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Child Protection Matters for Children with Disabilities

A Case Story



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Child Protection Matters for Children with Disabilities

“The training (on child protection) is important to us. We learned how to protect ourselves from violence. We know now, there is the potential for physical violence and sexual violence in our surroundings. Through the training we learned about what disability is and we also learned a lot about violence and how violence comes about.

The most important thing is that it will enable us to protect ourselves from violence. And the second is that we can teach our friends how they can protect themselves and they can then convince others how they can protect themselves, and so forth.”

..... Students from Gondar



Using the Community Based Rehabilitation (CBR) approach, Light for the World and its partner organisations have been working in Ethiopia for over a decade to ensure that children with disabilities get the opportunity, as any other child would, to develop and prosper within their communities. CBR is implemented at a range of levels—individual, community and society—to ensure services (such as: health, education, livelihood, social protection, humanitarian crisis interventions, justice, recreation, sport and leisure) are accessible to all people with disabilities, whether they be women, men, boys or girls. These CBR projects support children in receiving the medical and rehabilitation support they need, help them to access education, to become accepted in their families and communities, and support poor families in improving their income. CBR field workers find and visit children with disabilities in their homes, assess their needs, and provide them with the support they and their families need on a regular basis.

These CBR field workers are in close contact with children with disabilities and their families, and have been reporting stories of violence and abuse happening to children. Although CBR work is focused on the

development and inclusion of girls and boys with disabilities, there was very little attention for child rights and child protection. We realised that there were no policies, structures or activities focused on the prevention of child abuse, and that there was little attention for the rights of girls and boys with disabilities and their vulnerability to violence, or knowledge on how to address abuse.

Children with disabilities face a higher risk to abuse than children without disabilities. Research demonstrates that 70% of girls and boys with disabilities in developing countries have faced some form of violence (see African Child Policy Forum (2010). *Breaking the silence: violence against children with disabilities in Africa*). Girls and boys with disabilities are more often denied the right to education and more often live in poverty. In many societies girls and boys with disabilities are valued less than girls and boys without disabilities. In addition, girls and boys with disabilities often depend on the support of caretakers in many activities in their daily life, increasing their vulnerability and making it more likely that they will experience abuse. If and when they are abused, girls and boys with disabilities are often also less likely to seek and find justice for the violence committed against them.

Children, including girls and boys with disabilities, have the right to be protected from harm.

Article 19 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children ensures the rights of children to be protected from abuse, violence and exploitation. Furthermore, it specifically mentions the safety of girls and boys with disabilities as stated under article 23 (1):

“[...] a mentally or physically disabled child should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate the child’s active participation in the community”.

Article 7 (1), of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities also reaffirms the rights of girls and boys with disabilities to protection, like any other child:

“State Parties shall take all necessary measures to ensure the full enjoyment by children with disabilities of all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children”.

In order to address this missing piece in our work, we designed a project to support partner organisations in setting up child protection mechanisms that include girls and boys with disabilities. This child protection development project was led by our partner organisation VCBRA (Vision Community Based Rehabilitation Association), and six other Light for the World partner organisations participated.

The 6 partner organisations are:

- Cheshire Services Ethiopia
- Gondar University
- Gayo Pastoralist Organisation
- Harmee for Development Association
- Rehabilitation Services for the Deaf Association and Yesus Mena for the Deaf.

