

'Into the light'

Association des Femmes

Handicapées

de Madagascar,

Madagascar

*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: Members of AFHAM participate in a march at a national meeting of disabled women in Madagascar. Photo: Association des Femmes Handicapées de Madagascar.



In Madagascar, women are expected to stay at home. They're not supposed to work. They are denied access to an inheritance. They are excluded from political life. Women with disabilities face all this and more. It's what Fela Razafinjato, Founder and President of the Association des Femmes Handicapées de Madagascar (Association of Disabled Women of Madagascar, AFHAM), calls 'double discrimination'. In addition to the discrimination they face as women, women with disabilities are denied the ability to develop their full capacities. Their specific needs – for accessing health care or employment, or to engage in political decision-making – are not taken into account.

AFHAM was founded in 2011 to promote the rights of women with disabilities in the framework of the fight against poverty. The group believes in the principle of 'Nothing about us without us'. Women with disabilities are at once AFHAM's stakeholders and beneficiaries. They lead the Association and implement its actions. The Association has learned from experience that this strategy is the most effective for ensuring that the concerns of women with disabilities are heard and addressed. 'Women with disabilities stay in the shadows because of prejudice and discrimination. They are afraid to express themselves,' says Fela. 'The challenge is first to change the attitude that women with disabilities have about themselves, and second to change the attitudes of others. There is

a huge amount of awareness raising and advocacy to be done. The government has no plan to support women with disabilities.'

When AFHAM marked its tenth anniversary earlier this year, the group had much to celebrate. 'AFHAM has grown to 600 members. That's 600 women with disabilities who know their rights,' says Fela. 'Our members have reclaimed decision-making power over their bodies and their lives. One hundred members have gained financial autonomy and some are now actively participating in electoral processes. We have enabled many women with disabilities to come out of the shadows and into the light – to shed their invisibility.' The Association operates nationally and is active in 19 of Madagascar's 23 administrative regions.

Learning to welcome women with disabilities

Advancing the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women with disabilities is one of AFHAM's priorities. The group is working to improve accessibility of Madagascar's health centres, which often lack measures such as ramps for women who use wheelchairs, or interpretation and translation for women with visual or auditory disabilities. 'The health centres are not closed to us,' explains Fela. 'But our specific needs are not taken into account.' AFHAM trains health care workers to welcome women with disabilities and to better understand their needs. The group advocates for

adjustments, such as providing services on the ground floor of buildings, to make sure women with disabilities can access care. As part of this work, AFHAM has collaborated with a group in Madagascar that specialises in family planning and sexual and reproductive health.

In Madagascar, most people believe that women with disabilities don't have skills or the ability to study or work. The majority of women with disabilities do not have the opportunity to go to school. AFHAM endeavours to create employment opportunities and improve the economic situation of women with disabilities. A solidarity fund supports income-generating activities of AFHAM members, such as sewing, cooking and handicrafts. The group also raises awareness and educates employers about the abilities and special needs of women with disabilities. The association has conducted surveys and research on the professional integration of women with disabilities. 'Some women with disabilities have skills to offer employers. They just need specific adaptations,' explains Fela. Through a partnership with the Women Entrepreneurs of Madagascar, a group of women leaders from 50 companies, AFHAM has helped find and negotiate employment for thirty of the Association's members. AFHAM also supports women with legal issues, like alimony claims and legal complaints in cases of violence. The group assists women in filing necessary papers and paying fees.

Equality in rights and equity in access

The main message that AFHAM wants to drive home is this: the needs of women with disabilities must be taken into account – in public programmes, development initiatives, the design of buildings and spaces, employment, political processes. 'We need equality in rights and equity in access,' insists Fela. One without the other is not sufficient. 'We have the right to vote. But how are we supposed to participate in political processes if, for example, discussions are not translated into sign language for women with a hearing disability?'

AFHAM conducts research that feeds into its advocacy work: 'We need arguments, facts and numbers,' says Fela. In one study, AFHAM compared Madagascar's law on people with disabilities to the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and found, for example, that Madagascar's law on persons with disabilities lacked sufficient binding or enforcement provisions to ensure that disabled people could enjoy and exercise their rights. AFHAM is part of a national platform of disability rights organisations, where it plays a valued role as the only organisation representing women with disabilities.

Collaboration is fundamental to AFHAM's way of working. 'AFHAM does nothing by itself,' explains Fela, 'especially when it comes to monitoring legislation and advocating for the rights of people with disabilities. We

do everything through the platform.’ A highlight of the group’s advocacy work was pushing for ratification of the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Madagascar signed the Convention in 2007, but had yet to ratify it, which required approval in the National Assembly and Senate. The platform pushed hard for ratification and finally succeeded in 2014.

Over the years AFHAM has learned that working with the media is hugely beneficial for raising awareness and having an impact. As Fela puts it: ‘If you stay quiet, you stay invisible.’ Organising press conferences and work with journalists has helped put AFHAM on the map. The group has been featured on television programmes and in news articles, which has helped to build support for the organisation.

Lack of visibility in feminist movements

Through the national platform of disability rights organisations, AFHAM feels firmly embedded in Madagascar’s disability rights movement. Within the platform, AFHAM is recognised as the organisational voice of and for women with disabilities, a role that is advantageous, both for the group and its issues.

The situation with the feminist movement, however, is different. ‘Women with disabilities are not visible in the general feminist movement. That’s why we are really excited that Mama Cash is publishing this report,’

says Fela. ‘Every time I engage with the feminist movement, I preach for my own parish. It is really necessary to call people out about the situation of women with disabilities and to let people know that we are still left out of the feminist movement. Women with disabilities exist. We need to be respected, just like other groups within the feminist movement. We need to celebrate the diversity of humanity.’

A major concern is the lack of financial support and prioritisation of disability rights work among funders. Fela states it plainly: ‘We need money to realise this work. The challenges are huge and there is very little funding for the disability rights movement. Everything we do requires sustainable funding.’

Acknowledgements

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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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