

# The language to describe oneself

Iz Kruga Vojvodina,  
Serbia

*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:** Iz Kruga uses ‘body language’ to visualise that the body can be a site of protest. The translation of this text is: ‘Tell me, you say you wish me well, but you don’t see me hidden in a body with no speech.’  
Photo: Iz Kruga Vojvodina.



**As a child, Svjetlana Timotic did not want to think of herself as an ‘invalid’, the word she grew up hearing. ‘The hidden message behind the word invalid,’ she recalls, ‘was that I was not able to educate myself. I was not able to work. I was not able to do a lot of things that people without disabilities could do. I was not a complete person.’ Given this context, she didn’t want to acknowledge that she had a disability, let alone be an activist for disability rights.**

But that changed when she was in her late twenties, in the early 2000s. She became involved with a university group of people with disabilities, whose approach was radically new and different than what she was familiar with. Most disability rights organisations active at the time subscribed to the dominant biomedical model of disability, which treats disability in medical and physical terms. ‘The focus was on what a person cannot do and how to medically treat them,’ explains Svjetlana. In contrast, the university group advanced a social model of disability, where the focus lay on obstacles in society that make a person disabled. In the social model, disability is understood in terms of society’s failure to take people’s needs into account.

Svjetlana describes the profound and empowering change she underwent as she learned this new perspective. Through her work with the university group, and her subsequent work at another local disability rights organisation, she learned the language to describe herself. She learned to

accept herself and her disability as an essential, and positive, part of her identity. ‘What’s important about the term “person with disability” is that it gives you the right to think about yourself as a *person* – a person with a disability, and with a lot of other traits,’ she says.

All the knowledge and skills she learned from these two organisations helped Svjetlana fight her internalised shame and prejudice against being active in the disability rights movement. She went on to co-found Iz Kruga Vojvodina, which focuses on women with disabilities. The organisation is based in the Serbian region of Vojvodina. Svjetlana now serves as its Executive Director.

### **Out of the circle, out of the red zone**

Svjetlana’s early experiences with the disability rights movement helped her see herself not just as a person with disabilities, but as a *woman* with disabilities. That awareness coincided with her growing interest in women’s rights issues, including violence against women, sexuality, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. When she looked for research and analysis in Serbian on these issues as they pertained to women with disabilities, she was dismayed to find that none existed. Around the same time, she got to know the pioneering feminist disability rights activist, Lepojka Čarević Mitanovski, from Belgrade, who inspired and encouraged Svjetlana to start an activist group in Vojvodina.

Since its founding in 2007, Iz Kruga Vojvodina has campaigned for increased recognition of the problem of violence against women with disabilities. Iz Kruga means ‘out of circle’, a reference to getting out of the circle of violence. Iz Kruga Vojvodina maintains a helpline that is designed to ensure that women with different types of disabilities, including those with a hearing disability, can access a wide-range of support and information. Users can reach the helpline via a variety of channels, including phone, text, Facebook, or email. In addition, the organisation offers legal counselling and psychological support for individuals and groups, both in person and online.

Iz Kruga Vojvodina also works to improve access to gynaecological health care for women with disabilities. In cooperation with health institutions, the group organises gynaecological check-ups and provides assistance for women with disabilities. One of Iz Kruga Vojvodina’s earliest successes was to get Vojvodina’s main medical centre to purchase a hydraulic chair, thus removing a major barrier to gynaecological exams.

A key goal of Iz Kruga Vojvodina’s work is to build the skills of women with disabilities to advocate for their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Graduates of the group’s training programme are replicating Iz Kruga Vojvodina’s activist work in their own municipalities, including by advocating for hydraulic chairs in their own municipal medical centres. Iz Kruga Vojvodina has developed an informal network of 29 women with disabilities

in 11 different municipalities in Serbia who are active in their communities. At the height of the COVID-19 crisis in 2020, a group of Iz Kruga-trained activists sprang into action when their local medical centre’s hydraulic chair fell within the centre’s ‘red zone’, designated for COVID-19 patients only. The group succeeded in having the chair moved to the ‘green zone’, where it would remain accessible. Another activist recently succeeded in raising 1.3 million dinars – about €11,000 – in a crowdfunding campaign for the purchase of a hydraulic chair for the medical centre in her small municipality. Iz Kruga Vojvodina encourages and mentors the local women activists as they develop and carry out their own activities. The organisation recently supplied the activists with smart phones so they can stay connected to each other, as well as easily access online information.

