

The silenced voices

By Anastasia Prikhodko

Voices of disabled women and children are, in many circumstances, left unheard. Lanie Stockman from [Save the Children Australia](#) spoke at the conference about her research on children with disabilities in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea – the first data of its kind to fill an evident gap in knowledge.

At the beginning of the research, the children were asked three important questions: What is important to you? What are your hopes and dreams for the future? What would make your life better or happier? – questions that children should be asked frequently.

Lanie illustrated the priorities, concerns and dreams of children with disabilities, in order to give them a chance to speak and participate. The results of this type of research help organisations, governments and service providers to understand their needs and therefore alter, design and deliver more effective services to these children.

Lanie proposed a number of ideas, which could also be integrated into Western schools, and pre-schools. For example, the researchers in Vanuatu asked a visually-impaired individual about what they could use instead of a picture library for children. The outcome was trialing a 'story in a bag' idea, where everyday objects were put into a bag and used as conversation prompts. Ultimately the research is about suiting children's way of communication and enabling them to participate.

Following on from this, Suharto Suharto from Griffith University and an [Australia Award](#) scholar, talked about strategies in moving the focus away from the physical and practical aspects of what an individual may *not* be able to do to, and instead focusing on achieving inclusion of the impaired. Suharto advocated the word "diffability" as a replacement for 'disability'.

Joanne Crawford of the [International Women's Development Agency](#) talked about the research conducted with women with disabilities in Cambodia. Disability creates further challenges for women – with gender inequality already a prevalent issue; there are many complications related to child bearing, household duties and the overall expectations of women and their duties.

Domestic violence experienced by women with disabilities has been found to be much greater than that experienced by women without disabilities. Family members – in particular, parents – have been found to be the gatekeepers and perpetrators of violence towards women with disabilities within the household. With over 10 percent of women with disabilities attempting suicide, this is a crisis which evidently needs further attention from the government and foreign aid workers.

However, Joanne noted that while there is not a lot of evidence about disability, but the evidence that does exist highlights the issue of voice. Overcoming this lack of voice – particularly when vulnerabilities and threats such as domestic violence are involved, may be the greatest challenge.

Joanne left us with some final words that particularly stood out for me: "Inclusion isn't just about being invited into the sandpit that someone else has set – it's about setting the agenda."

