

Our Ability Beyond our Disability

Challenges, struggles, and triumphs of women with disabilities navigating the city of Phnom Penh



An initiative of 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories



This publication is a collaboration between Nika's Seeing Hands Massage Therapy Center and Women Peace Makers.

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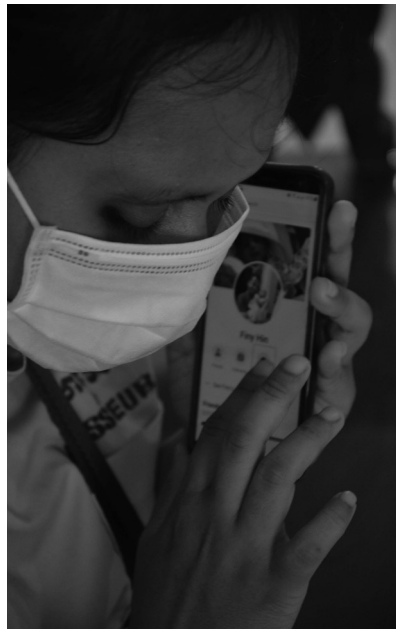
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This title is also available online and in a special audio format to provide accessibility for blind and visually impaired audiences.



Assumptions in check

Do not judge a book by its cover before you get to the pages

Nika Tath

We are those people you see in the blind massage shops. Take your choice whether you view us as successful entrepreneurs and experts in physical therapy with our seeing hands, or as limited service providers with little choice in career advancement. We are the singers in the streets that you can either see as artists or performers, or as beggars and panhandlers. We are the servers you meet in that trendy blind restaurant, that you either perceive as disabled, or suddenly realise are more abled than you when they take your hand and lead you into the pitch black. We are the students you sit beside in class, that you see as an incredible inspiration for overcoming barriers, or a hindrance that asks for so much extra help who cannot do more with a book than hold it. The way that you view us determines whether you first see our disabilities, or our special abilities.

There is a blind and visually impaired community in Phnom Penh and throughout Cambodia. We are active. We are diverse. Whether you see us or not, we exist and are part of a larger society. To understand our community, our culture, and us as people, it is crucial to put away assumptions

you might have and try for a moment to lose sense of your vision. You see us, but we do not see you. But we hear, smell, and feel you. We can sense things stronger in many ways.

I am the first female blind massage therapist in Cambodia. I experienced multiple barriers growing up as a blind girl, and I continued to face barriers as a blind woman, even within the blind community. I was a devout student, spending years and years learning the most advanced techniques in anma and shiatsu massage in Japan and elsewhere. Through my own learning, I transformed into a teacher in my own right. I went around the world to teach others how to employ massage therapy techniques and to begin their own businesses as blind social entrepreneurs. In spite of my own growth, I continue to face stereotypes in my native Phnom Penh - both in terms of having a disability and being a woman.

Beyond my story are so many other stories that define the life of being a woman with a disability. I had the gift to listen to eleven other stories that challenged my own opinions and



Nika Tath

Founder and Owner of Nika's Seeing Hands Massage Therapy Center

Advocate for women with disabilities in Cambodia and around the world

pushed me to think beyond my perceptions of who we are as women with disabilities. I talked to incredible women who are leading their lives with dignity and pride. I talked to others who have experienced such tragedy and hardship. I had conversations with some women that have taken leadership in so many different ways and have real ideas on how to improve the lives of women with disabilities in Phnom Penh.