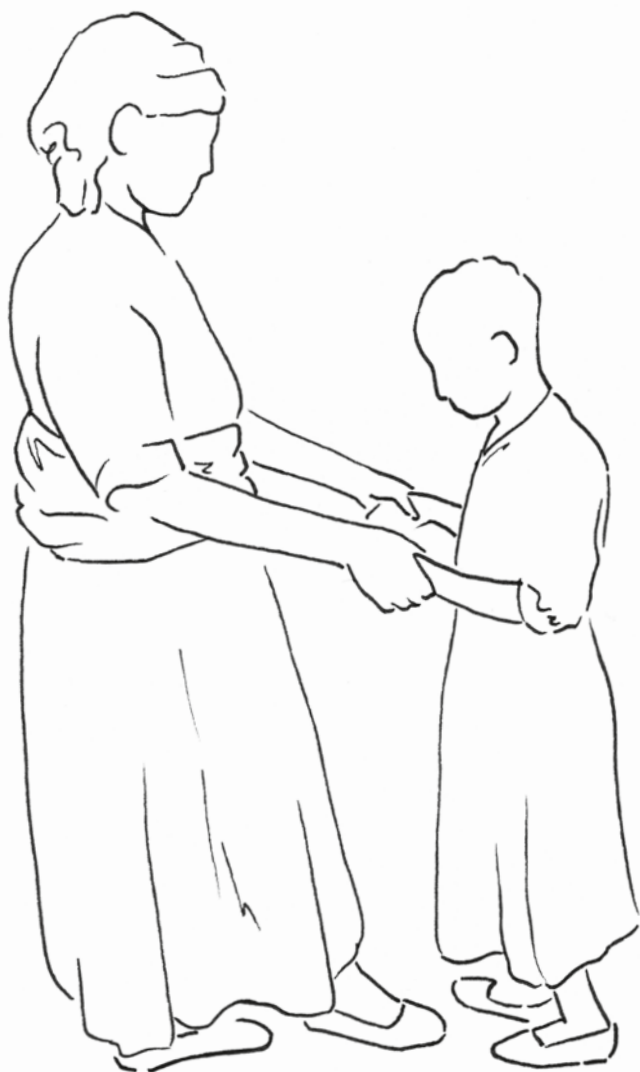
Light for the World provided the resources and technical support for the pilot project.

The pilot project included the following elements:

Training

- Understanding the rights of children (with disabilities) and when those rights are violated.
- Understanding the vulnerabilities of children and specifically the vulnerabilities of girls and boys with disabilities.
- How to make a child protection policy for the organisation.
- Obligations of organisations working with children (with disabilities) to support the protection of children, protect them from harm by staff working for the organisation and the obligation to report and follow up when there is suspicion or knowledge of the violation of the rights of a child (with a disability).
- Strategies to work on the protection of the rights of children (with disabilities).

We could not find existing training or support packages on child protection which included and addressed the specific elements that CBR organisations work with. Firstly, the vulnerability of girls and boys with disabilities to violence is even higher than that of non-disabled children. Secondly, the work done by the partners takes place in the community. Professionals providing services to the community, leaders in the community, and community members also lack understanding of the rights of girls and boys with disabilities and their vulnerability to violence. Thirdly, the children are not under the care of the organisation, but of their parents or other care takers. This means that when child abuse is identified, various parties need to be involved to protect the child. Especially since, in many communities, girls and boys with disabilities are considered not worthy of being protected. Given all these unique elements, we decided to tailor the training and guiding materials to these specific needs.



Planning and implementing activities on child protection in the community.

After the training all organisations were invited to hand in a proposal, with which they could receive some funding to pilot child protection mechanisms in their existing work. None of the participating organisations performed all these activities. This is a collection of the activities done by the various organisations.

- Assessment about the magnitude and nature of child abuse in the community, including identification of the needs and vulnerabilities of pastoralist girls with disabilities living in hostels to attend education.
Sharing of the assessment results with relevant community members, service providers, community-based organisations and leaders.
- Training parents about the rights of their girls and boys with disabilities
- Awareness campaigns on protection of girls and boys with disabilities in the community
- Radio broadcasting
- Billboards placed in schools and in towns
- Training and involvement of Women and Children Affairs Offices on the rights of girls and boys with disabilities
- Community conversations, including discussions on the establishment of child protection systems in the community
- Building the capacity of community members, service providers, community-based organisations and leaders on child protection (of girls and boys with disabilities) through training
- Training children and supporting them to raise awareness in their community and their schools about the rights of girls and boys with disabilities, and the responsibility of the community to protect them from violence. This was done:
 - In schools by training groups of students or, if existing, disability school clubs
 - By supporting child parliament to include the issues of girls and boys with disabilities
 - In child to child programmes for pre-school children about protecting themselves and their friends from harm
 - By developing a child protection policy for their own organisation

Development of resource materials for the partners.

