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MERGING MOVEMENTS: SUPPORTING INCLUSIVE WOMEN'S RIGHTS WORK THROUGH INNOVATIVE PARTNERSHIPS



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“MADRE is one of the few international women’s organizations taking the initiative and leading by example on disability inclusion. They not only understand their responsibility to promote inclusion of women with disabilities in their work, but they also recognize the incredible opportunity to be an innovator and to drive change through an inclusive, intersectional approach.”
– Susan Sygall, Mobility International USA (MIUSA) CEO

Increasingly, women’s rights funders are recognizing the need to be more intentional about including those who are on the margins of society. As one of the most historically marginalized groups in the world, women and girls with disabilities have long been under-resourced despite their contributions as community leaders. There is a critical need to bridge the women’s rights and disability rights fields by strengthening partnerships between disabled women’s groups and women’s rights organizations.

Women’s rights funders are in a unique position to bolster the work of the groups they already support by ensuring diverse perspectives and leaders are part of their efforts. They can also direct much-needed resources to support women with disabilities directly as they develop and lead their own organizations and movements.

Mobility International USA (MIUSA) and MADRE, an international women’s human rights organization, had the honor and privilege of working together, to further align MADRE’s values of equity and inclusion with its organizational culture, policies, and practices. During a two-year



partnership on the Commitment to Inclusive Excellence Initiative, MIUSA worked closely with MADRE to learn more about MADRE’s work and how MADRE could better align its feminist values internally and in the work MADRE supports and leads globally.

This practice note is intended to share the progress and learning trajectory from MIUSA and MADRE’s partnership on the Commitment to Inclusive Excellence Initiative. We are excited to share the progress that both MIUSA and MADRE have made in this endeavor because we believe it begins and sets a new standard for how disabled women and girls should be successfully included and celebrated in all programs, movements, services, and leadership of organizations.

How the Partnership Began

In 2018, Mobility International USA (MIUSA) and MADRE launched an innovative partnership to integrate disability inclusion as a core part of MADRE's feminist values and principles. Following an in-depth and long-term strategic planning process, MADRE determined the need to be more intentional about intersectionality across all areas of its work, and specifically to focus on building power, voice and agency among five priority communities: young women and girls, Indigenous women, Afro-descendent women, LGBTIQ people, and people with disabilities.

"It was the right moment. We were hearing from our partners, recognizing they were doing the work to be more inclusive without putting the label on it necessarily. We were taking our cues from the ground. It also had to do with the political context of that time. We believe that building the strongest possible movements really depends on who is in the movement space, how intersectional those movements are, and how effectively they draw on their strengths," said Cassandra Atlas, MADRE's Director of Learning and Evaluation.

MADRE recognized the need to strengthen its organizational expertise on disability inclusion and sought outside assistance from MIUSA to help reach its goals.

Together, MADRE and MIUSA embarked on a long-term engagement to increase the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities at all levels of MADRE's work and in the programming MADRE supports worldwide. MADRE, with tailored consultation, training, and technical assistance from MIUSA, worked to:

- Develop, sustain, and integrate a high level of awareness, consciousness, and capacity around an intersectional disability lens for all MADRE staff
- Translate that understanding and awareness into practical steps that infuse all aspects of MADRE's work, including operations, development, communication and programmatic actions
- Build the same awareness and capacity in funders, grantmakers, and MADRE's local partners so that they can be more actively inclusive of people with disabilities in their own programs at every level.

Long-term Engagement Process

MADRE's and MIUSA's multi-staged process included: 1) an organizational assessment, 2) staff training at MADRE headquarters, 3) development and implementation of concrete and measurable actions plans, 4) remote technical assistance, 5) a refresher training, and 6) development of materials and dissemination of results and lessons learned.

After conducting the initial assessment with MADRE staff, MIUSA designed and delivered a two-day training at MADRE's office in New York. The assessment provided insight into the needs for the training and also served as a baseline to be able to track changes to MADRE's learning and practices around disability inclusion over time.

In the training, MADRE staff learned about disability rights history, achievements, and global challenges. Staff explored possibilities for where and how MADRE could play a role in merging disability rights and women's rights movements. And, MADRE began to envision the real and sustained effort that would be needed to achieve meaningful change and disability justice. As a result of the training, a clear and bold shift in thinking started to take place, especially given that MADRE had come to this process with limited formal

training or prior experience with disability rights issues.

"There were many a-ha moments during the training," recalled Susan Sygall, MIUSA CEO. "One of my favorites was, when discussing reproductive health, the realization that serving disabled women and girls is not an extra component or an extra service or a lesser priority. Anyone who serves women and girls must inherently serve disabled women and girls. No questions asked, no excuses."

MADRE's Executive Director Yifat Susskind expressed a similar sentiment. "This training feels like the key to actually acting on our principles about disability rights, unlocking a new way of thinking that will make MADRE a better organization."

