FROM THE SHADOWS TO THE CENTRE
Rising Flame is a National Award winning nonprofit organisation based in India, working for recognition, protection, and promotion of human rights of People with Disabilities, particularly women and youth with disabilities. Rising Flame’s vision is to build an inclusive world in which diverse bodies, minds, and voices thrive with dignity; live free of discrimination, abuse, and violence; and enjoy equal opportunities and access. Since our establishment in 2017, we aim to enable persons with disabilities standing at multiple intersections to have a voice, have a space, be heard and lead from the front. As a self-led organisation, we are committed to upholding disability justice values and feminist principles. (Website: www.risingflame.org).

From Shadows to the Centre is a Rising Flame campaign which was run as part of 16 Days global campaign to End Gender Based Violence in 2020. Our campaign features 7 personal essays of women with disabilities, speaking up about the sexual harassment they have faced and saying #MeToo.
People often ask me, if a strong independent woman like me has ever been sexually harassed. And with a satirical laughter I say, I don’t know of any woman who has never faced harassment. I have experienced being whistled at, catcalled, groped, in public places, in crowded areas, and even on silent, dark streets. The abusers have been unknown people and random strangers, who I didn’t recognise and didn’t necessarily have to see again - ever.

But the harassment that I will be speaking about today is different yet similar, is usual yet scary. A disabled man, a co-panelist at a technology and accessibility event, once bent over and brushed his face on my cheek - under the guise of telling me that time was up and I should stop my presentation. This was my first ever sexual harassment in the disability community and of course it was not the last. When I spoke about this with close people - those that I knew then-and told them about the disgusting experience, they all said,
"WE ARE CONSTANTLY MADE TO BELIEVE THAT WE DESERVE THE ABUSE BECAUSE OF OUR DISABILITY, OR WE OUGHT TO ACCEPT THE ABUSE BECAUSE AT LEAST THE ABUSER IS HELPING US, OR "PROVIDING" US OPPORTUNITIES WHICH ARE SO FEW AND FAR IN BETWEEN, BUT MOSTLY, THE FEAR THAT NO ONE WOULD BELIEVE US EVEN IF WE SPOKE UP"
“Oh that man, we all know that he has abused many women with disabilities.” The casualness with which folks told me this was shocking, but the inaction surrounding this was simply unacceptable. It gradually dawned on me that the community is full of open secrets like these.

We see that disabled women speaking up against harassment within the community is extremely rare. I wondered on this for years, and interactions with and working within the community made me realise a few things. We, women with disabilities, are constantly made to believe that we deserve the abuse because of our disability, or we ought to accept the abuse because at least the abuser is helping us, or “providing” us opportunities which are so few and far in between, but mostly, the fear that no one would believe us even if we spoke up. These are few of the reasons that stop women with disabilities from coming forward. These are of course in addition to all the usual hurdles women go through when they face harassment. “It must have been your fault”, “You may have been too friendly and they stepped over”, “It is just one little incident, you take your own measures to protect yourself”, “You must be involved with him, or you are anyway too forward so how does it matter?” – are few of the comments/questions that any survivor is bogged down with and anticipates long before she comes forward. All this is in addition to the guilt and trauma that the survivor experiences due to the abuse, and that very often then leads to a delay in speaking up, or in reporting, if at all.

There are additional layers of silencing, a spoken and unspoken pressure of not reporting harassment when it comes from within the disabled community. It is a closed community and so the harasser almost always will find out when a disabled raises a complaint against them. Even if the woman would to keep it closed and anonymous. The rest of the community is upset that the disabled woman is defaming the community - a community already stigmatised and misunderstood in the non-disabled world. Many actors in the community would rather live this reality and hold them as open secrets- secrets that all know but no one wants to unveil.

But if we want to change the scenario, it is important to first raise several questions - Why do, we, women with disabilities remain silent? Who could be the abuser? When is the right time to speak up? Is there a right time to speak up?

Women with disabilities often don’t receive full acceptance in the non-disabled world because of their gender and disability. For many of us, the disabled community is a community of care and friendship, of love and guidance. In such a scenario, when the community guilts us to keep quiet, or hints that they would become hostile if negative narratives or rather open secrets were spoken, many of us often succumb. Also, the social stigma of asexuality, infantalisation and inspiring narratives that surrounds people with disabilities, means that most folks won’t believe that a disabled person could be a harasser.
The disability movement is a patriarchal space where opportunities, funding and leadership positions are more often than not for men with disabilities - and this is the case not just in India but world over. Women with disabilities are often tokenistically included or are included upto a point under majority male leadership. With men with disabilities holding more access to networks and funders, not all women with disabilities have the option to branch out by themselves. In such a case reporting harassment by male leaders, or colleagues who may be revered by others is not only challenging, but proves impossible in many cases.