A guideline on how to develop and implement a child protection policy and a training manual on child protection have been created for all organisations involved in the pilot. These materials were provided to the participating organisations at the end of the pilot period for future reference.

The activities developed by the various partners and the experiences of the beneficiaries determined three impor-

tant areas to implement child protection for girls and boys with disabilities within communities:

- Building awareness on the rights of all children, including girls and boys with disabilities
- Building protective structures in the community
- Building the resilience of children and increasing child participation

This document reflects the results and experiences of integrating child protection systems in CBR organisations.



Awareness on the rights of children, including the rights of children with disabilities

“Previously, I knew nothing about the protection of children.

I sent my seven-year-old, partially blind, daughter to work in the house of other people. I ignored her education and collected her monthly payment to cover our living expenses. It did not occur to me that my daughter would be abused or that I was abusing her rights. I was only thinking about her getting better food and shelter.

Now I know a lot of things about child abuse, including with regards to children with disabilities; like renting kids out for money, assigning children to look after cattle, not sending children to school, forcing children to fetch water, not feeding our children, insulting children, beating, and not buying them clothes like we do for other children.

When I think now of what happened to my daughter ... She had to look after cattle without having something to eat. After coming back with the cattle, she had to do household activities like boiling coffee and cleaning the house.

On top is all these pressures she was sexually abused at the age of seven by a 17-year old boy. The family of the boy who abused my child is very rich and my child has a visual impairment, so I abandoned the case feeling I had no chance. Also, the neighbours and my family told me to keep quiet since this experience was shameful, and I decided not to talk about it.

But now with the support of Harmee [the partner organisation], I started the case again and now the boy who abused my child is jailed after being penalised for 18 years.”

..... Father from Kersa

One reason why so much abuse could take place against girls and boys with disabilities, was simply because many people were not aware that what was happening was abuse, and that they could do something about it. Many individuals—adults, children, professionals and lay persons—expressed that they had learned more about the rights of all children through the project. They realised that when working on child rights, girls and boys with disabilities should be included. They started to see girls and boys with disabilities as children that are vulnerable and worthy of being protected.

“[...] Most of the time they [students with disabilities] feel isolated and stigmatised, and this training can reduce the stigmatisation. Through awareness people can interact and look differently at persons with disabilities. [...] In the compound we have started to study together with the students who have a disability. After the training we started to form relationships. We have a blind student in our school and we started to travel together from home to school and back home.”

..... Student from Hawassa

The training changed attitudes of parents towards their children. They came to realise in some cases that they had been neglecting the rights of their children and they learned from this and were encouraged to support their children in their rights and needs.

“Now I know many things. For example, I always clean her, when she is sick I take her to hospital, I give more attention to my child with a disability. Previously I used to hide her and even didn't breastfeed her but now that I know I don't hide and I love her. I see some change and hope for her.”

..... Mother from Kersa

Parents who had feared standing up for their children now realised they could and should defend their rights.

“Previously [...] when our children experienced abuse we did not try to solve the problem, but now I do not tolerate it anymore. I know now where I can go, and I go and solve the problem. The children in this school come from far away. They use public transport to reach their home. On the way there are people who abuse the children. They keep the children, sometimes for a day, and they make them beg on the street.

Now parents do not tolerate the issue and they report and follow up. After receiving training on child protection, we gained knowledge on the rights of our children. As a member of the parent association, when authorities from the Education Office visit we address the issues with them and ask them for solutions, like arranging transport for the children so their rights will be protected.”

..... Parent of a child with a disability

from Addis Ababa

These stories show that parents were often not aware they were abusing their own children. Or that it did not come to their mind that others were.

Building awareness on the fact that there actually is a problem, and that this problem needs to be addressed, is thus the first step in successfully achieving the protection of children. Awareness and attitude change on their duty to protect **all** children from harm seems key in the school environment and the community at large. Or as one parent stated:

“The important thing is to know one's own rights. That is important. Before even the parents used to say, ‘these children are sick children so what can we do’. But now we realise our kids have rights and we go wherever we must go. So, this is a huge change for us.”

