

EMERGING PRACTICE – Fostering peace and respect by bringing women and girls with disabilities concerns into a Women’s Organization

→ Implemented by Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL), Bungoma, Kenya

Background

Rural Women Peace Link (RWPL) is a grassroots women-led organization working in rural areas in the west of Kenya to promote local women’s involvement in peace building, governance and development. In 2015 Coffey International conducted a study on Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Bungoma County. The results showed that the area is affected by rape, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and domestic violence. Some respondents reported the existence of harmful beliefs such as the myth that having sex with a girl under the age of five can cure HIV/AIDS,ⁱ leading to cases of child sexual abuse. RWPL members saw for themselves that this violence against women and girls had been normalized by the communities: most cases went unreported and the rare cases that were reported were withdrawn and settled out of court. The *Jamii Thabiti* (“Strong Communities”) program aims at fostering peace and respect for women and girls. It acted as an eye opener as to the specific situation of women and girls, including those with disabilities. RWPL is a prime example of a mainstream women’s organization engaging strategically to include women and girls with disabilities

in their programs.

What happened?

RWPL’s practice started with an assessment of GBV prevention and response mechanisms in Bungoma County, composed of interviews with officials and focus group discussions with women, including women with disabilities. This assessment revealed interference by the police, chiefs, village elders and/or parents in the few cases that were actually reported. In some cases, the girls who survived sexual abuse were relocated by the family to live with relatives elsewhere.

RWPL targeted strategic areas in terms of GBV mitigation: schools, relations with the police, and other points of daily social interactions, such as local motorcycle taxi drivers. Firstly, the schools management board and teachers were trained on the existing laws and procedures on Gender-Based Violence. School clubs were set up to provide children with safe spaces to learn about and share on GBV. Secondly, RWPL set itself the goal of improving relations between the police and the community, through innovative projects such as the “adopt a cop” scheme in schools. Local police officers trained on GBV regularly give talks in schools to start a dialogue and relieve fears about reporting violence to a police officer. Thirdly, the organization engaged with local motorcycle taxi drivers (*boda boda riders*)ⁱⁱ who were identified by the community as perpetrators of sexual assaults and abuse. RWPL facilitated awareness-raising and discussion forums, focusing on existing laws, and the drivers established behavioural rules for all *boda boda riders* in the area. RWPL also understood that reporting between and

against drivers did not happen because of poor relations with the police. The organization therefore set up discussion forums. Finally, awareness-raising sessions were held for local journalists to make them aware of their role in combatting GBV by publicizing cases and exerting pressure on the justice system and the perpetrators. As a result, an online professional platform was created in the western region of Kenya for journalists to share information and improve their monitoring of cases.

Why more inclusion?

The practice was a real eye opener as it became clear to RWPL that the girls with disabilities were unable even to properly communicate with the school counsellor teachers trained to help the child survivors of violence. RWPL put article 27 of the Constitution on Kenya, which states that no one should be discriminated against on the basis of their gender or disability, at the forefront of their actions. Rural Women Peace Link leaders realized that further actions were needed to address the intersectionality of gender and disability so that women and girls with disabilities could fully enjoy their rights. The organization committed to include specific actions targeting women and girls with disabilities whilst addressing discrimination and violence. RWPL has been working closer with community leaders to encourage persons with disabilities to engage in peace building activities.

What's next?

RWPL developed a series of actions to drastically improve the inclusion of women and girls with disabilities in their activities

and strengthen their operational partnerships with Disabled Persons' Organizations, in particular United Disabled Persons of Kenya (UDPK). They plan to promote the availability of interpreters as intermediaries for GBV initiatives in the schools or communities. In order to provide the best support for schoolgirls with disabilities, RWPL aims to train the interpreters on the law, procedures and GBV issues. The organization is also including disability awareness-raising in their sessions with the police, in order to build their capacities with regard to the specific violence girls with disabilities experience and the barriers they face when reporting it. They have also chosen to develop accessible Information, Education and Communication (IEC) materials on the Persons with Disabilities Act and the Sexual Offences Act. Ultimately, RWPL's advocacy work resulted in the inclusion of training for women on women's rights and on GBV, with specific training provision for persons with disabilities, in the Bungoma County Integrated Development Plan (CIDP), a five-year plan to be adopted in 2018.

For more information, please visit:

<http://ruralwomenpeacelink.org/> or

contact: admin@ruralwomenpeacelink.org

ⁱ Coffey International - Jamii Thabiti Assessment on GBV in Bungoma County (2015) Not available online.

ⁱⁱ Boda boda riders are motorcycle drivers providing transportation in Kenya. They are commonly present in East Africa.