

TRANSFORMATIVE
JOURNEYS STORIES
OF IMPACT IN AFRICA

IMPACT STORY COMPILATION 2026



OVERVIEW OF DISABLED WOMEN IN AFRICA (DIWA)

Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA) is a pan-African regional network led by and for women and girls with disabilities, working across multiple countries to advance their rights, voice, and leadership. With its Secretariat based in Lilongwe, Malawi, DIWA brings together organizations of women with disabilities to strengthen movements, influence policy, and promote inclusive development at national, regional, and global levels.

DIWA's work is grounded in the principle of “Nothing About Us, Without Us,” ensuring that women and girls with disabilities are not only included but are at the forefront of

decision-making processes that affect their lives. Over the years, DIWA has built a strong reputation for advancing gender equality and disability inclusion through advocacy, capacity strengthening, research, and strategic partnerships with feminist movements, governments, and regional bodies such as the African Union.

Through its programmes, DIWA continues to bridge the gap between grassroots realities and high-level policy spaces—amplifying the voices of women with disabilities and ensuring that their lived experiences shape policies, systems, and services.



INTRODUCTION



Across Africa, women and girls with disabilities continue to face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, including limited access to justice, exclusion from policy processes, and heightened vulnerability to gender-based violence. Yet, their resilience, leadership, and lived experiences position them as powerful agents of change.

This compilation of impact stories highlights the transformative work of Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA) under the ACT Programme, implemented in partnership with key stakeholders including UN Women and Sonke Gender Justice. The stories capture how intentional investments in movement strengthening, advocacy, and leadership development are shifting power, influencing policy, and creating space for women and girls with disabilities to lead.

From influencing continental frameworks such as the Gender Is My Agenda Campaign (GIMAC) outcome statements, to shaping national policies like the National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence in Malawi, to amplifying youth voices through platforms such as the African Girls Summit these stories demonstrate that meaningful inclusion leads to meaningful change.

More importantly, they showcase a journey from exclusion to influence, from silence to voice, and from participation to leadership.

These stories are a testament to a central belief: ***when women with disabilities are supported, organized, and empowered, they do not just take part they transform systems, influence decisions, and drive sustainable change across Africa..***

Rising Voices:

Young Women with Disabilities Leading Change from Local to Global Spaces

Can you imagine a young woman with a disability from a rural community often excluded, overlooked, and unaware that spaces for influencing policy even exist suddenly finding herself at the center of continental conversations, shaping decisions that affect millions?

For many young women with disabilities across Africa, this is their reality. Structural barriers, stigma, and limited access to information and resources continue to exclude them from platforms where policies are discussed and decisions are made. Their voices are often absent, yet their lived experiences are critical to shaping inclusive solutions.

Young women with disabilities Africa wide face multiple layers of exclusion from limited access to education and economic opportunities to being left out of youth, gender equality, and policy spaces. Their voices are often missing in conversations shaping their futures, particularly on critical issues such as sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), Gender-Based Violence, climate justice, and access to essential services like water and sanitation.

Across Africa, lack of access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) continues to expose women and girls to heightened risks of gender-based violence (GBV). For women and girls with disabilities, these risks are even greater. Long distances to water points, inaccessible sanitation facilities, dependence on others for support, and exclusion from decision-making spaces increase their vulnerability to violence, abuse, exploitation, and poor health outcomes. Yet despite being disproportionately affected, women and girls with disabilities are often excluded from conversations and policies shaping WASH systems and GBV responses.

Through the ACT Programme, Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA), with support from partners including Sonke Gender Justice and UN Women, is changing this narrative by intentionally investing in young women with disabilities as leaders and influencers within national, regional, and continental spaces.

In February 2026, Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA) supported three organizations of women with disabilities: Zimbabwe Women with Disabilities in Development (ZWIDE) from Zimbabwe, an organization with over 400 members, Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association from Ethiopia, a non-profit, grassroots organization with over 12,500 members and Young People With Disabilities Network in Botswana to participate meaningfully in the Gender is My Agenda Campaign Pre-Summit Consultations in Addis Ababa.

These organizations were represented by three young women with visual and physical disabilities,

effectively in the consultations. The summit, which focused on water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), provided a strategic platform for influencing African Union processes and shaping continental priorities on inclusive development.

Prior to their participation, the young women were equipped with advocacy skills, messaging, and confidence to engage effectively in high-level policy discussions. At the summit, they contributed to dialogues on the intersection of disability, gender, and access to WASH services bringing lived experiences into spaces where such perspectives are often missing.

