Dorcus Motswadira lives by the motto “nothing for us without us”. As a young woman trying to live her truth, it has been anything but easy. Ask any woman around the globe about their daily challenges and you will hear stories of battling patriarchy, being sidelined, objectification, micro-aggressions, and the list goes on. So, when you add, that you have cerebral palsy, with diplegia (where you are sight impaired), with an additional diagnoses of strabismus (where your eyes do not properly align to an object), the deck is certainly stacked. Dorcus, however is on a mission to ensure that every young woman and man, diagnosed with a disability in Botswana, is assured of equal access and services. “Each human being is born with a different physical ability. People with disabilities are just differently abled. Their body is not an exception, rather I see it as being ordinary. Just like everyone else’s, it just functions in a different way.”

For Dorcus, her earliest memory of how people with disabilities are regarded and treated, was in Grade 1, when her teacher informed her mother that she was a ‘slow learner’ and needed to stay behind and repeat the year. She recalls her early schooling years as painful, where she was subjected to irritated, impatient and often uncaring teachers, bullies who would steal her lunch and classmates who would imitate her limp and openly make fun of her. This stigmatisation, led to low self-esteem, as is the case with many young people with a disability. But in 2013, aged 16, something changed. Dorcus can’t pinpoint what led to it exactly. “I think I was just tired of being subjected to people’s ridicule and I wanted to show them that I was the same, just different. I wanted them to see me and not my disability.” Dorcas decided to campaign for the school’s Student Representative Council. She recalls that she had written some notes on a piece of paper and when it was her time to speak, she was so nervous, that her shaking loosened the paper out of her hand and it dropped to the floor. Even the heckling of a young boy who joked about her being cross-eyed did not deter her. “I just chirped back that I might have a squint eye, but at least I was smart! That really got their attention. After I spoke, my classmates started clapping. It was amazing and that day I knew that my success in life was on me. That I had to stop being so hard on myself. I was in control of how I viewed myself. I was in control of my narrative and my journey.”

This new found sense of self-worth served her well when she started her life as a student at the University of Botswana. Attending many of the events hosted by the university, mainly to get some food she laughs, Dorcus was blown away when she heard Lilian Moremi as a guest speaker. This inspired her to stand up and share her story. Much to her surprise, she was contacted by Lilian a few days later who then offered to become her mentor. “I cannot tell how much Lilian’s mentorship has meant to me. For the last four years I have been able to learn and grow.” When asked what her most valuable lesson has been, she says that it was insistence that she go after what she wanted. “In life you must go for it, as long as it does not harm you and it teaches you a lesson, just do it. Don’t be afraid to follow your passion, even if you don’t get money straight away, it will come.” The power of positive female relationships and sisterhood has also been an influential part why Dorcus has decided to find a pathway where she can pay it forward and help other young women like herself to take the next step towards a different and inclusive future.
The biggest challenge for Dorcus is that many African governments have a dismissive attitude when it comes to people with disabilities. “Take our country, Botswana, for example. According to statistics, 4%-5% of the population is living with a disability. They are still full citizens of the country and many of them are quite capable of contributing to society, but yet are seen as a minority.” There is currently only one government funded institution for the visually impaired in the country. “Most families with a loved one will have to try and find some way to get into a private facility. It is really survival of the fittest.”

Dorcas is adamant that the government must and can do more for citizens living with disabilities in the country. “The problem is that we don’t have a national human rights institution that is tasked with truly advancing the human rights of all the Batswana. We need to have proper policies and structures in place that not only promote and protect our citizens’ human rights, but most importantly guarantees the same to people living with disabilities and other marginalised sections of our society.”

Her solution, “We need to ensure that when, the special office in the Presidency that deals with people living with a disability actually employs people, especially young people, they employ people who are living with a disability. That way you have a person who actually understands and has empathy for what people are going through when they are deciding on policies and campaigns. It’s not enough just so say we have heard you, we want people who have the lived-experience.”

Turning to her role as a sexual reproductive health rights activist, Dorcus wants people to know that people with disabilities have normal sexual needs too and their human right to access SRHR information and services is just as important. “Many young people with disabilities end up with STIs or HIV or unplanned pregnancies because they just don’t have access to proper information and services. It’s unacceptable because there are easy ways to solve this. If young people have access to brailed condoms and specialised demonstrations that work with the person’s disability then there is absolutely no reason for a young person not to have the protection and services they deserve.” On whose responsibility this is, she adds; “Without a doubt, it’s the responsibility of government to put measures in place to ensure that information is accessible formats for all people to access.”

Ignorance though, even amongst healthcare workers, is another barrier that young people face. Dorcus recalls how one of her lecturers revealed that when he was working with a person in a wheelchair, the nurses were surprised that the person was pregnant, as they did not know that a person in a wheelchair was able to even have sex let alone conceive a child. “One of the biggest challenges we face though has to be stigmatisation, because it leads to so many social ills. As people living with a disability we experience bullying, sexual violence, gender-based-violence and ignorance it’s a lot and it can be overwhelming at times.” Having to deal with this, Dorcus discovered, can lead to serious health problems. She was diagnosed with a heart condition in 2019 that was brought on by stressful situations. “I am on the right medication now, so it’s under control now, but it’s a reminder that we all are human after all.”
Globally, 1 in 7 people are living with a disability, which equates to roughly 1 billion people. So if you take that into consideration it can be argued that it’s the world that needs to change how they view and value all people who occupy our planet. “Personal accountability is important to me and if we each take responsibility for our actions and how we relate to and treat others we will have a totally transformed society. One that is better, healthier and more inclusive.”

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