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Mahnoor Hafeez

Dow University of Health Sciences, Karach

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PRACTICAL MEASURES FOR DISABLED'S EMPOWERMENT-TIME FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH!

Mahnoor Hafeez¹

¹Dow Institute of Radiology, Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi

Correspondence Author: Mahnoor Hafeez Dow Institute of Radiology, Dow University of Health Sciences, Karachi **Email:** mahnoor.hafeez@yahoo.com

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INTRODUCTION

The objective of this article is to advocate for persons with disabilities' (PWD) rights, to discuss issues solutions, social awareness and to promote diversity and inclusion.

The word 'Disability' covers a wide range of irreversible permanent impairments including physical and mobility difficulties, hearing, visual impairment, specific learning disabilities including dyslexia, medical conditions and mental health problems that may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.¹ Handicap is the condition of being unable to perform due to physical or mental unfitness.

PWDs are divided into two groups:

- a) From the age of onset of disability
 - Congenital
 - Acquired
- b) From an economical perspective
 - Mentally impaired PWD- includes intellectual disability due to cerebral palsy, severe autism, congenital anomalies etc.
 - Mentally sound PWD – a significant proportion of the country economy is hidden in this population

STATISTICS

According to WHO world Census report 2017, 15% of the world's population i.e. more than 1 billion people are living with disability and 2/3 of these people do not seek medical professional help largely due to stigma and neglect.² The Islamic Republic of Pakistan is the world's 5th most populous country.³ Around 31 million (approx. 14% population) people in Pakistan have some form of disability.⁴ More than two-thirds (68.4%) of the disabled population is illiterate which is significantly higher than average Pakistani illiteracy which stands at 41.09%.⁵ A World Bank report estimated that 71% of disabled people in Pakistan are unemployed.⁶ Around 31 million (approx. 14% population) people in Pakistan have some form of disability.³ By not empowering the PWD, Pakistan loses Rs.127 billion annually.⁷

BASIC LIVING NEEDS

These vary according to the type and severity of disability. At least seven million PWD are forced to stay home as they do not have access to wheelchairs in Pakistan.⁸ Assistive technology (AT) includes products, equipment, or systems that enhance learning, working, and daily living for persons with disabilities, e.g. washroom commode, mobility aids, wheelchairs, scooters, walkers, canes, crutches, prosthetic devices, orthotic devices, visual and hearing devices, screen readers. The AT team includes special education teachers, speech-language pathologists, rehabilitation engineers and occupational therapists. It also includes physical medicine and rehabilitation doctors who also have the knowledge and skills to advice about the assistive technology.

SELF AND SOCIETY FACTORS

Disability brings negative thoughts, fear, hesitation, lack of confidence and self-esteem, as PWDs are naturally different from 'Normal' population. PWDs are often home bound because of 'they can't do this' stereotype thoughts. With this dogmatic approach, families believe that they are giving adequate care for their disabled loved ones; and are not properly educated due to fear of unemployment risk; eventually PWDs becomes a social burden. Social stigma, body shaming, discrimination, vulnerability, and exploitation are a reality for PWD in Pakistan.^{9,10} To make matters worse, negativity and lack of acceptance by society are obstacles in the route of success.

MARITAL ISSUE:

Choice of marriage should be carefully made for PWD, considering disability type, its lifelong duties, responsibilities and its effect on future generations. PWD or his/ her family should consult specialist doctor before marriage of PWD. Persons with severe disabilities, for example: bed bound persons, chronic severe psychiatric illnesses should not be involved in marriage. There are specific Islamic rulings regarding marriage of mentally impaired PWD and persons with physical defects.¹¹⁻¹²

SOLUTIONS:

Few proposed solutions are:

1. December 3rd -an International Day of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) should be recognized as a National day in Pakistan for PWD support, society education and honoring successful PWD.
2. PWDs should not hesitate in having a disabled certificate issued by their doctor as their identity, proof of handi cap for documentation of their needs.
3. Educational Institutions and overall society needs to conduct educational programs to motivate PWD, building their self-esteem and to encourage the usage of respectful language. E.g. 'Disabled' better to be called a **'Differently abled'**. (Figure 1).