The open secrets remain cloaked and we are all responsible for that. A few months ago, I was speaking to an activist and they said that we all knew about a certain media person who was named in the #MeToo movement in India. But we never spoke up before because he was finally such a fantastic editor! And that was a huge moment of pause for me.

We, as communities, as professionals, as human beings, perhaps now need to carve out our non-negotiables. Does someone excelling at their profession give them the option to exercise power and exploit others? Does bringing a social change give them an authority to discriminate and abuse other genders? And the answer is within each of us.

Women cannot often take the legal route because the barriers in the justice system for women and particularly for women with disabilities are immense. Women often choose to speak up to ensure that communities like ours recognise that there are abusers within the community and safeguarding disabled women’s interest is important too.

The more powerful the abuser, the more difficult it is for women to speak up. In #MeToo accounts from USA or even globally we have seen how women feel safest to speak up when the abuser has lost his position of power or has even died. For women with disabilities, speaking up is no different. We speak up for each other, or when we feel that the abuser from within the community may no longer be able to hurt us personally or professionally. Being abused and harassed is a traumatic experience and it may take years for women to process their abuse and speak up.

I remember that while travelling for a conference within India I knew that the disabled man who was then harassing me for months, was attending that conference. So, I booked a hotel for myself and did not share my hotel details with anyone till I reached there. It was an important conference for my work and for our movement, and so my focus was on - being safe and moving the work forward. I could ensure this only by spending additional money, by requesting a colleague to accompany me at most times within the conference premises and through tiring and painstaking alertness. But is it fair that we as women, as women with disabilities have to shoulder the burden of our safety?
Do our movements and communities have no role to play in this?

Women with disabilities deserve respect. We deserve dignity. We deserve to be safe and to be believed when we speak up. And starting today we bring to you voices of women with disabilities from all across the globe, speaking up and ending the silence about sexual harassment they have faced from within the community. Because it is important for us to visibilise experiences of women with disabilities; it is important for us to recognise and accept that the abuse is happening and it is real; and it is important to step up and ensure that safeguarding systems are created. It is time, women with disabilities and their voices must move from the shadows to the centre!

**Nidhi Goyal** is a disability and gender rights expert with a decade of experience working at the intersection of feminist and disability rights movements. She is the founder and executive director of Rising Flame, a national award winning organisation that works on rights of persons with disabilities with a focus on women and youth with disabilities. She is a global advisor to UN WOMEN ED, President of Association of Women’s Rights in Development, core group member on persons with disabilities of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and Member of the task force on diversity and inclusion of Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).
In the early 2000’s, I was fully active in every possible space for advocacy on the rights of persons with disabilities, particularly of women with disabilities. I took the opportunity to participate in the newly developing movement that was shaping up as a UN human rights treaty to protect the rights of persons with disabilities. Most spaces were dominated by men with disabilities, and by other non-disabled persons; I was focused on demanding “Nothing about us, without us!”, so as long as voices of persons with disabilities, even if they were mostly men, were being heard over non-disabled persons’ voices, I felt things were moving forward.

So interacting with more men than women with disabilities was not unusual. Sexist comments were frequent, I became used to hearing macho humour and sarcasm about women with disabilities participating. I strongly desired to be part of this big effort to draft and adopt a UN treaty body on the rights of persons with disabilities, so dismissing these kind of comments and macho humor was the mechanism I adopted in order to move along.
"I know how important it is for women with disabilities to unite and share our experiences and pain. Most people who were gathered in that conference in Quito back in 2003, have never mentioned that incident to me again, I guessed most people have dismissed it, as it usually happens and because in this patriarchal male dominated world, sexual harassment is just a common mechanism to control women."
In April 2003, I was invited to participate in the Americas Regional Conference, that took place in between the 1 and 2 Ad Hoc Committee meetings, in Quito Ecuador. The meeting gathered representatives from States’ institutions and from civil society, notable many representing Organisations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) from all over the Americas. Among the delegation representing Costa Rica, there was a partially blind male lawyer who had some function within the country’s Parliament. When the first day of the conference was over, he called me to his hotel bedroom when I was about to go to bed, inviting me to his room to have some coffee, I said no and hung up the phone.