The training was just the beginning. Over the next several months, with MIUSA's support, MADRE developed clear action plans to move toward greater disability inclusion within the organization and across all areas of programming and partnerships. MIUSA continued to work with MADRE to operationalize these new ideas, strategies, and commitments, providing technical assistance, researching and compiling additional resources, and offering guidance on planning accessible events and improving website accessibility. MIUSA also assisted with dissemination of MADRE's job postings and grant opportunities to global disability rights networks.

Approximately one year later, MIUSA held a follow-up “refresher” training with MADRE staff.

By this time, MADRE had significantly expanded, doubling its staff size since the previous year, which prompted MADRE and MIUSA to hold a second round of disability training for new staff members, to ensure skills and knowledge on disability inclusion were equitably distributed across the organization. In addition, MIUSA used the reconvening as an opportunity to dive deeper into how disability inclusion could be extended to MADRE’s partners and how to address disability inclusion in monitoring and evaluation processes.

Changing Organizational Practices and Programs

As a result of MADRE's and MIUSA's engagement, MADRE has made significant strides in moving disability inclusion from paper to practice within its organizational culture, practices, and programs. While many changes were made quickly, others are still in progress or are being implemented over a longer timeframe.

Operations and Human Resources:

Immediately, MADRE began to integrate a greater focus on reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities at all MADRE public events,



training and workshops, whether in the U.S. or abroad. This entailed ensuring accessibility of physical spaces (including MADRE office spaces, to the extent possible), provision of sign language interpreters, and incorporating new language related to disability accommodations in external communications. MADRE also adjusted job postings and locations where positions were listed to ensure its recruitment practices were reaching and accommodating people with disabilities.

Communications:

MADRE assessed its current website for accessibility issues and began vetting external consultants to ensure all MADRE communication products and platforms are accessible to people with disabilities and that MADRE’s digital outreach is

intentional about meeting basic accessibility standards. As such, MADRE is in the process of developing website accessibility protocols for improving and maintaining accessibility.

MADRE also began to more intentionally highlight the leadership and participation of women and girls with disabilities within MADRE partnerships on its website. MADRE further added a feature to its social media editorial calendar to track which communities and perspectives were being highlighted on MADRE social media, to more easily identify when certain communities were missing.

Learning and Evaluation:

MADRE adjusted its learning and evaluation frameworks, partner reporting templates, and information gathering techniques to sensitively collect data on disability inclusion. By being more intentional with data collection, MADRE is

now able to use meaningful insight to collaborate with its partners to make adjustments and improvements within their organizations to engage and support people with disabilities.

To this end, in 2019, MADRE's Director of Learning and Evaluation also attended MIUSA's Gender, Disability and Development Institute (GDDI), part of MIUSA's Women's Institute on Leadership and Disability (WILD), with the Executive Director of MADRE's Nicaraguan partner, Wangki Tangni. There, they engaged in dialogue and mutual learning with women leaders with disabilities from around the world on integrating a gender and disability rights lens across humanitarian and development sectors. MADRE's partner was then able to take these learnings back to her local community to incorporate into outreach and programming.



Photo Credit: MIUSA

Advocacy:

MADRE built out strategies for more inclusive human rights advocacy work, expanding its work in solidarity with disabled women's and people's organizations and women with disabilities to increase their access to policy spaces and centers of power in order to advocate for themselves and their communities.

For example, in Nepal, MADRE resourced local partner, National Indigenous Women Forum (NIWF), to advocate on behalf of the rights of Indigenous women and women with disabilities before the United Nations (UN) Committee for the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This resulted in the inclusion of the priorities and concerns of women with disabilities in CEDAW's recommendations to the Nepalese government. This win has been an important tool for NIWF to pressure the Nepalese government to acknowledge the rights of Indigenous Peoples, including women with disabilities, specifically.

MADRE's human rights advocacy team has taken concrete steps to encourage the UN Secretary General to push for full participation of women with disabilities in peace implementation and the realization of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. MADRE's recommendation that "peacekeeping and special political missions ... improve their monitoring and



Photo Credit: MADRE

reporting of threats and violence against activists including women human rights defenders, with data disaggregated by ... disability" was recently included in the Secretary General's final report on the implementation of the WPS agenda to the UN Security Council.

Grantmaking and Partnerships:

MADRE's work to advocate for the equal rights and full participation of people with disabilities in communities around the world expanded within its local partnerships. Since beginning an engagement with MIUSA, MADRE has taken steps to ensure that partners' programs are inclusive of women and girls with disabilities and that they are working in solidarity with disabled women's organizations. MADRE is also resourcing and implementing programs specifically for people with disabilities

through grantmaking. Since 2018, over \$400,000 in grants have been disbursed to advance disability justice and operationalize a concerted disability rights portfolio of work with current and new partners in the countries where MADRE works.

