

Introduction



Why a book about health for women with disabilities?

Women with disabilities need good health. Good health is more than the absence of disease. When a disabled woman has good health it means she experiences well-being—of her body, mind, and spirit.

Women with disabilities can take charge of their own health when they have information that affirms their own experience of their bodies and health needs. They can also use this information to change the way people think about disability. As women with disabilities take charge of their lives, they will gain respect and support in their communities.

While disability itself may not be a health problem, many times the health problems of women with disabilities go untreated. This can mean that a simple health problem in a woman with disability, if left untreated, can become a life-threatening problem.

We must remove the barriers that keep disabled women from achieving good health.

In my country, the disabled, and especially disabled women, are seen as children, and you don't give children any responsibility. So women with disabilities get excluded from almost everything: education, health care, land ownership, etcetera.

We need information for women with disabilities so that they can learn how to take better care of their health themselves, to learn what they can do as a community to get doctors and nurses and hospital administrators to change their attitudes and make health care more accessible and available for women with disabilities.



—Lizzie Longshaw,
National Council of Disabled
Persons of Zimbabwe

BARRIERS TO GOOD HEALTH CARE

Like most women, women with disabilities often find it difficult to get the health care they need, when they need it.

Even if a woman lives near a health center and has enough money to pay for services, most clinics, health centers and hospitals have not been designed to make it easy for everyone to use them. Disabled women find barriers to care when health facilities do not have ramps for wheelchair users, do not have information in Braille or on audio cassettes for blind or vision-impaired people, do not have sign language interpreters for women who are deaf, and do not have people who can assist women who have trouble learning or understanding.

Another problem is that doctors and other health workers are not usually trained to understand the health needs disabled women may have. Because of this, health workers may have ideas about disability that make it uncomfortable and hard for disabled women to get good health care.

When women with disabilities do not have access to resources, education, and other opportunities, they are more vulnerable to poverty, exploitation, and abuse. Without confidence in and awareness of their rights, they are often socially marginalized. This creates even more barriers to their access to health care.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

This book is written for the millions of women with disabilities around the world who suffer and die needlessly because they lack access to respectful and appropriate health care.

This book can help most women with disabilities better care for themselves, improve their general health, their capabilities and self-reliance, and their ability to participate more effectively in their communities.

This book is not a rehabilitation manual and does not have all the information needed to diagnose and treat different kinds of disease, sickness or disability. The book has other goals.

This book gives information about the ways a disability may make the health needs of a woman with a disability different from those of a woman who does not have a disability.

The information in the book will help women with disabilities get better care from others.

This book will help health workers, as well as family members and caregivers, learn that disability by itself does not mean sickness, but that a woman with a disability—a blind woman, or a woman who uses a wheelchair—may have illnesses such as HIV/AIDS or malaria, just like women who do not have disabilities.

This book will help families, friends, community health workers, and other people who assist women with disabilities to be partners in caring.

This book also has information about the social causes of disability, and suggests ways to help change feelings and beliefs that are harmful to the health of women with disabilities, their families, and their communities.

To make the book as useful as possible, women with disabilities around the world shared their health needs, beliefs, and practices, and told us what they would most like included in the book. Their voices, experiences, and stories helped shape the writing and are reflected on every page.