## **Protagonists and creators**

When asked to reflect on what has changed since the founding of Iz Kruga Vojvodina, Svjetlana conjures the image of stepping stones, the slow path toward change. ‘When you are young, you believe you can change the world,’ she states. ‘But the most important change has actually been our growth – the fact that we as women with disabilities have developed our resources and our capacities. We started the organisation working out of a private apartment. Now we have a fully accessible office which serves as a safe place for women with disabilities, where they can access different resources – educational programmes, books, the

Internet – both for themselves and for implementing programmes and providing services for other women with disabilities.’ Iz Kruga has nine full-time staff members and engages as many as 100 women each year to carry out specific activities. The group’s informational materials and booklets are available in Braille, audio and easy reading format.

Iz Kruga Vojvodina has charted new territory in Serbia in its efforts to ensure that intersecting topics of disability, gender, sexuality, bodies and violence are visible and reflected in various media, from research to writing to art. Among other things, the group has advocated for more academic attention to issues relevant for women with disabilities and has conducted its own research on women with disabilities and sexuality. Thanks to these efforts, the Centre for Gender Studies at the University of Novi Sad now includes a module ‘Sexuality of Women with Disabilities’, based on Iz Kruga Vojvodina’s work, in its Women and Health course.

Iz Kruga Vojvodina also runs a registered media outlet known as ‘Disability Portal’, which promotes the visibility of women with disabilities and features coverage of issues that affect them. It is one of the only places where the voices of women with disabilities can be heard. In 2021, on International Day of the Girl (11 October) the portal featured ‘letters’ written by six women with disabilities to their younger selves in which they shared some insights they now have as adults.

Through a workshop series, ‘Empowering through Art’, Iz Kruga Vojvodina positions women with disabilities as protagonists and creators. Over the years, the workshop has covered diverse topics and used a wide range of artistic mediums, including photos, video, and performance. At the end of each workshop, participants collectively create a piece of art. ‘I call myself unspoken’, the title of one particularly memorable performance, emphasised how women’s sexuality and bodies – vaginas, breasts, menstruation – are often not spoken about.

### **Disability is a political issue**

Working at the intersection of disability rights and violence against women is and remains challenging. It took time and perseverance for Iz Kruga Vojvodina to gain recognition from institutional actors as an expert on violence against women. But that has changed significantly. Now, the group receives so many requests to participate in meetings and activities that they don’t have the capacity to respond. Yet Iz Kruga Vojvodina still encounters problems and barriers. ‘The women’s movement still sees disability as an *individual* issue,’ explains Svjetlana. ‘They don’t understand that the issue of disability is political, that it is something to be solved by *society*.’

### **Support for continuity**

Svjetlana describes some of the challenges in fundraising for Iz Kruga Vojvodina’s work, including funders who try to shift the group’s agenda: ‘A lot of

funding is for projects. Funders expect us to address other problems or change our course. It makes our work more difficult,' she says. The organisation has found some donor reporting requirements so burdensome, especially in relation to the small amount of funding provided, that it will no longer apply.

At the same time, the group really appreciates when donors ask good questions that give them the opportunity to really reflect on their work and the organisation. Sijetlana mentions Mama Cash's structural assessment tool as a

great example: 'It asks us questions about our mission, our structure, where we are and where we want to go. When we filled it out, it helped us see all the conferences we've participated in, all the services we've provided, all the actions we've done. It made us really proud. It also gave us insight into the strengths and weaknesses of our organisation and prompted us to think about how to improve our governance and operations.' What kind of support does Iz Kruga Vojvodina need to sustain its activism? The answer is categorical: long-term, core support. 'We need support that enables continuity. We have issues we want to solve.'



*Iz Kruga's Director, Sijetlana Timotic, speaks about the challenges faced in the field of securing women's human rights on 6 March 2020 at the National Library of Serbia in Belgrade, as part of an event to launch UN Women's Generation Equality campaign. Photo: Marija Piroški.*

# 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 "The language to describe oneself", Mama Cash wishes to express our deep gratitude to the activists of Iz Kruga Vojvodina 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.  
Design @naandeyeah

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.

[www.mamacash.org](http://www.mamacash.org)  
[info@mamacash.org](mailto:info@mamacash.org)  
+31 (0)20 515 87 00

