

Breaking the chains, bridging the gaps: Giving a voice to persons with disabilities

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Abstract: The day-to-day experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs) are twice as burdensome due to the social exclusion they face. PWDs are confronted with dilemmas such as inadequate education, employment declination, and healthcare rejection, which make them marginalized individuals. PWDs struggle to fit in the classroom due to a lack of improvements to accommodate their specific demands. PWDs frequently experience discrimination even before they are permitted to join the workforce. Moreover, the demands of people with disabilities are frequently overlooked or ignored because of the paucity of healthcare facilities and equipment in the country. Some initiatives to address these problems have been made; however, proper implementation has been overlooked and is still underway. By doing this, we allow individuals with disabilities to gain assurance and a sense of togetherness.

Keywords: Employment declination, Inadequate education, Persons with disabilities, Social exclusion

1. Introduction

Persons with disabilities face social exclusion. They come across unjustifiable discrimination and marginalization, which hamper their full participation in social and economic life. Society tends to build a barrier around them, thus leaving persons with disabilities out of the trends and movements of our society towards progress. They are often stigmatized due to negative attitudes and beliefs about disability. This stigma can take many forms, including stereotypes and prejudice; consequently, most of the time, persons with disabilities, are excluded from obtaining quality education and professional development, better employment, and proper healthcare.

2. Exclusion from obtaining quality education

Many would argue that the school is the best place to learn, but if it cannot provide PWDs' needs, is it still the best environment to learn a lot of basic skills? One of the general problems that persons with disabilities (PWD) face is inadequate education, which leads to insufficient development of their skills. This challenge may include physical, sensory, intellectual, or a combination of these, which affect their successful acquisition of the subject matter. PWDs are struggling to fit in the classroom because of the lack of accommodations to cater their special needs; thus, they are less likely to be enrolled than persons without disabilities. In fact, a survey in 2022 revealed that there are only 98,895 students with disabilities that are enrolled, which is relatively lower by 74% compared to the pre-pandemic figure of 360,876 (Yang, 2022).

One of the main reasons for this is that mainstream education is focused on people without disabilities. Most school facilities are designed for them, seemingly neglecting PWDs to learn. However, some improvements and initiatives are being considered, such as the Republic Act 11650, or the "Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education Act," that guarantees free early and basic education to students with special needs, emphasizing the nation's commitment to ensuring that everyone has access to a high-quality education.

Students with disabilities should be given the same opportunities as others, making sure that they can learn and improve their skills in spite of their disabilities. Even so, in the case of the Philippine schools, the curriculum and programs for PWDs are either not properly implemented or the result of the careless interpretation of the stakeholders and at the grassroots level of how PWDs should be treated. As a result, there is an insufficient teacher training for students with disabilities to accommodate them and recognize

that they belong inside the classroom, and the lack of funding and learning resources and facilities that will suit their needs dishearten and frustrate PWDs to go to school.

3. Rejection in the workplace

Another challenge for persons with disabilities is their failure to get a job. PWDs are often discriminated against even before they are able to enter the workplace and workforce. They are usually stigmatized as not being capable of contributing much to an organization. There is actually a domino effect when PWDs are not given the education and training they deserve. When PWDs are not given quality education and raw development of their skills, they do not acquire the necessary competence to be able to contribute to an economic upswing.

According to the International Labor Organization (2010), people with disabilities experience an unemployment rate 80–100% higher than average non-disabled workers. Several studies have revealed that one factor explaining this situation is the reluctance and unwillingness of employers to take in workers from this sector (Chi & Qu, 2003; Honey, Meager & Williams, 1993; Mansour, 2009; Rimmerman, 1998; Unger, 2002, as cited in Gatchalian et al., 2014). Additionally, in 2020, the International Disability Rights Monitor (IDRM) reported that in the Philippines, 57.1% of the PWDs are employed, of which 30.9% are engaged in agriculture as farmers, foresters, or fishermen, while 10.8% are laborers or unskilled workers. However, this data is confined only to those who work in the agriculture sector and not in the professional field, such as teachers or engineers. In saying this, it is about time that we hire people according to what they can offer to the organization and not look into whether they are disabled or not.

4. Healthcare knockback

The situation of healthcare in the Philippines faces some challenges, including limited services to cater to the needs of every Filipino. Some of these challenges include a lack of social support from sponsors and health specialists, the availability of essential healthcare services like counseling and medication, a lack of research, and out-of-date statistics on mental health problems (Toquero, 2021). In saying this, persons with disabilities have twice the challenge because non-disabled persons aren't well catered to, more so with PWDs who require specific equipment for their conditions. This is because the needs of persons with disabilities are often not adequately considered or addressed in the design and provision of public spaces, infrastructure, and services.

For instance, patients with mental illness are deprived of accessing quality healthcare due to the stigma and discrimination associated with mental illness, a lack of access to mental healthcare services, and a lack of knowledge or training among healthcare professionals on the treatment of mental health disorders. A shortage of mental healthcare providers is one of the most significant barriers to accessing mental healthcare services, particularly in certain geographic areas or for specific populations, such as low-income or rural communities. As a matter of fact, the Philippines has one of the highest incidences of depression in Southeast Asia, and those with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues (Toquero, 2021). This can make it difficult for patients suffering from mental illnesses to receive timely and appropriate treatment.

Comprehensive Programs for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) is a program that offers social safety and support to PWDs in an effort to enhance their quality of life (Department of Social Welfare and Development, 2013). The initiative offers services like livelihood training, financial and medical aid, and community-based rehabilitation. Additionally, with efforts such as mobile healthcare technologies among persons with disabilities, it is possible to improve their social and physical disparities. They have access to healthcare interventions that can get beyond constraints on preventive and health information accessibility (Toquero, 2021). But then again, advancements in implementation have not been made even with the various programs like this; despite the fact that laws and regulations require healthcare facilities to be accessible to people with disabilities, there are still many barriers that prevent PWDs from receiving the care they require.

5. Conclusion

Due to a lack of accessibility and accommodations, unfavorable attitudes and stereotypes, and institutional discrimination, people with disabilities are denied of their fundamental rights to adequate education, employment prospects, and healthcare. Lack of accessibility and accommodations can limit the prospects for

education, employment, and healthcare for people with disabilities by preventing them from accessing physical locations, information, and services. Policies, procedures, and institutional arrangements that maintain exclusion and inequity for people with disabilities constitute systemic discrimination. But the time has come for us to realize that having a disability does not necessarily make a person a less useful member of society. Let us release ourselves from the authority that we tend to exercise over their rights and start providing equal opportunities and the appropriate acceptance. Counting PWDs is not enough: It is important for governments, stakeholders, and all other pertinent groups to develop platforms for their voices to be heard. In this way, we enable those with disabilities to develop a sense of confidence and a sense of belongingness.

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