Disability	Out-Dated Language	Respectful Language
Blind or Visually Impairment	Dumb, Invalid	Blind/Visually Impaired, Person who is blind/visually impaired
Deaf or Hearing Impairment	Invalid, Deaf-and-Dumb, Deaf-Mute	Deaf or Hard-of-hearing, Person who is deaf or hard of hearing
Speech/Communication Disability	Dumb, "One who talks bad"	Person with a speech / communication disability
Learning Disability	Retarded, Slow, Brain- Damaged, "Special ed"	Learning disability, Cognitive disability, Person with a learning or cognitive disability
Mental Health Disability	Hyper-sensitive, Psycho, Crazy, Insane, Wacko, Nuts	Person with a psychiatric disability, Person with a mental health disability
Mobility/Physical Disability	Handicapped, Physically Challenged, "Special," Deformed, Cripple, Gimp, Spastic, Spaz, Wheelchair-bound, Lame	Wheelchair user, Physically disabled, Person with a mobility or physical disability
Emotional Disability	Emotionally disturbed	Emotionally disabled, Person with an emotional disability
Cognitive Disability	Retard, Mentally retarded, "Special ed"	Cognitively/Developmentally disabled, Person with a cognitive/developmental disability
Short Stature, Little Person	Dwarf, Midget	Someone of short stature, Little Person
Health Conditions	Victim, Someone "stricken with" a disability (i.e. "someone stricken with cancer" or "an AIDS victim")	Survivor, Someone "living with" a specific disability (i.e. "someone living with cancer or AIDS")

National Youth Leadership Network (NYLN) & Kids As Self Advocates (KASA), *Respectful Disability Language: Here's What's Up!*, 2006, 3.

Figure 1: Image from brochure at the Conference on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities at the School of Law, Lahore University of Management Sciences, March 2022.

4. Family/ Education Administration/ Employer should provide attendant and accessibility facilities for carrying routine daily PWD activities, as per need.
5. Govt./ NGOs should organize awareness, conferences, panel discussions and workshops at regional and national level, led by healthcare worker (preferably a Disabled Dr.) with media coverage to educate PWD, doctors, family members, teachers (to prohibit bullying against disabled children) and employers.¹³ The educator should:
 - Have concepts of neuro-musculo-skeletal diseases, learning disability, acquired brain injury and their prognosis, handicap, psycho-social implications, work (physical/ mental), occupation, profession, equity, diversity, inclusion, empathy and emotional intelligence.
 - Encourage PWD and their parents to visit psychotherapists and rehabilitation centers for counselling as well as self- acceptance.
 - Motivate Pakistani employers for PWD inclusion.
 - Prohibit living organ donation by PWD, unless no option.
 - Ban social norms:
 - Diverting disabled child to religion 'only'.
 - Approaching 'hakeem' or 'homeopaths' or 'rohani babas' for cure!
 - Considering marriage as a "cure" of disability/ illness.

ACCESSIBILITY

A phenomena in which PWD needs are specifically considered and products, services as well as facilities are modified so that they can be used by all physical disabled persons. Many old and even new buildings in Pakistan are not disabled-friendly; as the result, sufferers face trouble in performing their day to day working. Pakistani educational institutions, public buildings and hospitals should have washroom commode facility, wheelchair ramps, tactile paving, brail tracks and brail lift.⁷ Wheelchair, and shuttle services must be provided in larger institutes to cover distances.

EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

Good education brings good social interactions, confidence, future income and a positive influence on society. Poverty deprives a person of basic needs. A life of socioeconomically low PWD is not less than an animal or a person in cave. Negative correlation exists between poverty and disabled success. A disabled, while controlling own health issue, paying its cost; in such a situation, education becomes a dream! Few suggestions are mentioned below:

- Poor PWD should be provided with braille books, braille writers and labelers, speech magnification software.
- As a student with a disability is at a substantial disadvantage; the organization administration must make documented reasonable adjustments to help alleviate it. Examination and assessment modification must be done according to type of disability.
- Education systems should include sign language interpreter and software.
- Training sessions for sign language should be conducted for communication of speech/ hearing impaired PWD.
- According to disability, a child can be educated in special education, but a physically deprived person should not be deprived of education in mainstream

CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

According to Stephen Hawking, having a disability does not exclude people from discovering and pursuing their passions in life.¹⁴ In Pakistani medical college(s), candidate physical mobility is a mandatory pre-requisite for admission, as per author's experience¹⁵⁻¹⁶. Contrary to it, in the international world, the concept of a wheeler as a medical doctor has been established, justifying meritocracy. For example, a Wheeler Dr. Jim Post is the Chief of Internal Medicine at James J. Peters VA Medical Center, USA. Dr. Cheri Blauwet, MD, childhood quadriplegic, is a Stanford medical graduate and an Assistant Professor of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School. Patients of various backgrounds tend to feel more comfortable with physicians like them, and that's true for PWDs¹⁷⁻¹⁹. There should be no restriction to PWD for career selection including science, arts, commerce ranging from technical to academic fields etc. Appropriate guidance should be provided by mentors at each level for PWD success.

EMPLOYMENT

A World Bank report estimated that 71% of disabled people in Pakistan are unemployed.⁶ The PWD unemployment rate increased significantly in last few years. Though anti-discriminatory laws exist (Rights of Persons with Disability act by National Assembly) for PWD rights' protection and to ensure their community inclusion, the issue is of rule implementation. It is a documented phenomenon that the physical attractiveness of job candidates has the broadest influence on employment decisions.²⁰ With this marginalization concept, Pakistan's economy loses approx. £15 billion per year.⁶ A 2%-fixed job quota exists for PWD inclusion in which the companies are obligated to hire at least 2 PWDs per 100 employees, with a fine policy for not doing so, but the quota implementation is very low.⁸

The stereotype employers have risk of business loss with PWD hiring! Contrary to it, PWD represent an untapped pool of skills that can enhance business, according to the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Global Business and Disability Network. Employing people with disabilities makes good business sense and improves workplace morale²¹. Recent research showed that companies engaging in diversity policies and inclusion practices have higher profitability and are more valued by capital markets' investors.²² The same message must be spread by mass communication for Pakistani recruiters' education.

POLICIES

Various policies for PWD support, Educational and work activities have been documented.

- Higher Education Commission, Pakistan approved a policy for PWDs' higher education with mandate services, need assessment and responsibilities.²³
- The ordinance has been passed by Govt. Pak for employment, rehabilitation and issuance of specialized Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) by National Database and Registration Authority (**NADRA**).
- Royal College of Radiology published an Examination Adjustment Policy in which it asks candidate for adjustment request letter with exam application and reassures that consideration would be given in fair means.²⁴
- According to Reasonable Adjustment Policy by NHS-UK, an employer should make alteration that would enable a PWD to continue to carry out their duties without being at a disadvantage compared to others.²⁵

STRATEGIC PLANS

Few more policies, in term of formal strategic plan are:

- Education up to intermediate level, is mandatory for every Pakistani (either abled or disabled).
- Government must allocate a 'Special Disabled Fund' reserved for fulfillment of accessibility and to invest in poor PWD basic, Educational needs.
- Each Company/ Industry/Organization must have Disability-Inclusion Policy, code of conduct and anti-harassment law for PWD protection.²⁶
- At least 2% seats must be reserved in the National Assembly/Parliament for PWD only to represent and advocate for this population, considering Pakistani PWD population ratio. This will impact on changing the society image of PWD.¹³

CONCLUSION

WHO considers disability a global issue related to Public Health.²⁷ PWDs have challenges, inferiority complex, and powerlessness due to society rejection. In such circumstances, education and employment are blessing! As members of academia and civil society, all of us have a duty for the creation of equitable society, which will enhance the PWD contribution and impact in community.

DISCLAIMER: The manuscript is written on personal interest by the author based upon observations, experience, and literature research and has no personal association with above mentioned agencies.

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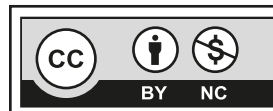
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