At this high-level platform, the young women did not merely attend they actively influenced outcomes. Their contributions were instrumental in shaping the 42nd GIMAC Outcome Statement, ensuring that disability inclusion was explicitly recognized within the recommendations. This marked a significant step forward in embedding the voices and priorities

of women and girls with disabilities within continental advocacy frameworks. The impact of this engagement is clearly visible in what followed. The 42nd GIMAC outcome statement incorporated disability.

Beyond their participation at the GIMAC in Ethiopia and individual transformation, this initiative has strengthened the broader movement by ensuring that youth voices particularly those of young women with disabilities are integrated into ongoing advocacy efforts. It has also demonstrated the importance of investing in young leaders as catalysts for long-term change.

Sukoluhle Mhlanga from Zimbabwe Women with Disabilities in Development (ZWIDE) from Zimbabwe has since participated in three different policy and advocacy platforms, contributing to discussions on access to water for persons with disabilities, promoting disability-inclusive service delivery, and supporting the development of a position paper as a strategic

advocacy tool. Her continued engagement demonstrates how exposure to continental platforms can translate into sustained national and regional influence.

Similarly, Rowena Koloi from Botswana has emerged as a strong youth advocate at the intersection of health, disability, and environmental sustainability. She featured as a panel discussant for Youths Against AIDS, where she spoke on HIV and disability inclusion. More recently, she was invited by the Children and Youth Major Group (CYMG) to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) multi-stakeholder dialogue on Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH). There, she highlighted the intersection of environmental sustainability, accessibility, and inclusive development in advancing WASH solutions in Botswana an opportunity that came as a direct recognition of her participation and visibility at GIMAC.

Martha Zenebe from Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association shared the knowledge, experiences, and key discussions from GIMAC with members of her organization and wider community. Through these engagements, she helped raise awareness on the importance of disability inclusion within WASH, gender equality, and advocacy spaces, while encouraging other young women with disabilities to participate confidently in leadership and policy platforms.

Reflecting on her journey, Sukoluhle Mhlanga one of the young leaders shared:

"Before this opportunity, I did not see myself as someone who could influence policy. Today, I am speaking in spaces I never imagined, and I am bringing the realities of young women with disabilities into conversations that matter."



Martha Zenebe sharing her learning on the conversations at GIMAC at her organization Ethiopian Women with Disabilities National Association from Ethiopia (EWDNA).



Sukoluhle Mhlanga from Zimbabwe Women with Disabilities in Development (ZWIDE), speaking and engaging in national conversations in Zimbabwe on water a month after engaging at GIMAC, bringing gender and disability in water perspectives.



For many young women with disabilities living in rural communities, participation in continental policy and advocacy spaces remains almost unimaginable. Structural barriers, stigma, poverty, and lack of access to information continue to silence their voices and exclude them from conversations shaping their futures. Too often, girls with disabilities are spoken about rather than being included directly in decision-making processes.

This was the reality for Juvita Sindani, a young woman with a disability from rural Malawi, before she participated in the 4th African Girls Summit.

Through the ACT Programme, Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA) supported a network of women and girls with disabilities in Malawi,

comprising nine-member organizations of women with disabilities, to participate in the summit. Recognizing the importance of amplifying underrepresented voices, Juvita was intentionally selected as one of the representatives because of her identity as a young woman with a disability from a rural community groups that are often left behind in

representatives because of her identity as a young woman with a disability from a rural community groups that are often left behind in policy and advocacy spaces.

The African Girls' Summit brought together government representatives, civil society organizations, development partners, and young people from across the continent to address critical issues affecting girls and young women. Discussions focused on challenges such as female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage, gender-based violence (GBV), and barriers to health and education.

Held under the theme, *"Building Innovations: Collectively Accelerating Girls' Social Rights and Empowerment,"* the summit carried a strong message: meaningful and sustainable change can only happen when

girls themselves are placed at the center of decision-making not merely referenced in speeches and policy documents.

For Juvita, the experience was transformative.

Coming from a rural setting where opportunities for leadership and continental engagement are rare, she found herself participating in high-level discussions alongside policymakers, activists, and youth leaders from across Africa. She contributed actively during plenary discussions, sharing the lived realities of girls with disabilities, particularly those from marginalized rural communities who continue to face barriers in education, protection, sexual and reproductive health services, and participation in public life.

Beyond the plenary sessions, Juvita also submitted contributions

toward the summit's outcome statement, ensuring that the perspectives and priorities of girls with disabilities were reflected within the recommendations and commitments emerging from the summit.