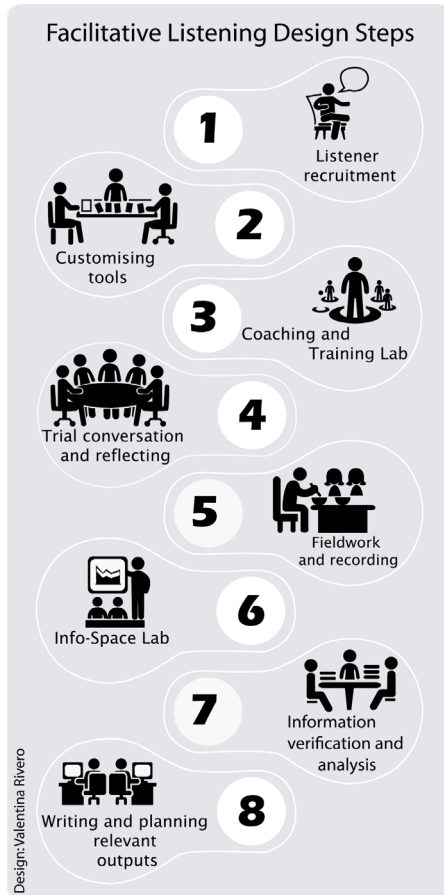
The community-based process of Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) is intuitive for blind and visually impaired people. For some of us, listening is one of our special abilities. We can hear things that others may not. We understand you more based on your voice than what your eyes look like. By using our own tools for accessibility, such as braille text, JAWS screen readers, or VoiceOver on our iPhones, we can not only carry out FLD, but we can excel at truly listening to what is being said. Not only are the words being analysed, but so are the tones, the pauses, and the intonation that tell us so much more.

This piece of work from the lives of eleven women feeds into the larger context of 41 doubly marginalised women living in Phnom Penh. It brings our voices into the collection and also shows that we have a lot in common with our rural, Indigenous, and survivors-of-violence sisters that live together with us in this vibrant and complex urban society. I hope that as you read the challenges and barriers we face as blind and visually impaired women in Phnom Penh, you also hear our powerful request to see our abilities beyond our disabilities. To fully disclose my own biases in becoming involved in this work and in my role as a leader "listening" to her own community, I must reveal my great wish to expose false assumptions about us. People with disabilities are not just living, sleeping, eating, and hiding in their homes. I believe that the findings from this work help us to challenge persistent stereotypes and I proudly present my community to you through this initiative led by us. I guarantee that you will be inspired by what we can accomplish if you give us that chance.

The Study

This study provides a snapshot into the multiple barriers that women with disabilities in Cambodia face and the coping strategies they employ in their lives navigating the city of Phnom Penh. As part of a larger endeavour to capture narratives of intersectionality among women with disabilities, rural-to-urban migrant women, Indigenous women, and women facing violence, this

subsection of the study explores the lives, experiences, and perspectives of women with disabilities through a qualitative information gathering methodology known as Facilitative Listening Design (FLD). An evolving peace research approach, FLD was chosen for this work largely for its advantage in providing the space for informal sharing on sensitive issues in local community contexts.



The Methodology

Facilitative Listening Design is an innovative adaptation of Listening Methodology. It is an “insider” human-to-human centred approach to better understand prevailing dynamics and explore sensitive topics that make for difficult conversations. It encourages deeper critical thinking and leverages the process to bring together groups at odds with each other and find solutions to protracted negative attitudes, stereotypes, or sentiment. It maintains the rigorous procedural and information-checking steps in conducting listening research, but puts a stronger emphasis on gaining relatively in-depth insight into a topic as a snapshot at a given moment.

The advantage in this context is that it can be carried out quickly and respond to situations in a timely manner. It is also discrete. Conversations can happen in private or can be informal in nature to provide anonymity to the participants. There is no need to connect any recorded information to the individuals who participated as all documentation happens after and away from where conversations took place. The conversational style of information-gathering can be employed nearly anywhere, even in extremely sensitive environments where conducting more traditional research, using audio recording or questionnaires, may not be feasible. With no need for papers or devices, participants can blend into different environments and engage with people simply as people rather than research participants. It can also be adapted to a range of cultural needs and

communication styles depending on the context and the groups involved.