For example, in Palestine, MADRE partnered with the Palestinian Medical Relief Society (PMRS) to provide urgent and long-term focused health services to communities affected by Israeli military violence with little to no access to health services. MADRE supported PMRS to run mobile clinics that provided post-operative care including check-ups, medication, wound dressing, and physiotherapy services as well as the provision of assistive devices to promote long-term care and mobility for nearly 300 Palestinians with disabilities.

Through its VIVA Girls Initiative, MADRE is awarding grants to adolescent girls and young women who identify as Afro-descendant, disabled, Indigenous and/or LGBTIQ, and those from communities confronting climate crisis, war, conflict, disaster, and their aftermath. Notably, in 2020, 20% of programs resourced through MADRE's VIVA Girls Initiative specifically supported girls with disabilities in the communities where MADRE works. In order to effectively reach this population, MADRE initiated an open call process for girls' proposals that specifically took into account the myriad needs and abilities of girls, advertising the call and accepting applications submitted in multiple formats including



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audio and video recordings to extend access to both hearing and visually impaired applicants. The inclusive nature of the open call process led to 1,633 applications for work with young women and girls with disabilities. Now organizations run by and for disabled women and girls are receiving grants. MIUSA was able to promote this opportunity to its hundreds of alumni in over 90 countries, a number of whom were successful grant recipients.

Support to young women and girls with disabilities through MADRE's VIVA Girls Initiative has likewise built girls' leadership that has been critical in supporting local communities to mitigate and recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis.



Photo Credit: NIDWAN

For example, with MADRE's support, the National Indigenous Disabled Women Association (NIDWAN) in Nepal is training young women through Zoom to collect local data surrounding the experience of young Indigenous women with disabilities during the pandemic and distribute essential food and hygiene supplies to women and girls with disabilities.

In Panama, a young girl activist, and graduate of MIUSA's WILD program, is partnering with the Equality and Gender for Women with Visual Disability Secretariat to distribute aid kits to people

with disabilities that are specific to their needs.

And in Sierra Leone, Women with Disabilities Yearning for Equal Opportunities (WoDYEO) is dispersing aid and personal protective equipment (PPE) and raising awareness of COVID-19 with posters, flyers and video clips that target the diverse needs of people with disabilities, including information on sexual and reproductive health. These are but three of numerous examples of how MADRE has enabled disabled women and girls to not only participate in programs, but lead their communities through crisis.

Shaping a New Feminist Future

MIUSA has worked with many large international organizations and funders who are now taking the stance of requiring reasonable accommodations. The impact of this shift will change the world and the lives of millions of people with disabilities, especially women and girls with disabilities, who have been historically excluded. MADRE has set the bar high and is a leader and a pioneer in meaningfully changing the status quo for inclusion of women and girls and people with disabilities. The level of commitment from MADRE's Executive Director and staff, and MADRE's dedication to implementing new strategies in how it works with partners and grantees, is a landmark cause for celebration.

MADRE's progress and learnings have positioned the organization to be a model to its peers and partners for how to be more intentional about disability inclusion in their practices and programs. Though its new strategies, policies, and changes may take time to perfect, MADRE's effort is bold, meaningful, and paves the way for other organizations to learn from MADRE's experience. It is both MIUSA's and MADRE's hope that by sharing this experience we will catalyze other organizations and funders to be more inclusive, as we all work together for a more just and equitable world.

Guiding Principles for Human Rights Organizations and Funders on Disability Inclusion

A few key guiding principles emerged as a result of MIUSA and MADRE's engagement process. These principles can be applied to human rights organizations and funders' work. Organizations and funders should be mindful of these principles as they make programmatic and funding decisions and decide future priorities:

- **Consult disabled women and girls:** Ensure that the expertise and experiences of women and girls with disabilities inform and guide your work by consulting with women and girls with disabilities. Ask whether

your partners and grantees collaborate with groups led by women and girls with disabilities or include them in their decision-making and activities. Ensure that you are reaching out to women and girls with disabilities when recruiting staff, board members, advisors, consultants, and interns.

- **Twin-track approach:** Beyond ensuring that people with disabilities can access all programs, there may be reasons to implement programs specific to people with disabilities. Disability-focused programs can build a sense of community, empowerment and pride, or focus on disability-specific resources or considerations. Implementing a combination of programs accessible to all while also offering disability-specific programs, as needed, is known as the "twin-track approach."
- **Infiltration strategy:** Practice "infiltration," a more proactive and intentional approach to inclusion. Infiltrate the disability community's events, share information with disability networks, and invite members of the disability community to your events and programs. By infiltrating, we accelerate inclusion and form partnerships with organizations and movements so that we all move forward together.
- **Budget for inclusion:** Unlike other types of diversity, disability inclusion may require additional and proactive

strategies to ensure that dedicated financial resources are available to remediate or remove environmental, communications and other barriers to access. Allocating 3-5% of your budget for disability inclusion is recommended.

