ruth javati – office manager, PNG assembly of disabled persons (PNGADP)

Papua new guinea

Ruth is an advocate for women with disabilities in Papua New Guinea (PNG). She is passionate about using her own experiences to ensure other women and girls with disabilities have opportunities, particularly for economic empowerment.

Ruth was in her second year of studying a Bachelor of Health Science when she acquired her disability. After she began using a wheelchair, Ruth was no longer able to access her university lectures, which were located on the second floor and only accessible via stairs. Despite numerous attempts by Ruth to advocate for her classes to be relocated to ground level, they remained on the second level. She was unable to attend class, was disqualified from sitting assessments and forced to leave university. She lost hope and felt that her *‘spirit was so broken’*; she shut herself away in her room, not wanting to engage with the world.

Ruth still wanted to continue studying but continued to face barriers. When she saw Australia Awards Scholarships advertised, Ruth was initially quite hesitant to apply given previous negative experiences. The encouragement from Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for women with disabilities to apply, however, provided her the motivation to apply. Ruth’s application was successful and she travelled to Australia with a study support package to study a Diploma of Community Services.

*“…[W]hen I received the opportunity to go on scholarship, I came out of my world. I was able to travel overseas, mingle with other people with disabilities especially other people with disabilities who had been born with disability from PNG and other countries. They shared their experiences of empowerment and challenges they had faced in life*

“I want women with disabilities, including myself, to become empowered and to experience financial independence” – Ruth. ©Belinda Bayak-Bush, CBM Australia

*and it was then that I realised … that it was up to me to give back and make a contribution to others in their journey towards empowerment, especially for other women and young girls with disabilities.”*

Ruth returned home in 2016, and started applying for jobs but again encountered barriers, especially in relation to lack of accessible infrastructure or transport.

*“As a woman when it comes to applying for jobs, I worry about my limitations and other people’s perceptions. I’ve had some negative experiences…”*

*“I did not want to apply for jobs where I knew that access within the office building or transport to and from the office would be an issue.”*

Ruth did not find work for three months after her return from studying in Australia, until the PNG Assembly of Disabled Persons (PNGADP), the national Disabled People’s Organisation for PNG, asked her to work with them as a volunteer administration officer. Ruth then applied for the role of officer manager with PNGADP. She was successful in her application and has been working with PNGADP for the past two years. Ruth’s role has involved managing funding, delivering advocacy training and co-facilitating training on gender and intersectionality. She has also had the opportunity to attend workshops and policy meetings hosted by DFAT and to contribute to DFAT funded training events. Since returning from her study overseas, Ruth has received project management training and continues to receive support from the in-country Australia Awards program.

Prior to her disability, Ruth described life as being *‘much easier’,* with greater independence in making decisions about personal finances, education and social life. Acquiring a disability for Ruth meant that others started making decisions on her behalf without her involvement or consideration of her disability. However, the opportunity to study overseas, in addition to the support of her parents and PNGAGP, has been fundamental in shifting this for Ruth.

Ruth describes DFAT as a ‘key enabler’ for her educational progress and current employment. The specific invitation to women with disabilities to apply for the Australia Award Program was pivotal in encouraging Ruth to apply and providing her the opportunity gain the skills and confidence to be where she is today. The professional development she has received through her ongoing engagement with DFAT has further boosted her confidence to seek self-empowerment and to empower other people with disabilities, specifically women and girls.

*“…I now had an educational qualification from Australia and could confidently negotiate conversations and advocate for the inclusion of people with disabilities, especially for women and girls with disabilities who did not have the same opportunities as I did.”*

With this new found confidence and interest in empowering other women, Ruth, with a fellow Australia Awards Scholarship alumna, has registered an organisation known as Speaking up for Women (SufoW). Their aim is to provide training and financial empowerment for women and young girls with disabilities, with a particular focus on ensuring those at the village and community level have access to such programs.

In 2017, Ruth applied for an additional Australia Awards Scholarship. She has been accepted to study for a Bachelor of Human Service and Public Health at Queensland University of Technology, which she will start in 2019. Once she completes her study, Ruth is interested in ensuring SufoW develops into a sustainable program that supports women with disabilities to become empowered and experience financial independence.