..... Father of a deaf child in Addis Abeba

Building protective structures in the community

The stories above demonstrated that it was not just awareness that was necessary, but that even if individuals were aware of abuse taking place, they did not feel they could do anything about the situation. They did not feel that there was a place to go to address the violation of child rights. Services which are available to protect the rights of children, often would not consider the protection of girls and boys with disabilities as part of their job. Police officers would often not file the report on abuse of a child with a disability. Girls with disabilities who were raped, would have to listen to the whispering of health staff, wondering who would be sexually interested in a girl like her, let alone rape her.

“There are many cases in which the actors of violence against children are reported to legal bodies and released without any punishment due to corruption. For example, [...] 3 crimes were committed against children (burning, rape and a physical abuse case) and the perpetrators were not even questioned. This shows that there is a lack of attention from legal bodies in the Woreda (District) to take mitigation measures against violence against children.”

..... Report from CBR organisation
(assessment prior to the intervention on child protection)

To tackle the lack of community support for the protection of girls and boys with disabilities, the organisations started working with community structures—making them aware of their duty to protect girls and boys with disabilities.

Types of community structures that were addressed through the pilot projects:

- Community Care Coalition (CCC)
- Community workers like community health workers/ social workers
- School staff
- Police
- Courts
- Religious leaders
- Bureau of Women and Children Affairs
- Bureau of Labour and Social Affairs
- Bureau of Education
- Justice bureau

For example, Cheshire Services Ethiopia in Hawassa organised training and discussions with a school and several local government structures including the Labour and Social Affairs Office, the Office of Women and Children Affairs and the Office for Education. The goal was to improve the protection of students with disabilities, and include girls and boys with disabilities in existing community protection structures. These include structures such as the para social workers who work in the community under the social affairs structure, and the community care coalition which works under the guidance of women and children affairs services, which is responsible for the detection of the needs of the most vulnerable in society, and works on community mobilisation for support.

The training of the school community resulted in the development of a code of conduct for the school:

“This code of conduct is important for us to make the school community, including the support staff, more accountable. Everybody needs to report when abuse is happening to students with disabilities. So, if a person observes abuse (s)he should be held accountable when they do not report it. We want everyone to sign the code of conduct when they understand it. [...] It is very important because there will be a new generation who will have disabilities. Kids with disabilities will come to our high-school. So, the school should accommodate their needs. Awareness creation is very important. Including [awareness on] the code of conduct.”

..... Teacher from Hawassa

Government employees from the above-mentioned government structures came together in a workshop organised by the Cheshire team to promote the inclusion of girls and boys with disabilities into their services.

“The participants were from offices that have the mandate to work on these issues and are responsible for the services and their day to day implementation. The rights of children with disabilities were emphasised. Even though the trainees have a good understanding of child rights, the training challenged whether children with disabilities would be able to access their services. [...] The main challenge was the attitudinal difficulties. In the training there were discussions on how to remove the attitudinal barrier particularly.

[...] After the training there was better understanding amongst the participants and action was taken, like building of ramps. But that does not mean that we have total accessibility now. For example, school communities should be trained in an inclusive atmosphere or approach. The education sector stressed this. But some steps have been taken. All children should have the right to access their rights.”

..... Two staff members from the

Office of Labour and Social Affairs in Hawassa

In Ambo and Wolisso, VCBRA organised the existing community structures to form a “child protection follow-up committee”. The committee was led by the Social Affairs Office and includes members from government structures like schools and the community care coalition, but also community-based structures like religious leaders and idirs. Now they have a better system to help, as demonstrated in the example below.

“A 16-year-old young deaf girl lives with her aunt. Her physical change was first observed by a community-based rehab worker. The rehab worker started to ask questions and found that she was raped by a close family member. The rehab worker took the case to the child protection follow up committee, who encouraged the Social Affairs Office to refer her to the health centre to confirm the rape and a pregnancy. Then Social Affairs, together with the legal office, took the case to court. The person who sexually abused the young deaf girl is now in prison and the Social Affairs Office, in collaboration with other offices, is supporting the deaf girl to handle her baby and with teen parenting”.

..... Project coordinator VCBRA

As a result of these activities, communities now had structures where they could go if they wanted to report and address cases of child abuse against girls and boys with disabilities.

