

‘You have to ensure our rights’

**Women with Disabilities
Development Foundation,
Bangladesh**

*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 photo: WDDF participates in a conversation to raise awareness about violence against disabled girls; in this village, WDDF is providing legal support to a girl with an intellectual disability who was raped. Photo: Women with Disabilities Development Foundation.



In the early years of the Women with Disabilities Development Foundation (WDDF), it was extremely difficult for the organisation to be recognised as a legitimate voice on the rights of women with disabilities. There was a lack of understanding and attention to both the diversity of disabilities, as well as the diversity of women's experiences. Ashrafun Nahar ('Misti'), the organisation's Executive Director and one of its founding members, remembers a meeting in 2009 of a platform focused on monitoring implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in Bangladesh. Misti recalls: 'On the first day, a feminist leader from the platform came up and asked me: What is your name? Why did you come here? You can just send us a short note about what you want to do.' Misti politely told the woman that her meaningful participation in the meetings was very important. It was the only way the platform would understand what is needed to eliminate discrimination against women and girls with a diversity of disabilities.

Misti continued to engage in the platform, reviewing documents, attending meetings, and regularly speaking up to give WDDF's input into the platform's forthcoming shadow report on the status of CEDAW implementation. When the report came out, none of WDDF's input had been included. Misti recalls confronting the authors: 'You forgot me! All year long, I have been coming to these meetings and giving my input, but still you forgot

me. You forgot disability issues, because you cannot recognise that there are women and girls in our society who are living with disabilities and who are being discriminated against.'

It was a pivotal moment for the CEDAW platform and for WDDF. 'After that,' Misti laughs, 'they never again forgot about women and girls with disabilities.' Women and girls with disabilities are now a standard subject in the shadow report, and WDDF is recognised by the platform as an important source of information and analysis about needs and gaps relating to women and girls with disabilities.

Misti is one of a group of seven women with disabilities who co-founded WDDF in 2007. Despite significant barriers to education, all seven have earned a Master's degree. Misti's own experience is telling. Her disability stems from a spinal cord injury that occurred when she was 14. Following the accident, her father rebuilt the house to accommodate her wheelchair. Her family was extremely supportive and sensitive to her needs. But Misti soon saw how exceptional her own family was. When she applied to a university, she was rejected solely because the university would not accommodate 'a girl with a wheelchair'. She went to a college instead and eventually received her Master's, but regularly faced bullying and discrimination. She even encountered discrimination when she applied for a job with an organisation that worked on disability issues, which told her they would not accommodate her particular needs. (Fortunately, another disability rights organisation hired her.)

Access to justice

At the time, there was no organisation in Bangladesh advocating for the human rights of women and girls with disabilities. WDDF's co-founders set out to fill the gap. 'We saw that we needed a platform to raise our voices and influence laws and policies,' says Misti. 'We understood that women and girls with disabilities faced different kinds of human right violations – from their families, from society, from institutions. But these were not on the agenda of human rights organisations.'

Since the beginning, advocacy for improved laws and policies has been a top priority for WDDF. In 2007, Bangladesh was in the process of reviewing and revising its Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000. WDDF called on the law commission, which was responsible for reviewing the act before it went to parliament, to address issues facing women and girls with disabilities. WDDF highlighted the barriers faced by women with visual, speech, and hearing disabilities, whose needs are not accommodated by the police or the judicial system. Misti explains: 'If a girl with a hearing disability is raped, she can't file a report in the police station because the police say they can't understand her. The police deny her the right to file. It is an exercise of power over the victim. The same is true in the courts. Lawyers and judges don't understand sign language and there is no interpretation provided.' WDDF raised the issue with the commission and insisted that a chapter be added

that explicitly required access to justice for women and girls with disabilities. The commission ignored WDDF's recommendation, but the group gained valuable experience in the process.

A formidable voice

A few years later, when the law commission began work on a Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection Act, WDDF was ready with facts and figures about the incidence of domestic violence against women and girls with disabilities. Again, the group urged the commission to explicitly address the needs of women and girls with disabilities. Again, the commission failed to act. But this time, WDDF pursued their struggle to the next stage. Misti explains: 'When the government was in the process of creating the rules for the act, in 2010, we said: If you ignore us, then you cannot claim that the act works successfully. You cannot claim that women get remedy. Because women with disabilities are also women. Girls with disabilities are also girls.' This time, WDDF's message was heard. For the first time ever, the government explicitly included rules about accommodating the needs of women and girls with disabilities.

