

Nigeria gathering inspires courage among women with disabilities



Photo: Ayoko Bahun-Wilson/WCC

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“Before being identified as a person with disability, you are a woman with the same rights,” said Hellen Anurika Udoye Beyioku-Alase, a young woman with a disability.

She was among some 70 women who gathered at the Swiss International Hotel in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, on 22-23 June around the theme “Women with Disabilities, Sexual Reproductive Health and HIV.”

Women with disabilities shared their views, experiences and good practices on their vulnerability to the risks of emotional, physical, economic and sexual abuse during the conference, which was supported by the World Council of Churches Ecumenical HIV and AIDS Initiatives and Advocacy and Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network.

Planned for 50 women, more than 70 women (who are blind, deaf, mute or with various types of physical challenges, many using wheelchairs, crutches and canes) from the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) and the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) regrouped under the umbrella of BOLD (Beautiful Outstanding Ladies with disabilities) Hearts Network. They met to reflect on their challenges and sexuality in order to be able to reach out to others with positive messages on disability, body image, and HIV.

According to the World Bank Group, one billion people, or 15% of the world's population, experience some form of disability. It is increasingly recognized that persons with disabilities are often more vulnerable to HIV infection for a variety of reasons. From this perspective, participants discussed body image and sexuality.

The women also learned negotiating skills and assertiveness to help overcome their challenges in communicating about sexuality. They also observed Thursdays in Black, a campaign against sexual and gender-based violence, followed by a contextual Bible study.

Feeling they had a “safe space” in which to communicate, participants committed to appoint regional representatives of the BOLD Hearts Network in Nigeria to reach out to women with disabilities in churches and engage them in training to create more awareness, and reduce vulnerability and stigmatization.

A team from the Presbyterian Community Services and Development was on the ground to offer free HIV testing and counseling, helping to build on the campaign “Know your status,” an initiative that encourages organizations across the country to help more people learn their HIV status.

The women adopted a slogan - Bold Ladies, Bold Heart - in order to inspire continued discussions and encourage other women with disabilities to live a fruitful life.

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