The following day, he was appointed to coordinate one of the working groups, and the plenary broke out into different meeting rooms. I arrived the first to the one I had been pointed out to, which unfortunately was the one this blind male had to coordinate. Unsuspectedly, I walked close to him to say hello, and he caught my arm and pulled me very close to him, I quickly broke his grip and walked away fast. To my relief, people were already arriving in the room. I felt very angry, but also very embarrassed about the incident; I kept thinking how stupid I had been to get so close to him in an empty room, but I finally did tell a friend about it and he encouraged me to place a complaint, which I decided to do through the person responsible for managing the grant that paid for my participation. Because the harasser was a member of a State delegation, the donor decided not to do anything, and this was the hard way I learned how diplomacy can work, or rather, cannot work.

The blind lawyer kept harassing me throughout the Conference, he kept trying to get physically near me, but my colleagues were very supportive and kept me at a safe distance all the time.

The Conference was finally over, I kept participating in the next Ad Hoc Committee meetings until the end, in 2006.

I was very disappointed to learn that the blind lawyer had a successful political career in his country: he became a Parliament member and even ran as a candidate to the Presidency. And after more than a decade after that horrible incident that affected me personally, that man continues to move easily in political spaces in his country, and he recently even nominated himself as a candidate for a special mandate within the UN Human Rights Council.

Although my participation within the national and international movement for the rights of persons with disabilities, and for the rights of women with disabilities has continued smoothly, I still feel very frustrated that that sexual harasser has had no consequences for his misconduct. I know that women’s rights defenders in his country consider him as misogynist, but he’s still very politically active and it seems that he has not faced any serious accusations from
At the very end, I know how important it is for women with disabilities to unite and share our experiences and pain. Most people who were gathered in that Conference in Quito back in 2003, have never mentioned that incident to me again, I guessed most people have dismissed it, as it usually happens and because in this patriarchal male dominated world, sexual harassment is just a common mechanism to control women.

It’s been over 15 years after that, I just hoped that when it happened, I had other women offering their support to me. I hope this testimony may be useful for other women with disabilities who are being harassed by disabled men, leaders of OPDs and disability rights movements. Let this story serve as a guiding light to my peers and sisters, you’re not alone.

Silvia Quan fights for expanding the rights of all persons with disabilities, in her native Guatemala, in the broader Latin American region, and on the global stage. For her many achievements, especially in her capacity as Vice-Chair of the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Silvia was honored with the International Advocate Award by the U.S. International Council of Disabilities (USICD). From the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) to the committee's review of compliance reports, Silvia has ensured that UN work on disability rights includes the voices of women. Silvia is currently advocating to raise awareness to prevent and eliminate violence against women.
Back in 2009, in my university days, I used to volunteer for a cross-disability rights organisation in Pakistan where I live. He used to work as the manager there. A well-spoken, polite man who lived with Polio. I never really had much of a relationship with him but we were cordial and I felt safe at my workplace. I worked there for two years and went on with my life. There’s not much else to say about my time at the organisation; the two years of my student life were ordinary at best. I received my Masters degree in Media and Communication and began my career in the corporate sector as an enthusiastic professional excited about using my skills and experience to work for the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

In the course of my work, three years ago, I got invited for a consultation for the development of the legislative process for persons with disabilities. At the time, we did not have the Pakistan Disability Act. A cross-disability rights organisation that organised this consultation had invited many stakeholders from the disability rights movement which included individuals and civil society
"As a young blind woman, I was used to people questioning my experiences. Whether I was sure, I was naming the right person. How could I possibly know for certain it was who I thought it was?"
organisations. The consultation was supposed to stretch over a period of a few days, focusing largely on recognising barriers around the development of a legislation for the rights of disabled persons. We had all gathered in a popular hotel in Islamabad about half hour away from my house; a hotel which was a popular choice amongst NGOs to hold their international conferences and large events. Since I had previously worked with disability rights organisations, I tended to meet familiar faces often at such events. So it wasn’t a surprise that I ran into my colleague, the manager, from the organisation I used to volunteer at when I was in college. It had been a long time since I last met him, so as the norm goes, we exchanged pleasantries and caught each other up on our lives. It was perfectly formal, nondescript and mundane. We moved on to talk to other people. Although I don’t remember much else about my interaction with him, I do remember feeling uncomfortable around him. I had felt tense and uneasy whenever he sat next to me. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