The partner organisations described various strategies they used to make community structures include girls and boys with disabilities in their protective measures:

- Those working on the ground in community structures like teachers, Community Care Coalition members, para-social workers, police officers and religious leaders, received training about the rights of girls and boys with disabilities and the need to include them in protective mechanisms
- Reporting mechanisms in case of abuse were created in various communities. Part of these mechanisms would include community members and the responsible bodies described above
- To prevent abuse from happening, ideas were gathered through community meetings on protective community mechanisms
- Cases that were reported during the implementation time of the project were followed up and perpetrators were brought to justice
- To increase the awareness of all community members, flyers were distributed and billboards about child protection of girls and boys with disabilities were displayed in various communities
- The Women and Children Affairs Office has child protection as its main mandate. Some of the partners in the project included the Office of Women and Children Affairs. Others decided after discussions to ask Women and Children Affairs to lead activities on behalf of the project. In this way the Women and Children Affairs Office was made aware of the situation of violence against girls and boys with disabilities and had a chance to improve on their mandate to protect them
- Also, children themselves became part of the protective mechanisms through the child protection clubs that were formed in various schools in some of the communities

Building resilience of children and child participation

A third important step is to ensure that children are included in the awareness-raising on child protection. Children need to learn not to accept abuse from others, and to understand what behaviour is unacceptable.

“I was using bajaj transport [Motor Riksha] and the driver just took me to another place and did not drop me at my home. I challenged the driver and told him he should not do this, and he dropped me home. I dared to challenge him and protected myself from violence!”

..... Student from Gondar

By involving children in their own protection, they can become advocates for the rights of other children too.

“In our house there was a girl. She was 16 years old. And she was doing a lot of hard work. The girl had a high workload and did not go to school. But after the training I told my parents what the rights of children were and that children were not allowed to work hard like this and that they should go to school. Now she is going to school and her workload is reduced.”

..... Student from Addis Ababa

The following environments were included in outreach to involve girls and boys with disabilities in protecting their own rights:

- In schools.
- Through children’s parliament.
- Through disability school clubs.
- Through youth league.

The girls and boys used what they had learned about child protection to reach out to other children in the schools or clubs.

“After the training the children started to perform different dramas about child protection. They performed a drama about labour abuse; about all kinds of abuse. They understood [the training] very well and they shared what kind of abuse they had experienced. As they understood the issue well, they passed on the training messages to other students and their parents.”

..... Teacher from Addis Ababa

The children also started sharing stories with their teachers about the abuse they face:

“Previously the deaf children did not tell us about what actions their parents take. It was accepted as a fact. They expected the abuse. Now they report it to the teacher and the school and they even confront the parents about the abuse.”

..... Teacher from Addis Ababa

Informing children about their rights and how to recognise when their rights are being violated, is a third crucial step in building child protection systems in CBR work.

Conclusion

These stories come from a pilot project that lasted only nine months. The pilot was meant to get CBR organisations thinking about the safety and protection of girls and boys with disabilities in the communities where they work. We found that existing materials for child protection did not fit the realities of girls and boys with disabilities in the communities where our work takes place. We realised that there were three areas that need to be addressed to improve the protection of girls and boys with disabilities:

- Building awareness on the rights of all children, including girls and boys with disabilities
- Building protective structures in the community
- Building the resilience of children and increasing child participation

Through the interviews we have done in four sites, we found that all these intervention areas are meaningful and that in less than a year first steps have been taken to increase the safety of girls and boys with disabilities in their communities. All those interviewed, whether children, parents or professionals, indicated there is a need to address the safety of girls and boys with disabilities. Current (government and non-government) community services do not yet include the protection of girls and boys with disabilities. Children themselves were happy to discover they were worth protecting, and brought in ideas to improve their own safety and that of their peers. We recommend that in community-based initiatives for girls and boys with disabilities all three areas of intervention will be included. In nine months we managed to make a start. To end violence against girls and boys with disabilities, child protection has to become an integral part of the CBR approach.

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Light for the World International & VCBRA

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Graphics: Barbara Weingartshofer

All data as of April 2019

www.light-for-the-world.org