The general procedure of a Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) approach was carried out to better understand thoughts and opinions of four doubly marginalised groups including women with disabilities, rural-to-urban migrant women, Indigenous Women, and women facing violence. Eight general steps guided the process from design to implementation.¹ One important adaptation of FLD in this specific study was the customised data gathering method specifically used for blind and visually impaired Listeners. Traditionally, FLD is heavily focused on writing what was heard from the conversation in tools that are designed for the specific intervention. Given that the blind and visually impaired Listeners could not rely on writing, a post-conversation recording methodology was arranged. Following the conversations, the Listeners individually recorded their reflection of the conversation they had on their handheld devices and uploaded them into an online repository. This meant that the data collected was less structured than other FLD interventions that employ the usual method of writing summarised conversations into a written template. However, once collected and transcribed, the data from the blind and visually impaired women was still able to be coded and categorised by themes developed by the Listeners. This evolution of FLD is a major contribution and expands the possibilities of how it can be implemented in a range of different settings and contexts.

¹ For a detailed understanding of FLD methodology, refer to The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Design For Your Project (October 2017) provided at <http://wpmcambodia.org/project/the-fl-d-handbook>.

The Demographics

This study is a limited subsection of a main study involving 41 conversations with doubly marginalised women. This component includes individual conversations with eleven women who are referred to as Sharers. The conversations were carried out by two information gatherers referred to as Listeners. The Listeners come directly from the communities they are seeking to understand. They decided to focus specifically on blind and visually impaired women in Phnom Penh in order to gain a deeper understanding on issues related to barriers and strengths from lack of vision. One Listener was blind and one was visually impaired. Reaching into their own network, they engaged with eleven other women with visual disabilities.

A Listener Profile

One of the important people in this project was Chomrern, a visually impaired woman who joined as a Listener to hear the stories and thoughts of other women with disabilities. Chomrern mainly works at home, taking care of her family, including a child. She was motivated to join the FLD initiative to have a chance to get out of her house and talk to people in similar situations. Although she had worked casually helping people clean their homes and wash clothes, she saw this project as a new job and an opportunity to learn more.

Chomrern says that working as a team was important and that listening to other blind and visually impaired women in Phnom Penh was a learning experience. It not only got her outside of her usual routine in the house, but also helped her to understand society more broadly. Reflecting on her conversations, Chomrern shared a message for all women with disabilities to be strong, and to never give up - even in the face of discrimination.





The Findings

Initial findings of FLD were analysed by the Listeners themselves based on the data they collected and the themes they heard the most during their fieldwork. Through a process of early analysis, the following findings emerged among the conversations had between Listeners and Sharers.

Women with disabilities (blind and visually impaired)

Emerging themes

1. We often face stereotypes and discrimination for our physical disability from both our families and the communities we live in.
2. Our inability to see makes us especially vulnerable to sexual harassment, abuse, labour exploitation, trafficking, and other types of violence.
3. We often feel unloved, not cared for, not listened to, and useless in society.
4. We want others to understand about our needs so we can have a lifestyle just like everyone else.
5. We want others to see our value and our ability rather than focus on our disability.
6. There is a major lack of resources, public services, facilities, and other necessities to meet our needs - leading to exclusion.
7. Our employment options are limited and most of the work we do is not valued by society.
8. We feel hopeless without encouragement and feel pressure and control from our families.
9. Many of us dream about gaining specialised skills to become fully independent.

Discrimination at home and beyond

As a disabled woman, I face discrimination everywhere. Especially as a singer, people see me more like a beggar...

