

THE EFFECT OF DISABLED PEOPLE ON SOCIETAL RESPONSE

By Kamya Julius

About the Author

I am a Ugandan from very humble background. Born to a peasant family in 1969, I became totally blind in 1977. My left eye had been plucked out at the age of six months, and the other at eight years. Medical professionals diagnosed “eye cancer”. I therefore had to remain without eyeballs in order to save my brains from infection.

Till this day, I have remained mesmerised about the spirited fight and determination throughout my lifetime. I do not have any vivid memories of long-term despair about my loss of sight. My immediate wish after 1977 was always an opportunity to continue with my formal education. Thanks to my “great” mum. Although she never went beyond basic primary education, mum knew the value of investing in literacy. From her toil, I pursued primary education in a special school for the blind, joined secondary and university education together with sighted students. My average performance always encourage old mum to push on, even when she could no longer fend for herself – but left to the care of a daughter (one of my long-gone sisters). Mum would go without lunch whenever I was in boarding school so as to save some tuition and upkeep money for me for the ensuing school term. This article is dedicated to her.

During my secondary and tertiary education, and after first graduation from Makerere University in 1995, I have interacted with a cross-section of people – disabled colleagues inclusive, with varied views and actions towards disability and disabled people. Although my observation and learning process is still ongoing, I thought I should share with readers what has so far struck me very astonishingly.

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Introduction

Disabled people are generally not active participants in socio-economic life due to limited opportunity to do so. Most awareness and advocacy campaigns to address this scenario have largely focused on public attitude change towards and about disability. As disabled people, we have come to the conclusion that the existing inequalities against us are the result of a social construct. This construct manifests in society viewing disabled people as worthless, excluding them from the development process, and doing “little or nothing” to make the socio-physical environment friendly for all. In this, we more often than not, fail to realise that our attitudes and actions could greatly influence the way society looks at and treats us.

Disabled people should recognise that we may be a significant factor in our discrimination and marginalisation. We should therefore develop a positive attitude towards ourselves and society in order to improve the latter’s response. I am deeply concerned by this missing link. In this document, I challenge disabled colleagues to access information and knowledge, strive to live independently, and promote good leadership to bridge all existing imbalances against us.

The Case for Disabled People’s Negative Attitudes and Practices

Disability is a challenging condition. Many who find themselves disabled fail or take a long time to cope or remain in self-pity and denial. Others become reserved or hostile. They may blame others for their misfortune

and expect society to always sympathise with them. Others, however, become shrewd and use their condition to manipulate society. Below are some examples, largely drawn from the Ugandan setting:

Masibo Senior Secondary is a girls' school, but with an annex for the blind. As in most boarding schools, all students are entitled to a breakfast cupful of porridge and a plateful of food each at lunch and dinner. Many blind boys in the 1980s never adhered to this. They would each get two meals at a time, let alone ignoring the cafeteria queue. Others would then go hungry because of some who thought their blindness gave them leeway to get more than their share.

In the early 1990s, the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUDIPU) initiated a revolving loan scheme for its membership. While this was meant to create incomes for disabled people, the project failed shortly after its inception because loan recovery was less than 10%. Some of the intended beneficiaries bought new clothing, engaged in excessive drinking and found new lovers. "This was their money after all"! As was echoed by many. If the project had succeeded, many disabled people would by now be in possession of collateral and perhaps accessing bigger loans from financial institutions. To date, zero or low incomes for disabled people remains one of the greatest challenges for all actors in the disability field.

Many disabled people have reservations about non-disabled professionals being employed in disability-related work. Without sufficient information, they think that disability is a profession and they can therefore do all disability work themselves. Disability is not a sector on an island, but one among many, requiring the contribution of everybody for any meaningful change to occur. Ironically, we then blame society for our nonparticipation in other sectors! Many non-disabled professionals who have tried to work with disabled people have been frustrated and quit, disillusioned. Others have persisted and somehow learnt to live with the situation.

Society can more willingly accept us when we package ourselves in an acceptable manner. While it may be true that the majority live in abject poverty, it is not right for us to forego cleanliness, lose confidence or develop low voice tones (in the absence of a speech disability). Also, blind people need not develop peculiar mannerisms such as tracing direction like a bat, unnecessarily facing the sky, and groping unnecessarily.

The Need for Positive Thinking

The challenges related to the foresaid are not insurmountable. Negative thoughts can be countered by supporting disabled people to accept their disability and think more positively about themselves. It is important for the individual to seriously consider his/her remaining potential, and the psychosocial and economic support that can be garnered from society. This, can be done through a series of psychosocial therapy (confidence building) sessions, regular home visits, use of successful/liberated disabled individuals as role models, stimulating community action to render appropriate support to the otherwise downcast person, and the list is endless. When this is done, they will rediscover their "sunken" abilities, and liberate their minds from the bondage of helplessness and/or hostility.

The Importance of information and knowledge

Disabled people also think and act the way they do because of illiteracy, low self-esteem, and lack of exposure, knowledge and skills. Their negative social outlook could be altered by accessing counselling services, attending local meetings, reading publications, doing exchange visits, listening to the radio and yawning for positive information. Positive information could include general human and disability rights and obligations, current affairs, existing opportunities and services and experiences from successful disabled people.

It should be noted that the disability movements, especially in the developing world, are still challenged by illiteracy and lack of specialised skills. Families and the State should invest heavily in formal and non-formal education to deal with the illiteracy problem among disabled children and adults.

Independent Living

Some disabled people are lifelong dependants and beggars. Now is the time to “get out of these chains” and make life more meaningful. This is possible by getting involved in activities of daily living. Such activities include maintaining self and general hygiene, participating in recreation and sports, and doing household chores.

Furthermore, disabled people need to work hard, demonstrate responsibility and ability to manage society. Possibilities include raising and sustaining families, forming active support groups, and starting income generating activities. Disabled people can for instance generate incomes through small-scale retailing, commercial farming, tailoring and crafting.

The Need for Good Leadership.

The importance of good leadership in the struggle for equal opportunities in the development process cannot be over emphasised. Part of the struggle to realise this has been for the training sessions of disabled people’s organisations to basically focus on building skills in advocacy, leadership and organisational development. In many instances however, these trainings have also been used to cement the feeling that the wider society is against us, and possibly not the other way round, too.

The onus is on the leadership of disabled people’s organisations to address this anomaly. Disabled and non-disabled people need each other in order to remove the existing inequalities. The beginning point in this is the need to groom young disabled people for responsible leadership through positive thinking.

Linked to this is the need for disabled people to be more open-minded and accept skilled, non-disabled leaders within their movement (s).

Positive thinking and skilled disabled leaders should also be promoted to be more active in disabled people’s organisations.

In addition, players in the disability field need to improve their training material and approaches so that they bridge this gap of concern. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on tailor-made skills training in intra/inter-personal relations, effective communication, leadership, self-understanding and determination.

Conclusion

Aggressive awareness campaigns aimed at achieving positive societal thinking and practices towards disabled people have been conducted over decades. Nonetheless, attitude change is a very slow process. Disabled persons should ponder over this, and begin seeing themselves as crucial actors in the process. While we expect society to change, they too expect us to do likewise and perhaps meet certain minimum societal standards and norms!