The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world that we live in almost instantaneously. It has had far reaching effects, from pushing struggling healthcare systems to the brink, to decimating the business sector and even forcing the cancellation of major global sporting events to mitigate the spread of the virus. “Overnight my dreams of going to Japan to participate in the Paralympics was gone. Three years of hard work, honing my tennis skills and the long hours my team members and I had put in to represent our country in the Summer Olympics, just evaporated.” But Charity is used to overcoming ‘small obstacles’ as she calls them. Being diagnosed with cancer at the tender age of 14, a bicycle accident led to her right leg being amputated just above the knee, Charity Masango starts each day with a blessing and gratitude for waking up to each new day with a renewed purpose to make a difference in the lives of others.

Her Olympic dreams deferred for now, Charity remains steadfast in what she believes is her more important role as a young person living with a disability in Zimbabwe, which is to ensure that young women and girls are in control of their sexual reproductive health, through proper access to SRHR and HIV prevention services. “Education about your sexual health and rights is very important for a young person, but it’s even more so for a person who is disabled.” For Charity, her aim is to inspire a generation of young girls and women just like her to be in control of their sexual health and pleasure. “I want them to know what precautions are available to them and to ensure that they are practicing safe sex, with the right contraceptive methods that suit them and their sexual health.”

But being differently abled remains a challenge with many facing daily stereotyping and stigmatisation. “I always say, that having a disability does not mean that I don’t have ability.” Charity believes that it’s her calling to educate society, that disabled people have so much more to offer and given the space can play a meaningful role in society, as wives, mothers or work colleagues. It is one of her ambitions to one day raise a family of her own and continue her advocacy work in fighting for the rights of those who are disabled in other countries, and has her sights set on Dubai or Japan. “At first when I lost my leg, it was a big hit to me and my family, but especially my mother who really struggled that her daughter was now disabled. But over the years my family have seen how independent and strong I have become and they are now my biggest supporters.”

“I love working with young girls and helping them to build up their self-esteem. It’s really important for a young person who is disabled. Your whole world can change and you have to figure out how you are going to fit into your community now, as this person who is seen by others as different. But if you know your rights, you have a voice.” As a member of the National Council of the Disabled Persons in Zimbabwe, Charity has built up an impressive cadre of adolescent girls and young women in her community who are now accessing SRHR and HIV services. She has been the leading force behind setting up an innovative theatre production focused on SRHR education and awareness at local tertiary institutions. Understanding the value of building networks who are able to amplify awareness campaigns, Charity has also been instrumental in building a movement of champions at community level to ensure that no girl or young woman is left behind.

“Another important part of my work in communities, is to disrupt the negative myths or misconceptions
around people who are disabled. We are all humans. We have equal value and that means that we can contribute equally to society.” Charity believes that when a society embraces those who are different it is the better for it. “When you do this, it can lead to improvements in small things like ensuring that government documents offer braille for those who are visually impaired, or local buses are low enough for people in wheelchairs to easily access public transport, or big things like young women who are disabled are valued as mothers, wives or business leaders.”

Charity credits her strength and outspoken spirit to her work as a youth SRHR advocate that has pushed her to step out of her comfort zone, where she even feels empowered to participate in some of the dance activations that she has set up as part of her advocacy outreach. Describing her journey, the activism bug bit when she was 20 and became intrigued by a programme being offered by Girls Choose Champions in her community. “They were handing out flyers on the importance of SRHR services and it just clicked. I knew that this is what I wanted to do with my life. I just knew that my disability would be a benefit and I could make a difference in the lives and futures of young women like me.”

Although Charity believes that her work has had a tangible impact in her community, she is deeply worried about the devastation that the Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked in her country. “This pandemic has brought our services to a standstill. The lockdown and movement restrictions have meant that it is nearly impossible for those with disabilities to access SRHR and HIV services. We are also experiencing massive spikes in gender based violence, because the schools are closed and this has resulted in young girls and women, especially those with disabilities, being sexually assaulted. It’s a mess.” She cites the lack of information on the Covid-19 virus as another challenge facing citizens who are trying to figure out how to stay safe while earning a living to keep hunger at bay. “The hunger crises is deepening in our country and this is especially hard for people living with disabilities, many are left to fend for themselves, often with disastrous consequences. This is why we need to get back into full community service as soon as possible.” Charity is eager to get her community engagement and youth hubs back on track again as she believes that this is what will offer the safe spaces that young people need, where they can access services, meals and a chance to connect with other young people again to help normalise what has otherwise been a highly unnatural event.

“Watch this space, we are going to make it happen. Young people are resilient and I know that we will come out of this Covid-19 pandemic stronger and more motivated to build on our successes. I want to play my part in this new normal, whatever that looks like. And who knows maybe I will still get my shot at Olympic glory too.”

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