

'Sisters'

location

confidential

*Working at the intersection of feminist
and disability rights activism*



‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible’

Mama Cash funds feminist groups and movements led by women, girls, trans people, and intersex people working to secure justice and freedom. Mama Cash’s grantee-partners include groups working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights activism. This story is excerpted from a longer report on feminist disability rights activism called ‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible’. The full report presents the stories of eight activist groups working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights movements. The full report can be found on our website:

<https://www.mamacash.org/en/disability-rights-report>

Cover and page 2 illustrations:
Bumbuku Creatives.



Sisters (For safety reasons, the names of the group and the activist in this article are not real, and the country where the organisation is located is not named.)

Given the current context in the country where they work, the fact that Sisters recently became a legally registered organisation is in and of itself a truly remarkable achievement. 'It is the thing we are most proud of,' says Ana, the organisation's Development and Project Manager and one of its five founders.

In recent years, feminist movements have faced significant political repression. Feminist activists, especially young feminists, run the risk of being detained or arrested. Despite this challenging situation, the young women behind Sisters – four of whom have a disability and several of whom are lesbian – forged ahead to realise their shared vision of building a diverse feminist movement. A few years ago, in their spare time and with their own money, they began their work. 'When we set up the group, the first goal was gender education, because we are feminists,' explains Ana. 'A second goal was diversity education, because some of us are LGBT. And another goal was to support women and girls with disabilities.'

Diverse identities

At the time, Ana worked for an organisation focused on the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons

with Disabilities (CRPD). 'The organisation and the government were doing a lot for disability rights,' Ana explains. 'But we found that when it came to women's rights, or LGBT rights, or the rights of women with disabilities, there was a gap. We realised that by drawing on our diverse identities – as feminists, as lesbians, as women with disabilities – we could bridge the gap between gender and disability issues.'

After a couple of years, Ana and other members of the group began fundraising so they could work for the organisation full-time. They were successful in securing grants from Mama Cash and several other donors. But the more critical and difficult step was registration, which was important for receiving foreign funding. The country had enacted a law that increased scrutiny of civil society organisations and funding from foreign sources.

'We had a lot of difficulties,' Ana says. To apply for registration, the group had to present themselves as a social work organisation. They needed to secure a minimum amount of funding and pay a registration fee, a sum equivalent to about 10,000 EUR. They needed to find politically acceptable individuals to join the group's governing committee and an officer in the government who would serve as a 'management partner'. Sisters managed to overcome all of these barriers, in addition to the general barrier of repression of feminist activism. 'We were very lucky,' explains Ana, with great satisfaction. 'A couple of years ago, we were the only civil society organisation to be registered. And no

organisation has been registered since.’ Ironically, Ana thinks that the inability of society in her country to see women with disabilities as women may have been a factor in the group’s success. If so, it’s a prejudice that has worked to their advantage: ‘We are feminists. But maybe we are not seen as female,’ she says with a laugh. ‘They hate feminists, but they do not hate us,’ she adds.

According to Ana, there are some exemplary efforts by the government, especially at the local level in some cities, to address issues facing women with disabilities. But because the issues they face are very complicated, there is an important role for civil society to fill in gaps. ‘For example, problems around domestic violence are amplified for women with disabilities,’ she explains. ‘They may not have the courage to file for divorce, because they don’t have a job and are dependent on their spouse. The government is doing a good job in some places, but there is still a gap. Women’s issues need more care and attention.’

As a registered organisation working on disability rights, Sisters is a member of a national disability rights federation. The group is pleased to have recently been invited to participate in a prominent committee of the federation, where they hope to influence its policies. They will urge the federation to set up a Women with Disabilities group, which has the potential to have a huge impact. ‘We are very small,’ says Ana. ‘But the federation can reach millions of people with disabilities.’

Accessible life

The formal mission of Sisters is to support women with disabilities to live independently. Education, including public awareness raising, is their key strategy. For example, the group has organised two public exhibitions featuring portraits – photos along with interviews – of women and girls with disabilities. (The first exhibition helped bring the group favourable attention from the government during the registration process.) The exhibitions both focused on women and girls in the context of their work. Next year, the group is planning to focus on women with disabilities as mothers.

Art and creativity figure prominently in Sisters’ activities. The group has an art therapy project that supports women and girls with disabilities (as well those without disabilities) to deal with trauma and violence – a seemingly uncontroversial objective in an otherwise difficult political context. ‘It sounds very gentle and beautiful,’ Ana says of the project. ‘But through the art therapy we raise awareness about gender equality and feminism.’ The women and girls take part in a series of workshops that follow a well-considered logic. The series begins with themes like going out in the world, having ‘a sunny life’, and employment. It then moves on to friends, intimate relationships, body, and gender. The next workshop, on ‘accessible life’, goes beyond the topic of accessibility of physical spaces, which has improved significantly in the last decade, to a discussion of what the group calls ‘soft accessibility’ – the accessibility of community and social

connection for girls and women with disabilities. It is a topic of particular relevance for the growing population of elderly women in the country, many of whom have a disability and live alone. In the final thematic workshop, participants discuss and apply their artistic skills to the question of ‘How to be a feminist woman with a disability’. Ana describes the powerful effect of the art therapy programme: ‘The art they make in the workshops allows women to show their anger, to express their emotions, to heal. We talk about bodies. We talk about vaginas. We talk about the idea that we’re supposed to be virgins.’ The group is thrilled to have recently received funding to move the programme from their tiny office to a large space of 100m².

Activist influencers

Another project focuses on building the presence of women and girls with disabilities in a digital art space, namely the social media app TikTok. In an online training, women and girls who live in the provinces learn about disability rights issues, as well as strategies for telling a good story on TikTok and attracting followers. Participants are eligible to receive small grants, up to about €500, which they can use for online income-generating activities, such as the sale of handicrafts or make-up. Sisters boasts ten young women who have become well-known TikTok influencers, one with upwards of 20,000 followers.

Since its founding, Sisters has also involved about 100 women and girls with disabilities from across the country

in a multi-day leadership training, which covers disability and gender issues, as well as organising and project management skills. Graduates of the training have gone on to form activist groups in their own cities. Sisters now supports ten of these groups, including by providing small grants for local activities, and organising regular meetings to connect and share.

Find a way

Are there lessons to be learned from Sisters’ success as a relatively young organisation? Ana’s English skills, and the assistance of a native English speaker, were critical for the organisation’s early fundraising success. Other feminist disability rights organisations may be at a disadvantage in this regard: ‘This is a big problem for the movements in Asia and Africa. Because they don’t have strong English skills, they have no chance to access the global funds.’ Funders could diminish this barrier by providing information in more languages.

Ana also thinks that organisations and funders alike need to learn to be flexible and problem solve when faced with a challenging political environment. The key is to be creative while staying true to your principles. ‘If you face difficulties, it is important to stick to your beliefs and figure out how to solve problems,’ she says. ‘Insist on your beliefs and find a way. That’s really important.’

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The name of the full report 'If you stay quiet, you stay invisible,' is a quote from Fela Razafinjato, of Association des Femmes Handicapées de Madagascar.

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