On the second last day of the consultation, all the participants were asked to assemble in the hall for a group photograph. We were a lot of participants, however, my former colleague chose to stand next to me for the photograph. My uneasiness continued. As a young blind woman, I was used to people questioning my experiences. Whether I was sure, I was naming the right person. How could I possibly know for certain it was who I thought it was? And to be honest, I understand. As a blind person, I do need to have other sources of confirmation. However, the hand that snaked around my waist, reached up and molest me that day was his. I told my friends I was absolutely positive when they asked me to wait for the photos. We did wait for the photos though and I was right. Since then, I have wondered many times what I would’ve done had he not disappeared into the crowd almost immediately. I also wondered, should I have had done more after I had complained to the organisation despite my friends telling me it would tarnish its reputation. The organisation reassured me that they would bar his inclusion in future events but this was not enough for me. The gravity of this punishment did not come close to the fear and disgust I had felt in that moment. I would’ve preferred going to the police but I did not have the capacity.

I am now 32 years old. I am working in the development sector, still with the same goal of inclusion of persons with disabilities through CSR activities. I have much more insight about the incident now. I have not spoken to him since; I do not know if he was, in fact, barred from future events like I was told he would be. But now, I feel like I have found my voice. I want to talk about what happened to me and this time, I want to be heard.

Maria Zia is a programme officer for inclusive initiatives. She has been working for the inclusion of people with disabilities in society in Pakistan.
IT WASN’T A BAD DREAM THAT I COULD FORGET

ANONYMOUS, INDIA

I have faced experiences of violence on the streets often - those are the experiences that come first to mind. But if I had to think in particular about the incidents that happened with intimate partners and men with disabilities. What do I say?

I think back to this one incident. I was molested by this person who has a long term friend, a kind of a childhood friend. He was also a person with cerebral palsy. I don’t know what happened that day but he tried to molest me. I froze when it happened and was unable to form words. I was quite shy and not forthcoming at that point. My nature was not confrontational, and the incident had me shocked - because I didn’t expect it from him.

I cannot even remember how many years ago this was. I was in my 20s and yet to find my voice. We had known each other from our school days. Our relationship was always friendly. We knew and had spent a lot of time together through our years of growing up. This incident took place when we were in our 20s. Both of us were friends and I still don’t know what came over him. Our
"I haven’t really ever spoken up about this incident before. I don’t think I could express how I felt that day. For years after, I would still have to see him. I didn’t like him at all and didn’t want to interact with him. But because we were both part of the community, I had to maintain a formal relationship of 'Hi, hello.'"
families knew each other too and spent a lot of time together. Our relationship had seen so much that I think I hesitated talking about this incident before. Especially because of all the fond memories I had of him. It is hard to bring something like this up when you have a history of a relationship that was mostly good. People tend to brush it off as a single incident but it left a huge impact on me.

In fact when this incident occurred, two of my friends - one disabled and one non disabled - were with us. We were taking a walk in a park near the river. They witnessed the whole thing. We (me and my friend) did discuss it later. They were both so taken aback that they had no words either. None of us knew how to react to the situation. Since none of us had expected it, we were left speechless. They told me to get over it. Imagine it was all a bad dream. At that point, it seemed like the best option. But the whole incident made me feel dirty and ashamed. It felt wrong.

I haven’t really ever spoken up about this incident before. I don’t think I could express how I felt that day. For years after, I would still have to see him. I didn’t like him at all and didn’t want to interact him. But because we were both part of the community, I had to maintain a formal relationship of hi, hello. The early years of interacting with him were very difficult for me and I wanted to run away. Now, years later, it is easier to interact with him.

To be honest, when the incident happened, I was confused. I didn’t know what to do, who to speak with, who to confide in or even how to frame this incident. I was young - so that could have played a role. Having known the man for so long had made me hesitant to bring it up in public or even with him.