WDDF eventually developed a good relationship with the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. By the time the government began preparing a new 'National Policy Related to Women's Advancement', WDDF's recommendations were taken seriously. Five chapters of the new policy specifically addressed issues of women

and girls with disabilities. It included training for court practitioners, police officers, and staff of victim support centres on the needs of women and girls with disabilities, and improvements to police stations to make them ‘disability friendly’. It featured measures to enhance women with disabilities’ engagement in political processes, including by improving accessibility of polling places and reserving two seats in the national parliament specifically for women with disabilities.

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Among other things, WDDF advocates for policies to promote employment for women and girls with disabilities. As part of the 2013 Persons with Disabilities Rights Act, which WDDF helped influence, a certain number of government jobs are reserved for persons with disabilities. Since then, WDDF has urged the government to improve implementation of the law by more actively recruiting persons with disabilities. When the government recently made a move to scrap the quota, WDDF successfully mobilised to ensure that it was kept in place.

Improving accessibility of public buildings and public transportation is another important goal. WDDF recently published a report and guidelines on accessibility of buildings, and successfully lobbied the government to ensure attention to the issue in the new National Building Act 2020. The group has met with government officials to discuss making transportation inclusive, including in its plans for a new metro rail

system. Misti recalls a conversation with the Ministry of Transportation: ‘We told them that there are public buses, foot paths, bridges, underpasses, etc. that are not accessible to women and girls with disabilities. But if you recognise that we are citizens of Bangladesh, then you have to ensure our rights. You have to make transportation accessible.’

One of the challenges WDDF faces is convincing the government that disability issues (and the budget to address them) are relevant to all Ministries. ‘In the national budget, money for disability issues is exclusively in the social safety net budget line of the Ministry of Social Welfare,’ explains Misti. ‘That means there is no budget to cover disability issues in other Ministries, like employment, transportation, health, education, communication. Disability issues are ignored by the other Ministries, because they don’t receive the budget for it.’

The next generation of leaders

Alongside of advocacy, WDDF works to build leadership and expand opportunities for women and girls with disabilities. In seven sub-districts in Bangladesh, the group has organised ‘grassroots committees’ of women and girls with disabilities. It supports the members to develop income-generating activities, access education, and engage in political processes. Some of these women and girls have taken part in WDDF’s intensive training programme, where they have learned about gender, violence against women, sexual and

reproductive health and rights, and other issues at the intersection of feminism and disability rights. (The training is also open to staff of other disability rights organisations.) Graduates of the training programme are playing an important leadership role in their communities, where they bring issues to the attention of decision-makers. Some now serve in Bangladesh's sub-district (*upazila*) and 'union' (a collection of villages) levels of government.

WDDF is also investing in building 'second-line leadership' within the organisation, helping ensure they have the skills to some day run the organisation. Misti believes that new leaders can benefit from the same opportunities that she had – to travel and participate in international meetings, develop new insights and connections, and see how accessible other countries are.

The challenge of funders' restrictions

The need to invest in leadership and organisational development is a topic of relevance for funders. Conditions of funding, such as limits on or the exclusion of administrative and management salaries, or for infrastructure, can make organisational development difficult. Misti explains:

'One donor would not give us funding for laptops. So we asked: How will we work? How will we write a proposal? How will we write a report?'

There are also limited funding opportunities for small grassroots organisations working with women and girls with disabilities. Most funding goes to large, well-known national and international NGOs. Other donors restrict the types of activities they will support. For example, some focus on advocacy and leadership building, but will not fund direct support to women and girls, such as the provision of assistive devices, like wheelchairs. Misti describes the absurdity of the situation: 'Donors say they want to fund activities for women and girls with disabilities. But if a woman or girl with a disability needs a device and does not have it, how can she come to our activities? This is one of our big challenges.' Moreover, such donor policies conflict with the government's requirement that at least 15% of funding be used as direct support for the organisation's 'target groups' (i.e., women and girls with disabilities). WDDF is raising this issue with donors and the government. But in the meantime, when necessary, the organisation looks to the generosity of friends and family (and sometimes its own staff) to provide assistive devices to the women and girls who may one day lead the organisation.

Acknowledgements

Creating the report 'If you stay quiet, you stay invisible,' from which this story is excerpted, was a collective endeavour. For the creation of 'You have to ensure our rights', Mama Cash wishes to express our deep gratitude to the activists of Women with Disabilities Development Foundation who shared their time, trust, and stories. We also extend thanks to Paige Shipman for conducting the interview and writing the profile, and to Naandeyé for the publication design. Mama Cash staff who have contributed to this project include: Chantelle de Nobrega, Coco Jervis, Happy Mwende Kinyili, Jimena Soria, Refilwe Moahi, Sarah van Brussel, Sharon Petrie, Shradha Shreejaya, Sophia Sakhanberidze, Susan Jessop, Sylvia Szely, and zohra moosa.

Illustration (page 2): Bumbuku Creatives.
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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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