

By Ondiege Matthew, Artistic Director, Dance into Space Foundation.

Siaya County in the southwest of Kenya has one of the highest HIV prevalence rates in Kenya, at 24.8%, nearly 4.2 times higher than the national rate. People with disabilities in Siaya, the majority being physically challenged by polio in their childhood, are disadvantaged on almost all fronts, including in sexual and reproductive health and rights services.

Therefore, Dance into Space, a group of performance artists, designed the Breaking Barriers Project. This is an innovative, inspiring and revolutionary mixed-ability contemporary dance theatre addressing sexual and reproductive rights and HIV of people with disabilities, together with performing artists both with and without (physical) disabilities.

The practice: dance to empower and create awareness

Our Breaking Barriers programme is both experiential and experimental. The creative process preceding the dance performances draws from real and personal experiences of sexual and reproductive health and rights of participants with disabilities. Personal experiences are deconstructed, creatively re-imagined, improvised and reconstructed and then presented in open-air community forums.

With this process, we aim to break down cultural barriers, superstition, taboos and stigma surrounding people with disabilities and their sexuality. Other goals include the following.

### *Empowerment*

We are empowering people with disabilities through expressive contemporary dance and performance skills for advocacy on SRHR. Amongst other things, the participants are taught choreography and other exercises and games that enhance concentration, teamwork, leadership qualities and self-confidence. This enables participants to overcome their individual and cultural inhibitions that would ordinarily hinder them from expressing themselves fully.

“Dance, music and theatre processes liberate the participants to express themselves freely and share their true stories devoid of any inhibitions.”

### *Disability rights advocates*

Through discussions, reflections and dialogues around rights and advocacy in broader contexts, participants with disabilities are empowered to become self-advocates who can speak out against oppression and claim their rights regarding SRH. The management of the health clinic specifically involved the trained advocates in regular health talks at the clinic to address community stigma and service provision to people with disability.

### *Create alternative sexual narratives*

With our dance performances, we provide a platform for engagement to debunk the myths around disabilities and sexuality, targeting people with disabilities themselves, their caregivers and the community. We show alternative sexual narratives that recognize the sexual needs of people with disabilities and promote their rights to access those needs.

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