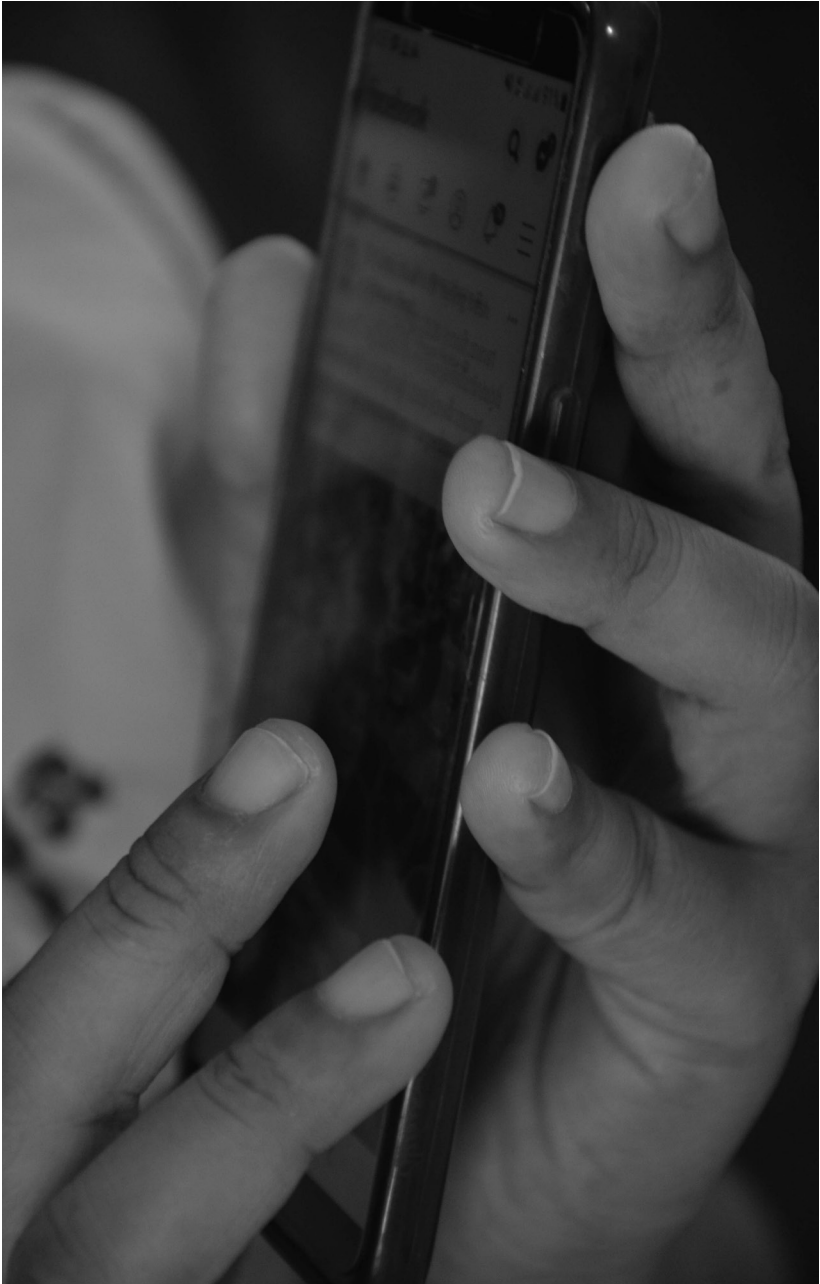
- A 32-year-old blind singer who moved from Kampong Speu province to work in Phnom Penh

Women with disabilities face everyday discrimination in Phnom Penh. Discrimination can begin with barriers that stem from lack of access in a city that was not planned or built to necessarily accommodate diverse disabilities. It can also be a part of people's attitudes towards them, not only by people unfamiliar with the needs of people with disabilities, but even from within families and those that are close to them.

All Sharers offered their stories and testimonies to paint a picture on the discrimination that blind and visually impaired women faced in their lives in the city. Many discussed discrimination inside their own families and communities. For example, some mentioned harsh words and discriminatory language used against them by relatives. Others said that their families would not support them because of their blindness. There were also cases in which the families of blind women would not allow them to do

what they desired because of their inability to see.

Structural discrimination was also frequently cited by Sharers. Lack of adequate toilet facilities meant that some had to ask fellow students or coworkers to help them use the washroom, sometimes causing tension or reaching a point when nobody would assist them anymore. Some discussed how their workplaces did not provide accessibility or were not willing to remove barriers for full inclusion in the workforce. Several also mentioned that general societal attitudes towards people with disabilities were negative and stereotypes, such as the inability of people with disabilities to work, contributed to systemic discrimination that especially affected women. Some even talked about a myth that blind people are contagious or bring bad luck which continues to persist in Cambodian society and leads to many forms of daily discrimination and stigma.



“We are disabled, but we are abled enough to do what we want.”

