

Centre for Disability Law and Policy Lunchtime Seminar
presents Feliza Ali speaking on Disability Rights in Bolivia

Venue: CDLP boardroom

Time: 12.30pm – 2pm

Feliza AliRamos is the Disability Programme Co-coordinator with the Bolivian field team of development agency International Service. On September 23rd 1997, Feliza's life changed forever when as a result of a bus accident, she received fractures to her spine and right knee and she has been a wheelchair user since.

Following her accident Feliza carried out a study on disability in Bolivia and found that disabled people in Bolivia are often discriminated against and that they are treated very differently to everyone else, having decisions made for them without being given their say. As an example, even though she had a degree in social work and had been working for several years, her old colleagues and people she applied for jobs with thought she was no longer capable of working and so she stopped looking.

Following her accident, Feliza worked on a voluntary basis for four years to support and encourage people with disabilities to show that they can live equal lives to all other people. During this period, Feliza founded several organisations, namely Nueva Esperanza (New Hope), the regional Federation and Coordinations of People with Disabilities of Chuquisaca, the first Sports team of women with disabilities in Sucre and the Association of Parents of Deaf Children in Sucre. Following on from this, Feliza became the Executive Director of the National Office for Coordination of People with Disabilities in Bolivia.

Working with International Service since 2007 as Disability Programme Coordinator on an Irish Aid funded project, Feliza was successful in having disabled people's rights recognised in the new National Constitution adopted in 2009. There are now 3 specific articles protecting the rights of people with disabilities, concerning education, free healthcare, good working conditions and the right to develop individual potential. The state now prohibits and punishes all forms of abuse, discrimination, exploitation and violence, and ensures access to prevention and rehabilitation services. "This is a significant achievement and one that IS proudly contributed to", said Feliza. As part of the project Feliza worked with our Development Workers and partners to support the creation of job opportunities, the establishment of a national plan for equal opportunities, the development of a national register of people with disabilities, the recognition of sign language, and the reclassification of blind teachers so they can receive their due benefits.

Disability in Bolivia

In Bolivia, people with disabilities face discrimination from multiple fronts: at institutional and social levels. Between 74-97% of disabled children do not receive any form of education and of those who do attend school only 1 in twenty will finish secondary school. Training for teachers does not include a focus on including children with disabilities into educational curricula. The knock-on effect of this is their exclusion from the workforce due to a lack of employable skills. It comes as no surprise therefore that 70% of people with disabilities are unemployed throughout the Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region and that in Bolivia, more than 70% of people with disabilities live on less than \$2 a day.

People with disabilities in rural areas are further discriminated against by their families and communities as disability is seen as being a punishment from God for some previous wrong-doing by the parents. In addition to all of these difficulties, people with visual impairments are amongst the most vulnerable of this marginalized group due to the lack of accessible information that is available to them. Braille is not widely taught and it is thought that there is only one Braille printer in the country.

The Bolivian government has however demonstrated their increasing willingness to address issues of inequality facing people with disabilities. This can be seen in the specific mention of people with disabilities in the new Bolivian Constitution, the passing of several new laws that ensure the social inclusion of people with disabilities, for example the 1995 Labour Law 1678 which stipulates that 4% of public sector employees must be people with disabilities. The National Development Plan makes reference to people with disabilities as being a priority group for inclusive development policies. The Bolivian Government signed the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities in 2008.