Reflecting on the experience, Juvita shared:

"Before this opportunity, I never imagined that someone like me a young woman with a disability from a rural area could speak in a continental space and contribute to important decisions. Everyone wanted to have a picture with me".

Her participation extended beyond personal growth. By representing a network of nine organizations of women with disabilities in Malawi, Juvita carried with her the voices, experiences, and aspirations of

many other girls and young women who rarely access such spaces. Her journey demonstrated the importance of intentionally investing in underrepresented groups to ensure that advocacy processes are truly inclusive and representative.

Since returning home, Juvita has become more confident in engaging with peers and community members on issues affecting girls with disabilities. Her experience has also inspired other young women within the network to believe that they, too, can participate meaningfully in leadership and advocacy spaces.



Juvita Sindani [Network of Women and Girls with Disabilities in Malawi (NEGWD)] at the 4th African Girls Summit, Ethiopia, Addis Ababa.

Juvita's story is a powerful reminder that inclusion is not simply about attendance it is about influence, representation, and ensuring that those most often excluded are empowered to shape policies and conversations that affect their lives.

From Margins to the Main Table: Women with Disabilities Influencing GBV Policy in Malawi

Women with disabilities in Malawi have historically been excluded from national gender-based violence (GBV) policy spaces, despite facing heightened risks of violence. Their voices were often missing in critical platforms shaping laws and programmes intended to protect them. This exclusion not only weakened the effectiveness of GBV responses but also reinforced systemic inequalities.

This exclusion was evident in the recently concluded National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence (NAP GBV ended in 2022), where women with disabilities were largely left out of both consultations and the final framework. As a result, key issues—such as accessibility of GBV services, inclusive reporting mechanisms, and targeted protection measures—were insufficiently addressed. The impact has been significant: GBV interventions have remained largely inaccessible, services have not fully responded to the unique needs of

women with disabilities, and systemic inequalities have been reinforced rather than challenged.

Without deliberate inclusion, policies risk leaving behind those who are most affected.

Recognizing these gaps, Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA), through the ACT Programme, initiated a sub-regional convening bringing together organizations of women with disabilities from Uganda, Malawi, and Zambia. The convening aimed to build awareness and deepen understanding of National Action Plans on GBV across the three countries, creating a platform for shared learning, reflection, and exchange of experiences.

Through these discussions, participants examined gaps, challenges, and opportunities within their respective national frameworks. The dialogue was later strategically narrowed to focus on

Malawi—highlighting the upcoming review of the NAP GBV as a critical opportunity to correct past exclusions and ensure meaningful disability inclusion.

This process laid the foundation for collective action.

Following the convening, DIWA supported the formation of a task force of five organizations of women with disabilities

- Spinal injuries association of Malawi (SIAM),
- network of Girls and Women with disabilities in Malawi (NEGWDM),
- Disability independent living centre (DILICE)
- Women and girls with disability human rights (WAG)
- Association of Persons with Albinism in Malawi (APAM) To take forward the advocacy agenda. The task force worked collaboratively to develop a position paper on disability inclusion in GBV prevention and

From Margins to the Main Table: Women with Disabilities Influencing GBV Policy in Malawi

worked collaboratively to develop a position paper on disability inclusion in GBV prevention and response, grounded in lived experiences and evidence from women with disabilities.

The position paper was formally submitted to the Ministry of Gender, which is leading the NAP GBV review process, with clear and actionable recommendations to ensure that the revised framework integrates accessibility, inclusive service delivery, protection mechanisms, and meaningful participation.

This marks a significant shift from exclusion to organized, strategic influence.

These efforts culminated in the active participation of women with disabilities in the review of Malawi's National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence (NAP GBV 2025–2030).

The results have been transformative. For the first time, women with disabilities not only participated in consultations but influenced the content of national policy frameworks. Their contributions ensured that issues such as accessibility of GBV services, inclusive reporting mechanisms, and targeted protection measures were recognized within national priorities.

DIWA further sustained its engagement with the Ministry of Gender throughout the review process with also support from SPADRA project under SIDA, providing continuous technical input, follow-up advocacy, and representation of the priorities of women with disabilities. This consistent engagement ensured that disability inclusion remained visible and prioritized at every stage of the process.

As a result, the final validated National Action Plan on Gender-Based Violence (NAP GBV) now incorporates key issues raised by women with disabilities. These include commitments towards improving accessibility of GBV services, strengthening inclusive response mechanisms, and recognizing the heightened risks and intersectional vulnerabilities faced by women and girls with disabilities.