- A 26-year-old blind singer who divorced her blind husband due to lack of family support

Lack of sight makes us vulnerable

*The feeling of insecurity made me
move from one place to another.*

- A 21-year-old massage therapist who became
blind at 7 years old

Blind and visually impaired women are especially susceptible to sexual harassment, abuse, labour exploitation, human trafficking, and other forms of violence. Without sight, navigating society requires different skills and the reliance on other senses. As many blind and visually impaired women deeply desire independence and freedom, they continue to face unique barriers and particular dangers in an urban society.

Through storytelling, Sharers conveyed their vulnerability in society to the Listeners. Those working in the massage therapy industry talked particularly about sexual harassment and abuse. They shared cases of guests and clients harassing them and making unwanted

sexual advances towards them. For blind singers, harassment by authorities was sometimes mentioned in stories of being arrested for illegally singing in public.

The Sharers frequently discussed labour exploitation and told stories of their bosses or fellow employees forcing them to do things they did not want to do. One blind massage therapist told her story of a former boss who took her to a hotel to massage a client that took advantage of her. After reporting it, her boss refused to pay her salary. The situation for many blind women of feeling insecure in their work caused them to go from one workplace to another, experiencing different forms of exploitation and abuse.



“I want blind women to make good decisions before they act.”

-A blind massage therapist who was exploited by clients and her boss

We are seen as the unvalued burden

I don't want to get married again because I don't want my disability to be a burden to others and my family.

- A 31-year-old blind massage therapist who divorced her husband because of his family's pressure

Many women with disabilities feel an internalised sense of shame in being a burden to those around them. Blind and visually impaired women often feel unloved, uncared for, and even useless in the societies they live. This negative view of their lives can deeply affect them and their relationships with others and causes great sorrow and stress.

Several Sharers talked about their family lives and how perceptions of them affected how they saw themselves. Many confided that their parents did not support them and some said they were routinely shamed for being unable to support themselves at some point in their lives. Some said they had no voice in their families and communities, that their opinions were not validated by others. This was mentioned both in terms of parents and siblings as it was for spouses and children.

There were also numerous mentions about society in general and how Cambodians did not value blind and visually impaired people, and especially blind women. Some Sharers felt that as they aged, they had nobody to help them and others felt they could no longer ask for help, even such as asking fellow students to assist when doing assignments that required sight. Many negative perceptions were attributed to work and prevalent attitudes that the blind were a burden on society. Some expressed that working for a boss with sight could be a great challenge if they could not understand or empathise with their situation. Others who worked with blind or visually impaired bosses felt there was often more understanding and empowerment. Overall, the blind and visually impaired Sharers felt sadness and despair when reflecting on the weight of societal perceptions of them.



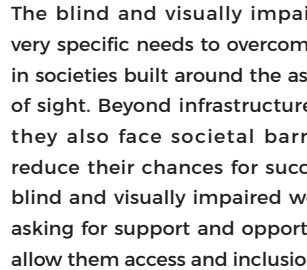
*“Even though
we are blind,
our minds
can see.”*

- A 35-year-old blind woman who sings and sells things
to earn money

We need you to understand what we need

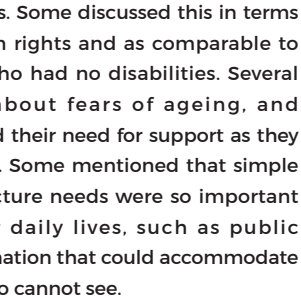
I would like the government to pay more attention to us and take care of people with disabilities because whenever we have problems, we don't know where to ask for help...

- A 42-year-old blind massage therapist who moved from Prey Veng province to Phnom Penh



The blind and visually impaired have very specific needs to overcome barriers in societies built around the assumption of sight. Beyond infrastructure barriers, they also face societal barriers that reduce their chances for success. Most blind and visually impaired women are asking for support and opportunities to allow them access and inclusion.

Many Sharers were very clear in talking about what they needed to achieve success. Basic supports such as money, employment, and education were at the top of the list. Gaining practical skills and having access to jobs were mentioned by blind and visually impaired women in all careers. Some discussed this in terms of human rights and as comparable to others who had no disabilities. Several talked about fears of ageing, and expressed their need for support as they get older. Some mentioned that simple infrastructure needs were so important for their daily lives, such as public transportation that could accommodate those who cannot see.