These incidents I know are common for many women with disabilities. We are not taught about violence at all because it is not imagined that it will happen to us. This experience has stayed with me because of the many ways in which lines were crossed without hesitation by him. Over the years, I have found my voice and it has helped me to speak up when such incidents happen not just with me, but with other women with disabilities.
Back in 2009, in my university days, I used to volunteer for a cross-disability rights organisation in Pakistan where I live. He used to work as the manager there. A well-spoken, polite man who lived with Polio. I never really had much of a relationship with him but we were cordial and I felt safe at my workplace. I worked there for two years and went on with my life. There’s not much else to say about my time at the organisation; the two years of my student life were ordinary at best. I received my Masters degree in Media and Communication and began my career in the corporate sector as an enthusiastic professional excited about using my skills and experience to work for the social inclusion of persons with disabilities.

In the course of my work, three years ago, I got invited for a consultation for the development of the legislative process for persons with disabilities. At the time, we did not have the Pakistan Disability Act. A cross-disability rights organisation that organised this consultation had invited many stakeholders from the disability rights movement which included individuals and civil society.

I was in my favourite mall. I like that mall because of a certain level of basic accessibility for disabled people that they maintain, for example, several numbers of restrooms, elevators and escalators for those of us who can’t walk around too much or stand for long periods of time. There’s also easy readable digital maps on every corner and every zone of the mall is colour coded on every floor for those of us who are neurodivergent and get lost or distracted in a mall easily.

On this day, I was with my partner and we were shopping for household items. We were at a store called Home Centre when I passed two cisgender men, one of whom had a visible orthopedic disability. Since I have an orthopedic disability too, we exchanged a glance and a nod of understanding. At least that’s what I thought it was until 10 minutes later. I saw that the two men had followed us around the store. My brain said that maybe it was a coincidence and we just happened to be in the same area, I mean that happens all the time right? No need to worry. 10 more minutes later, I was sitting and resting on a couch at a waiting area for my partner and the store attendant to check on some shopping request, and suddenly the two men appeared and sat across from me.
"I think that cis disabled men often don’t understand queerness and they feel that they have some sort of liberty to say/do whatever they want when they encounter disabled women. I don’t want to feel that way but we cannot deny that patriarchy and toxic masculinity invades the disability community as well."
The one with the disability started introducing himself, talking about his disability, commenting about mine and asking intrusive questions to me. Instantly my stomach felt queasy and I remembered something a mentor of mine had taught me about “trusting your gut” when it comes to encounters with men. Within a couple of minutes of them arriving, I got up immediately and excused myself politely. I don’t remember clearly but I might have told him my first name, even though later I was sure I did not.

After I found partner, we left that store and it was after about an hour or so when we were headed to a coffee shop that I spotted the same men following us around the huge mall. I felt a surge of frustration, headed towards them and told them off "aapko aur koi kaam nahi hai kya?!" (Do you have no other work?) I didn’t wait for an answer and rushed off. I felt panicky and wanted to leave the mall. We encountered the men 2-3 times more where the disabled man would say stuff like "Aapse 5 minute kuch important baat karni hai" (I want to talk to you about something important for just 5 minutes) and “please ma'am" and "kuchh inspiration lena hai aapka" (I want to get some inspiration from you) in a very creepy way.

I know that many people would say that it’s no big deal, that it's just a conversation, and maybe some would go ahead and just talk to him to be polite. Maybe some courageous women would just tell him directly to shut up and leave us alone. But I have constantly failed at courage when being intimidated at a real life situations no matter how much courage I read about online. But I was just exhausted and kept ignoring his presence.

When I returned home that night, I checked my phone and that disabled man had found me on all my social media accounts and sent me creepy messages. I blocked him and many weeks later, he would message me from other accounts.

This whole situation did not shock me or make me uncomfortable because this is not the first time or even the worst instance where I felt mentally and physically violated by a disabled man. I have reached a point where I actively avoid interacting or looking at cis disabled men because I don't want them to get "the wrong idea" or whatever. I think that cis disabled men often don't understand queerness and they feel that they have some sort of liberty to say/do whatever they want when they encounter disabled women. I don't want to feel that way but we cannot deny that patriarchy and toxic masculinity invades the disability community as well.

