's change makers."

Yetnebersh has trained more than 200 women with disabilities and provided business development services for 50 more, in the process helping some 80 women with disabilities abandon begging and develop productive lives. "There is a lot of discrimination against people with disabilities", she says. "Assisting others to independently support themselves is the way forward. We should capitalize on people's ability rather than capitalize on their disability and hand them charity. I am a generous person but I don't give people charity."

***"We should capitalize on people's ability rather than capitalize on their disability and hand them charity."***

Yetnebersh says her disability gave her the opportunities to become the person she is today. "I am never satisfied by my yesterday's achievements," she says. "I am always looking to see how I can do more, how I can give more. I continue to prove to myself and to my community that I can achieve what I dream."

### ***Zhang Lili - China***

*Zhang Lili is vice president of Heilongjiang Province Disabled Persons' Federation. She is a recipient of several national awards, including National Outstanding Teacher (2012), National Outstanding Woman Worker (2012), and the National Labor Medal (2012).*



Zhang joining an interview with a radio station whose audiences are mainly disabled persons

Zhang Lili was a middle school teacher. While attempting to save the lives of four students in 2012, she had a traffic accident resulting in paralysis of her lower limbs and requiring her to use a wheelchair for her daily activities. Since then, Zhang has received national recognition for her bravery and invitations to speak about her altruistic actions risking her life for others.

There are many other women with disabilities who face challenges and obstacles in their day-to-day lives”, says Zhang. Her determination to speak out about what it means to be a disabled woman and to be a voice for the disadvantaged were among the factors that motivated her to join the Disabled Persons’ Federation of

Heilongjiang Province (DPFH)\*.

Through her affiliation with DPFH, she learned that roughly 4 per cent of women with disabilities had completed a high school education in the Heilongjiang Province. Moreover, about 26 per cent – *nearly one-third of the national average* – were employed (2010 Heilongjiang Province, Disabled Persons Federation). “Many people call us vulnerable groups. This idea comes from discrimination against people with disabilities by non-disabled persons.” She says there is strong social stigma against women with disability that often precludes their participation in community activities and social events. This bias is even stronger in rural areas.

Zhang is currently pursuing a Master’s in Special Education at Beijing Normal University. She actively applies her knowledge and skills by making connections to the real world around her, promoting education rights for women with disabilities and advocating for non-discrimination in Heilongjiang Province. She shares her new focus on promoting rights, education and social inclusion with her female friends with disabilities and encourages them to “accept their disabilities and strive for equal rights as a human being and enjoy the happiness”.

*\*The DPFH is an umbrella network of the China Disabled Persons’ Federation established in 1988. It represents the interests of people with disabilities and helps protect their rights, and provides comprehensive services for disabled people. It aims to mainstream women with disabilities in rehabilitation, employment, education, legal aid and social protection.*

### ***Vo Thi Hoang Yen - Vietnam***

*Vo Thi Hoang Yen is at the forefront of the human rights movement for persons with disabilities in Vietnam. She is both the founder and director of the Disability Research and Development Center (DRD)\*, and lecturer at Ho Chi Minh City Open University for future social workers in Southern Vietnam. In 2010 she received The President’s Call to Service Award of the U.S. government (2010), in recognition of those individuals who make a difference through volunteer service, and in 2009 was named winner of the Kazuo Itoga Prize for her outstanding work in developing resources to enable persons with disabilities in Vietnam to participate in society and promote their equal opportunities.*

Vo Thi Hoang Yen was a born fighter. Neither the polio she contracted at the age of 3 nor the obstacles she confronted while growing up in Vietnam could keep her down. Unlike most people with disabilities, she

completed high school in Vietnam and then earned her master's degree abroad. Since then, Yen has been at the forefront of the human rights movement for persons with disabilities in Vietnam.

Unlike the situation in many developed countries, there are few institutions in Vietnam that provide support services for persons with disabilities. "At DRD, we first try to encourage disabled persons to change their mindset, to recognize that they are human beings with their own values and their own capacity and then we help them realize their full potential", says Yen.

Women with disabilities face particular disadvantages because of the combined discrimination based on sex and on disability. According to Yen, women with disabilities are much less likely to be employed than men with disabilities and women without disabilities. Many of them do not marry and have their own families. In addition, many face difficulties in accessing transportation, public buildings, healthcare and reproductive health services.

Established in 2005, DRD provides leadership training, job counseling and scholarships for young women and men with disabilities. It also links disabled job seekers to mainstream job placement centers and employers. In addition, DRD helped to set up a women's entrepreneurs club and provide technical support with a marketing strategy, business development and networking with clients. Today, DRD has over 3,500 beneficiaries and welcomes new people every day.

In Yen's view, to achieve a more equal and inclusive society, "policymakers should be more aware of the barriers facing persons with disabilities, especially women with disabilities, and make the proper adjustments to meet their needs". Her advice to peers is to believe "that you are just as capable as other people, be more confident in expressing yourself and be insistent in asking for what you deserve."

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Yen's dream is to have an inclusive, barrier-free society where people with disabilities can participate in all activities equally and equitably and be able to enjoy a quality life.