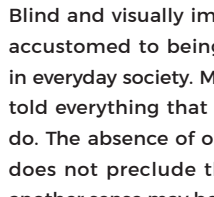
*“If we let our
blindness
take over
our lives,
we’d only
stay at home
forever...”*

- A blind Sharer in the project who is married to a
blind man and has a daughter

Look at our “ability” above our “disability”

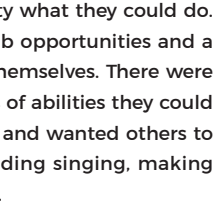
*Give us a chance. If you don't give us
a chance you won't know our capacity.
Please see our ability rather than
disability.*

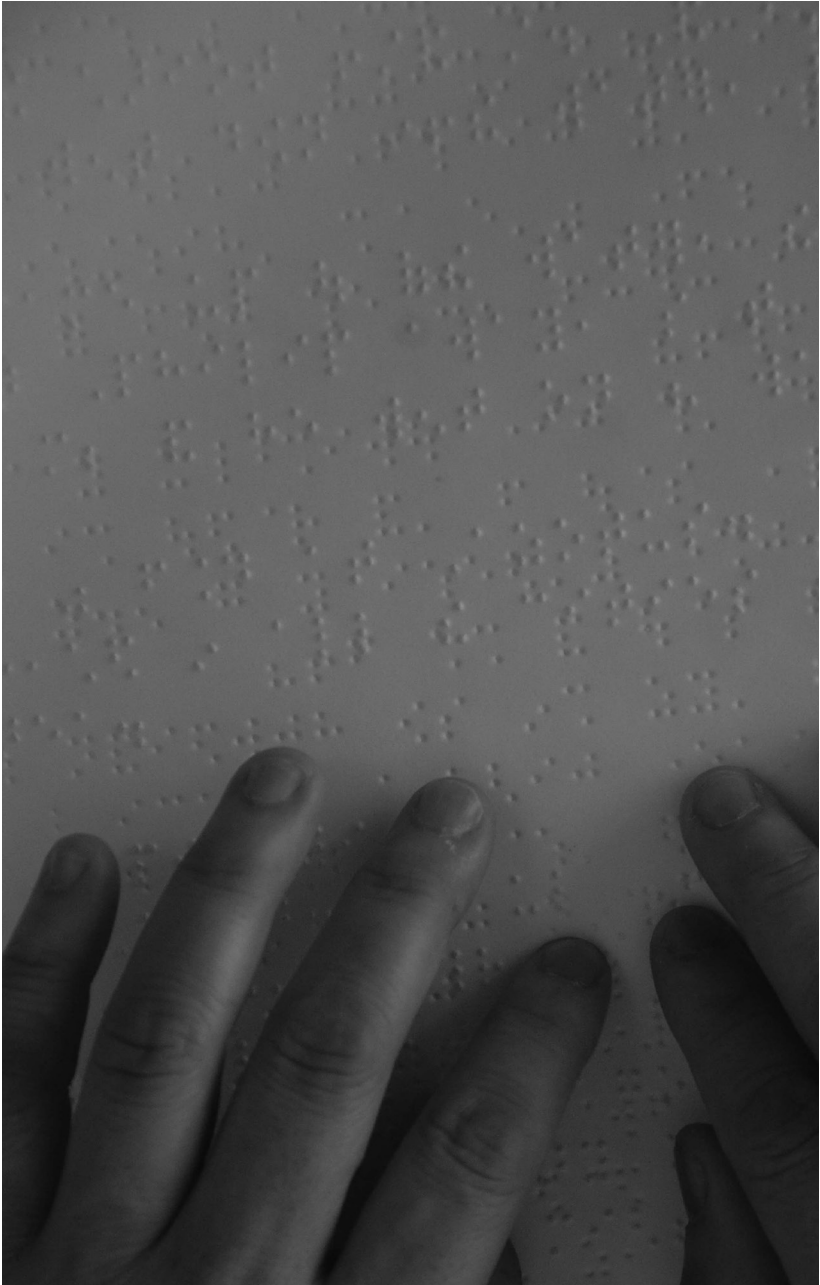
- A 35-year-old blind singer who moved from
Siem Reap to Phnom Penh to gain new skills



Blind and visually impaired women are accustomed to being seen as disabled in everyday society. Many grow up being told everything that they are unable to do. The absence of one sense, however, does not preclude the possibility that another sense may be heightened.