Shivangi (@DisabledSpice) is a queer and disability activist. She works as an accessibility consultant, policy advisor, researcher, facilitator and a graffiti artist with a collective called Determined Art Movement (D.A.M.).
HE TOOK AWAY MY VOICE

ANONYMOUS, COLOMBIA

In the disability and human rights movement in Colombia, various aggressive behaviours against participating women are carefully covered up. Usually, the opinion of a man has more weight than that of a woman. Tasks and responsibilities are divided according to patriarchal rules that affect all power relations and dynamics at the workplace. Women must serve, support, protect and rarely can we lead, debate or question what managers, who are mostly men, do. Medical science, with regards to physical or mental health, is used to delegitimize the opinions of women and their participation. Usually, the work of women is not remunerated but maximum efforts are demanded, regardless of the disabilities, other conditions and economic situations. The psychiatrization of women is used to justify aggressive and discriminatory behaviours regarding their participation, as well as to create a bad reputation for them if they come forward to report sexual or work harassment, which causes immense damage at a psychological level, affecting trust in others and the desire to continue activism. Other pseudo-religious organizations, such as Scientology, infiltrate associations of psychiatric patients to offer false psychological therapies that are actually decoys to attract very vulnerable people and destroy their lives to incorporate them into those sects. They have also deceptively recruited
"THE PSYCHIATRIZATION OF WOMEN IS USED TO JUSTIFY AGGRESSIVE AND DISCRIMINATORY BEHAVIORS REGARDING THEIR PARTICIPATION, AS WELL AS TO CREATE A BAD REPUTATION FOR THEM IF THEY COME FORWARD TO REPORT SEXUAL OR WORK HARASSMENT, WHICH CAUSES IMMENSE DAMAGE AT A PSYCHOLOGICAL LEVEL, AFFECTING TRUST IN OTHERS AND THE DESIRE TO CONTINUE ACTIVISM."
prominent activists, who are unaware of the evil nature of these sects and who have not received support from recognized organizations.

In 2007 I joined a large mental health organisation in Bogotá. Within the organisation, women are targeted, their participation is restricted. They are made fun of for exhibiting behaviours typical of their ailments. On many occasions, I witnessed naturalized sexual harassment in social interaction, without anyone speaking out at this lack of respect. Around that time, a young woman became the victim of an attempted rape inside the apartment of one of the leaders, who later was president of this association for several years. She was unable to report the incident and was verbally abused and slandered until she had to leave. I had to endure verbal sexual harassment by that man, but he had such support that there was no point in complaining. When I had to meet him at his apartment a couple of times for work, I made sure he knew that my family was aware of my location. Alerted by experience, his violent behaviour drifted to work. He wanted to take advantage of my work in documentary research for his benefit. He humiliated me in front of psychiatrists and patients; he created problems for me with people from the same organisation and he took away my voice at events. Just because he was the president, and a man. He used a patient to call my house to threaten me that if I continued to speak ill publicly, they could forcibly hospitalise me. After the incident, I publicly retired from that organised, in 2014.

But earlier, in 2007, through the organisation I contacted a psychologist who was misleading because he was from the Scientology sect. For nearly three years, he emotionally manipulated me until he caused me profound harm and used his knowledge of hypnosis to try to convince me that the origin of the childhood trauma I still endure was imaginary. It increased my anxiety and to conceal it, he recommended that I take psychiatric medication. In 2010, he abruptly stopped the drugs and this caused a serious crisis. I had to go to hospital and suffered more violence in Bogotá. I could not report as no one would have believed me. My family too collapsed and split up for some time, and they blamed me for everything that happened.

The psychologist was a friend of an influential director of a foundation in Colombia. He recommended me because I needed a job, but he wanted to use me to spy. This man, recognized as a co-chairman of the board of an important worldwide mental health organisations network, displayed a warm and enveloping personality in appearance—but he proved to be highly destructive, unscrupulous, manipulative, and knowledgeable of the suggestive techniques of the psychologist. It is known that he raped a woman in Asia but escaped from the authorities. I joined his organisation in 2009 as a volunteer, without knowing the underlying risks.

After hospitalization, he offered me help to report the psychologist, he also assigned me work in his foundation and in representative spaces. First, he just
like the psychologist did. Then he emotionally assaulted me and revealed details about the relationship to many people to damage my image. At the same time, he did these things with other women in the organisation to obtain loyalty, complicity, free work, and financial resources. He squandered the money he received from donations and did not keep any accounting or financial reports.

I tried so hard, but he never kept his promise or paid for my work. On the contrary, he demerited my work, and demanded, in exchange, support to become a coordinator in a network of disability organizations in Bogotá that I give him half the salary that they were going to pay me, I refused to do so and he tried to force me without success. I questioned their irregular financial management in a letter that I published for the other members and I endured great hostility. He claimed that I owed him money for an alleged donation to travel to Buenos Aires.