\*DRD, <http://www.drdvietnam.org/>

### ***Musola Catherine Kaseketi - Zambia***

*Musola Catherine Kaseketi is a founder member and Executive Director of Vilole Images Production (VIP), a non-profit organization that works to change the lives of vulnerable people through use of audio-visual tools, skills empowerment, advocacy for human rights and providing information and materials on disability, gender, rights and health. Musola was the first Zambian woman to win an international filmmaking award as a writer, producer and director in 2011 for her short film 'Suwi'. The film, released in 2009, centers on the broad themes of developing a disability, learning to adapt to a changed life and finding a way to support oneself. It was shortlisted for the UN Women Deliver Cinema Corner screening and in 2012 added to the Library of Congress in Washington DC. The film also received the ILO@90 Decent Work award for the human rights and labour law issues. In 2009, Musola was among the few African women to be trained as a facilitator in the ILO Disability Equality Training.*

"The greatest challenge faced by women with disabilities in Zambia is their invisibility and voicelessness", says Musola. "As women with disabilities, we fight more than double wars and that makes us special. Most

programmes and services designed for women do not address the specific needs of women with disabilities to enable them participate fully in society.”

Musola became disabled at a very early age when a poorly administered injection by a student nurse struck a nerve in her left leg, leaving her unable to walk. Despite corrective surgery, she has walked with difficulty ever since. The roots of her advocacy work on the rights of women with disabilities stem from secondary school where girls with disabilities were segregated in the same dormitory with sick pupils undergoing treatment, exposing them to various illnesses.



Since 2011, VIP has been using the film industry to lobby, sensitize, advocate and train women with disabilities to realize and claim their rights and foster a spirit of independent living and dignity. Musola, feels that although women with disabilities are the most disadvantaged in society, empowering them can promote independent living, inclusion, respect and appreciation for all women with disabilities. She feels an urgent need to talk about equal access to job opportunities and education, and the creation of initiatives that can enhance independent living among women with disabilities.

A new project, Vilole Images Productions Pa Chibwase (*or Women’s meeting place*) Corner (VIPACHIC) addresses various social issues that, to a large extent, hinder the pursuit by women and girls with disabilities of freedom of expression of their rights and independence. VIPACHIC is a place where women and girls with a disability can develop support networks, discuss health issues, enhance their skills, and serve others. “Through VIPACHIC, we are trying to address political, economic, social and cultural issues in relation to women with disabilities.”

“What is needed is greater sensitization”, says Musola.

“Creating a broader awareness of both the negative and positive situations affecting disabled women. Lobby and engage all parties at every stage involved in addressing such issues. But mainly, let women with disabilities spearhead activities that target them.”

***“As women with disabilities, we fight more than double wars and that makes us special.”***

When asked what advice she would give other disabled women, Musola responds, “be positive, strong and never to give up. If we have to ‘inspire change’ within our circle, we should not give up easily, embrace persistence and avoid complaining or blaming others. Just focus on achieving the set objectives to enable us to create a better future for the coming generation of women with disabilities.”

### ***Aria Indrawati - Indonesia***

*Aria Indrawati has served as the Third Vice President of the Indonesian Blind Union since 2004. She has been a member of the Indonesian Blind Union for 16 years, and The World Blind Union (WBU) for seven years. Aria is currently working at the Mitra Netra Foundation, an organization that focuses on providing services to persons with visual impairments, including skills training and employment.*

Aria is a social worker specializing in people who are blind or visually impaired, and a social entrepreneur, public relations manager, writer and columnist. She overcame discrimination and obstacles due to her low vision to earn a bachelor’s degree in law.



She has been involved in the field of rehabilitation for nearly ten years, specifically building skills and capacities of people with visual impairments in Indonesia through soft skills and hard skills pre-employment training, and job development, promotion and placement. Her efforts are gradually paying off, eroding the stigma often attached to people with visual impairments in Indonesia.

In 2010, together with Mitra Netra Foundation colleagues, she helped start a magazine dedicated to disability issues. Called 'Diffa', which means

.... *“be more courageous, voice your rights as citizens, be more proactive...”*

“different and special”, it is the first and only journal about disability in Indonesia, and appears in print and audio formats so as to be accessible for all. Aria continues to work as one of the editors.

Aria believes that although women with disabilities have the same rights as others, many still face ‘double discrimination’ because of their gender and disability. “It is quite urgent that the government gives more attention to empowering women with disabilities so they can be self-reliant and actively participate in society. If they become poor, they are prone to violence and harassment, especially sexual harassment”. She encourages women with disabilities to be more courageous, to voice their rights as citizens, to become more proactive, willing to learn and continue to work and build synergies with all others.

### About the ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme

*The ILO works in partnership with Irish Aid, the government of Ireland’s programme of development assistance, and a range of stakeholders in the area of disability and development to promote decent work and a better life for people with disabilities through effective legislation and its implementation, and through advocating approaches to skills development, employment services and job opportunities that include persons with disability alongside non-disabled people. The Partnership Programme is currently active in China, Ethiopia, Indonesia, Vietnam and Zambia.*

#### For further information:

ILO-Irish Aid Partnership Programme on Disability,

<http://www.ilo.org/inclusion>

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<sup>i</sup> World Health Organization and the World Bank. (2011).” World Report on Disability”, Geneva: WHO Press, p. 29.

<sup>ii</sup> USAID: <http://www.usaid.gov/what-we-do/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment/women-disabilities>, accessed on 3 March 2014

<sup>iii</sup> Mitra et al (2011). Disability and Poverty in Developing Countries: A snapshot from the World Health Survey. SP Discussion Paper, World Bank

<sup>iv</sup> World Health Organization and the World Bank (2011), “World Report on Disability”, [http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789240685215\\_eng.pdf?ua=1](http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789240685215_eng.pdf?ua=1), Geneva: WHO Press., pp. 237 & p. 239.

<sup>v</sup> Backup, S. (2009). “The price of exclusion: The economic consequences of excluding people with disabilities from the world of work”, Geneva, International Labour Organization, Employment Working Paper No. 43.