This milestone represents a significant shift from exclusion in the previous framework to meaningful inclusion in the current one. It demonstrates the power of coordinated advocacy, evidence based engagement, and sustained dialogue with government institutions.

More importantly, it sets a precedent for future policy processes in Malawi that inclusion of women with disabilities is not

optional, but essential for effective and equitable policy outcomes.

Beyond individual empowerment, the project has strengthened the broader feminist movement by fostering collaboration between disability rights organizations and mainstream women's rights groups. It has also positioned DIWA as a key regional actor in advancing inclusive GBV responses across Africa.

Importantly, the change is sustainable. Women with disabilities are now part of national task forces and advocacy platforms, ensuring continued engagement beyond the project lifecycle. The skills, networks, and confidence built through the ACT Programme will continue to drive inclusive policy influence.

This story is a testament to a simple but powerful truth: there can be no meaningful progress in ending violence against women and girls without the full inclusion of women with disabilities.

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Strengthening Voice, Visibility, and Sustainability: DIWA's Journey Through Feminist Movement Building

How Feminist Funders Dialogue Opened New Pathways for Disability Inclusion



The first Feminist funders dialogue held in Nairobi Kenya, organized by UN Women

Organizations of women with disabilities across Africa continue to face significant barriers in accessing sustainable and flexible funding. While these organizations play a critical role in advancing gender equality, disability rights, and inclusive advocacy, they are often excluded from mainstream feminist funding ecosystems and struggle with short-term project-

based support that limits institutional growth, sustainability, and long-term impact.

For Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA), these challenges affected the organization's ability to fully respond to the growing needs of women and girls with disabilities across the region. Limited access to multi-year

Strengthening Voice, Visibility, and Sustainability: DIWA's Journey Through Feminist Movement Building

flexible funding weakened organizational capacity, constrained long-term planning, and reduced opportunities to invest in movement strengthening, visibility, and institutional development.

Through the ACT Programme, supported by UN

During the Feminist Funders Dialogue engagements, DIWA openly highlighted the realities faced by organizations of women with disabilities, particularly the lack of multi-year flexible funding that continues to weaken institutional sustainability and limit the ability to adequately meet the needs of women and girls with disabilities across Africa.

These conversations created important visibility for disability-inclusive feminist advocacy and positioned DIWA within



broader feminist movement discussions and funding ecosystems.

At the same time, participation in the Civil Society Regional Network (CSRN) enabled DIWA to

Women, DIWA gained access to strategic feminist movement-building platforms, including participation in the Feminist Funders Dialogue and the Civil Society Regional Network (CSRN). These spaces became transformative opportunities for growth, collaboration, and organizational strengthening.

sisterhood, solidarity, and collective learning with other feminist and civil society organizations.

This engagement strengthened DIWA's participation in strategic regional and global advocacy platforms such as the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and the Women Deliver 2026 conference. Through these spaces, DIWA not only amplified the voices of women and girls with disabilities but also strengthened partnerships, visibility, and collaboration

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inclusion and is contributing meaningfully to shaping conversations within feminist spaces that historically excluded women with disabilities.

Reflecting on the journey, DIWA acknowledges that the greatest transformation has not only been access to platforms, but also the confidence, relationships, and collective power built through feminist movement engagement.

This story demonstrates that when organizations of women with disabilities are intentionally included within feminist networks and funding spaces, they do not only strengthen themselves institutionally they strengthen the entire movement toward more inclusive, intersectional, and sustainable gender justice advocacy



Conclusion

The stories captured in this compilation are more than individual successes they represent a broader shift in power, visibility, and influence for women and girls with disabilities across Africa. From grassroots communities to continental platforms, the ACT Programme has demonstrated that when deliberate efforts are made to include those most often left behind, the results are transformative.

Through strategic advocacy, movement strengthening, and sustained engagement, Disabled Women in Africa (DIWA) and its partners have supported women and girls with disabilities to move from the margins to the center of decision-making. They are shaping national policies, influencing regional frameworks, and redefining what inclusive leadership looks like in practice.

These achievements also highlight an important lesson: inclusion is not a one-time event, it requires continuous commitment, investment, and accountability. While significant progress has been

made, there is still more to be done to ensure that systems, policies, and programmes consistently reflect the realities and rights of women and girls with disabilities.

Looking ahead, the focus must remain on sustaining these gains—strengthening movements, deepening partnerships, and ensuring that the voices of women with disabilities continue to inform and influence change at all levels.



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