Given that most of the Sharers in the study were either massage therapists or singers, their use of alternate senses (touch and acoustics) were notable. Several emphasised both directly and indirectly that their skills and abilities were more important than their disabilities and that perpetual stereotypes otherwise played into discrimination and barriers to opportunities. There was a concerted desire among Sharers to show mainstream society what they could do. Some called for job opportunities and a chance to prove themselves. There were also real examples of abilities they could do independently and wanted others to know about including singing, making wine, and cooking.





“Girls, we might be blind but it might be them who actually can’t see. We have seeing hands, we take care of their pains, and we feel their problems with our powers of touch. Remind them whenever you face a barrier. Your ability makes you special.”

- A Listener from the project who runs a massage therapy centre with blind staff providing services to residents and tourists in Phnom Penh

Our barriers are real and make everything harder

There is a major lack of resources to support us at university because blind students like us cannot read textbooks like other seeing students. We need our own types of textbooks to touch and understand.

- A blind 23-year-old first year university student who came from Kampong Speu province to study in the city after graduating from a blind and deaf school

Most people with sight take for granted the way the physical world is laid out assuming that everyone can see. The blind and visually impaired navigate their worlds through an entirely different way. They often come across very obvious barriers that prevent their inclusion and limit their ability to succeed.

Sharers provided insight into barriers they face at a daily level in their lives. Key resources, public services, infrastructure and facilities, and other specific necessities were highlighted in conversations by the eleven women. They talked about their experiences in schools and using public services.

They talked about transportation challenges and difficulties walking around without bumping into other people or things. Several discussed learning and information gathering challenges, specifically about the inability to read. There was also mention about the challenges in eating in public and the wish for others to understand the difficulties they face. One Sharer highlighted differences in inclusivity in other areas of Cambodia, sharing that she had to move from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh because of the lack of support there to gain skills as a woman with a disability.

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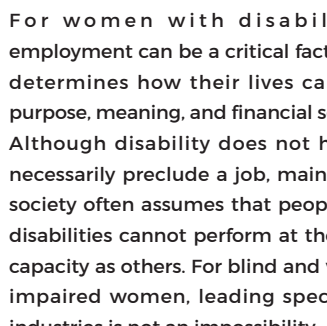
“Even though we were born as people with disabilities, we can still learn skills and work to support our families and ourselves.”

- A 37-year-old blind massage therapist who works to support herself and live an independent life

Work is our lifeline

Being employed is the first priority for people with disabilities because we do not have the money to support our basic needs

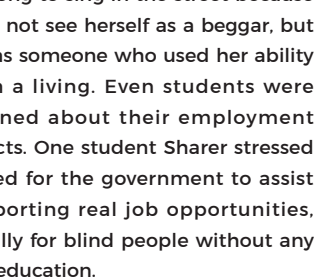
- A 28-year-old blind massage therapist who worries about getting older as she has nobody to take care of her



For women with disabilities, employment can be a critical factor that determines how their lives can have purpose, meaning, and financial security. Although disability does not have to necessarily preclude a job, mainstream society often assumes that people with disabilities cannot perform at the same capacity as others. For blind and visually impaired women, leading specialised industries is not an impossibility.

Of the eleven Sharers in the study, seven were employed while the four others were students. Among the employed, they were working or had worked in the blind massage industry, as singers, or selling products. They stressed the importance of their work and being able to earn a living to provide for their needs. Although some talked about personal success in their employment

paths, several discussed the negative perceptions they confronted regarding their industries. Massage therapists confided in situations that associated their work with the sex industry which was unwanted. Singers talked about great challenges in being able to perform without harassment or negative attitudes. One Sharer even asked the Listeners she spoke with whether she was wrong to sing in the street because she did not see herself as a beggar, but rather as someone who used her ability to earn a living. Even students were concerned about their employment prospects. One student Sharer stressed the need for the government to assist in supporting real job opportunities, especially for blind people without any formal education.