I made him sign my resignation.

He is still after me on social networks. He harmed the spread of my Facebook posts, infiltrated my accounts with false profiles to try to damage my independent work and my private business. He has harassed me on phone and schemed with people from a Latin American network to defame me with false accusations about my intimate behaviour, lies about the women in his foundation and other organisations that still defend him.
NOT HERE FOR OPTICS; WE HAVE A VOICE

LIZZIE KIAMA

When I started my career as a young woman and a disability rights activist in Kenya, like most young people, I took all the help I could get. A tightly knit community such as the disability community, is often thought to be a safe space, and it was to an extent.

In Kenya, the leadership in the disability community comprises predominantly men as is probably the case with most movements barring a few. The social and cultural predominance of a few groups, ironically enough, is also sustained inside movements trying to dismantle these hegemonies. This means resources like money, social and cultural capital, etc. are not equitably distributed amongst these communities either.

As a young activist, I needed these resources in order to do my work. I needed partnerships with people who have been doing this work for a long time, people who were leaders in the disability rights field.

A few years ago, I was invited to an embassy in Kenya for an event on disability
"This isn’t about that one incident; or about that one man. Instances like these have been commonplace. Little touches here and there, being too in your physical space. Nothing you could squarely point out and lay blame. Advances that are thought to barest minimum in terms of harassment; things one could fluidly brush away as ‘just being friendly’ or ‘that’s not what they meant, you must have misunderstood.’"
rights. A very prominent national organisation was there to talk about funding opportunities. A disabled man, with whom I was pursuing a work collaboration very seriously, spotted me and sat down next to me. I had a glass of wine in my hand. I remember thinking he was too close for comfort. We were just having a conversation, there was no need to sit so close to me. There was absolutely no need to put his hand on my knee. It was a social event, however, and I didn’t want to rub him the wrong way. I felt like there was nothing I could do at that moment since this was being done so openly. I waited to see if he removed his hand but it stayed there for a bit. There was no way for me to ask him to remove his hand without embarrassing or offending him. I chose to withdraw from the partnership later. I felt like he was trying to tell me that to continue I would have to be open to touches like this.

This isn’t about that one incident; or about that one man. Instances like these have been commonplace. Little touches here and there, being too in your physical space. Nothing you could squarely point out and lay blame. Advances that are thought to barest minimum in terms of harassment; things one could fluidly brush away as ‘just being friendly’ or ‘that’s not what they meant, you must have misunderstood’.

As a young activist, it made sense for me to reach out to the leadership in the community for partnerships. They all started out the same way. They liked my ideas but the process of following up was exhausting. Multiple face to face meetings and a plethora of run-arounds. It always seemed to me that men in the community tended to treat women as ‘flowers’; as less than. Merely there for optics but without a voice. It has always been a power thing in that way and harassment thrives in such an environment.

In Kenya, specifically in the disability community, we have not been very vocal about the sexuality or the sexual rights of persons with disabilities. At least not in the public domain. So when it comes to speaking about sexual harassment, I find that there is no prelude to that conversation. Maybe for this reason, women with disabilities have not had this conversation even amongst themselves. Not having this conversation also feels like violence. In traditional workplaces, in Kenya, similarly, there are a lot of blurred lines. While speaking about sexual rights is not commonplace, sexual innuendo and banter certainly is. Maybe it’s something we cultivated culturally, but it becomes hard to make a distinction between the personal and the professional.

Disability spaces in this regard, are similarly set up but for different reasons. Disability is an extremely personal experience, however, you have to lean on people, quite literally, for assistance. It again leaves a lot of room for lines to get blurred. With the addition of power into this mix, there is a lot of dangling bait in the community. To ‘succeed’, you have to keep asking. To be able to get somewhere, to be able to access resources, these men want you to reduce yourself; to succumb to their demands. It’s almost like a rite of passage. If you want to be relevant in the community, you have to look the other way. This was
not where I saw myself. I have since pulled out from many partnerships and collaborations. I have found other ways and strategies of achieving my goals.

Lizzie Kiama is the managing trustee of This Ability, an organisation that works on advancing the rights of women and girls with disabilities in Nairobi, Kenya.