*“Blind
people are
also human
beings!”*

- A blind massage therapist who has moved around the
country in search of a good workplace

Without family support, we have little hope

My husband is also disabled so our families do not support us. They think because we are both blind we cannot do anything. We decided to leave our families and work as singers.

- A blind singer who has a daughter

A family's response to a child with a disability will largely affect the life of that individual. Family attitudes towards disability are often based on both societal norms and personal perceptions. Will a family take on a strong caretaker role or will it push for a disabled child's independence? Will the child be sheltered and protected or encouraged to go out and explore? Each family's response will be different, and each person with a disability will be impacted by that upbringing and their long term relationship with both their parents and siblings, as well as their potential partners and children.

Many conversations between Sharers and Listeners turned towards the issue of family. Some felt that their own immediate families discriminated against them and shared feelings of

distress and hopelessness. Others said that they did not feel supported by their families which sometimes pushed them to seek out their own independence. Some blind women mentioned that a common stereotype of children with disabilities being a burden on their families also affected their relationships and made them try harder to feel useful. There were also Sharers who felt great support and love from their families who took care of them even as they reached adulthood. For adult women who had formed a relationship or had children, support and love from them as well as from the partner's family were noted as important. Some women who had become involved with blind partners encountered difficulties with extended families who felt that a blind couple may not be able to live independently.



“I have eleven siblings, six of us are blind... I have faced discrimination from neighbours and friends but I try not to worry about it and keep studying hard and improving myself more and more.”

- A mature highschool student in Phnom Penh who came from Siem Reap province.

We have dreams

My dream is to be a teacher because I want to teach others how to stop discriminating against us. I want the government to encourage blind people and students to keep learning. I want to see all women with disabilities as future leaders.

- A visually impaired orphan from Takeo province
who studies in Phnom Penh

Women with disabilities have dreams like everyone else.

All Sharers took time in their conversations to discuss their dreams and hopes. Many shared their career dreams which were tied to their independence and success. A majority discussed their ambitions to attain the necessary skills to achieve their goals. Women working in the massage industry or hoping to enter it talked about the desire to receive high quality training or certification inside Cambodia. Some also elaborated on their dreams to own their own massage therapy centres and to explore social entrepreneurship and business through their massage skills.

Several singers dreamt about gaining skills in another field so they would not have to be dependent on singing as a profession. Again, they provided massage and weaving as alternative examples. Students often dreamt about careers after studies, hoping for a good job and more study opportunities. Interestingly, several Sharers shared the same dream of being a teacher in some capacity, teaching others in different subjects. Beyond career and study, some blind women also shared personal dreams for a society in which discrimination and violence was no longer present, and more opportunities were available to them to grow and thrive in Cambodian society.



*“I want to see
women with
disabilities
becoming
future
leaders.”*

- A visually impaired woman who is studying in high school



This initiative would not be possible without the generous support of Voice.



Our Ability Beyond our Disability is a snapshot into the challenges, struggles, hopes, and dreams of women with disabilities living in the city of Phnom Penh. Part of a collaborative initiative known as 4 Women, 4 Communities, 4 Stories, this component draws on the stories and reflections of eleven blind and visually impaired women led by two blind leaders who aspire to not only change their lives, but to change the way others see them. The larger initiative explores intersectionality among doubly marginalised including rural women in the city, Indigenous women, women facing violence, and these women with disabilities who all reside in Phnom Penh and carry out their lives in an urban context.

This publication examines the findings of blind and visually impaired women who work as massage therapists, singers, or study in the city. Following the implementation of Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), a participatory community research approach that connects “Listeners” to “Sharers” in deep conversation, these findings provide a glimpse into the minds and experiences of women who cannot rely on sight to navigate their lives. Direct messages from the women themselves also gift readers with genuine insights and petitions to see things from their point of view, or rather feel things from their hearts.

