

prejudice

The Stigma of Disability and Limb Differences

inferior

different

by Rick Bowers

Gimp. Crip. Captain Hook. Four-eyed freak. Though these hurtful words are just a relatively minor expression of the many stigmas against people with disabilities, the negative feelings that they represent can, if left unopposed, lead to horrible acts of prejudice and injustice.

Nazi law before and during World War II, for example, “forced the sterilization of all persons who suffered from diseases considered hereditary” based on the movement’s desire to establish a biologically pure Aryan master race (*Handicapped: Victims of the Nazi Era, 1933-1945*). To make such a law more palatable to the general population, films and textbooks were used to stigmatize those with disabilities as “useless eaters,” burdens on the state and its war effort, “life unworthy of life.” (*THE NAZI DOCTORS*). According to *Handicapped*, “School mathematics books posed such questions as: ‘The construction of a lunatic asylum costs 6 million marks. How many houses at 15,000 marks each could have been built for that amount?’”

Starting with ideas, words and then forced sterilization, the Nazis would ultimately “progress” to the murder of approximately 200,000 people with disabilities in Germany, including amputees who were deemed of no further use to society (*Let’s Talk*). Strangely, the foundations of these horrific policies were not only based on Nazi hatred, but also on “scientific,” social, economic, and perhaps even “religious” considerations. Unfortunately, these types of

stigmas are not limited to a single culture, country or religion; they exist throughout the world, and their cost to those with disabilities is often pain, isolation, poverty, wasted talent, and, sometimes, even death.

Stigmas Related to Marriage and Relationships

In some Eastern countries, for example, if an able-bodied man wants to marry a disabled woman, his parents will strongly object. Even worse, if an able-bodied married woman acquires a disability, her husband will likely divorce her, and she will be considered incapable of taking care of her children (*Disabled People in International Development*).

Because some (not all) Hindus consider amputation to be caused by bad actions in a previous life, those with limb differences are likely to be stigmatized and considered unacceptable for marriage. In such societies, where marriage is such an important part of life, this can be a major problem.

Stigmas that prevent or hamper those with disabilities from marrying or having romantic relationships are also present in areas like Cambodia, Mozambique, Angola, the Caribbean and Mexico, to name a few. The villagers in Ajoya, Mexico, for example, once believed that a “disabled person should not and could not have a loving relationship, get married, or have children,” writes David Werner in *Disabled Village Children*.

Though the villagers have since changed many of their

attitudes as the result of a community rehabilitation program called Project PROJIMO, Werner says that in the past, not only did the able-bodied villagers stigmatize those with disabilities, but those with disabilities stigmatized themselves. As a result of long-term immersion in a culture that stigmatized them, “most believed they could never be attractive to a member of the opposite sex,” he writes.

Stigmas Associated With Economics

In 1991, Diane Driedger wrote that about 99 percent of those with disabilities in the developing countries were unemployed, often because they are thought to be less able, less qualified, and too dependent on others to work (*Disabled People in International Development*). In fact, many amputees in poor countries can't get the prostheses they need to enable them to do certain jobs. This, in turn, leads to another stigma that amputees are less useful, and thus less valuable, members of society.

In Cambodia, as in many countries, writes Marc Bonnet, poverty often both leads to disability and results from disability. “As a result,” he says, “disabled people are very often socially and economically marginalized” (*Motor disabled people in the agricultural and rural sector in Cambodia*). Because contributing financially to the family, especially for adult males, is considered so important in Cambodia, as well as in countries like Afghanistan, not being able to work or earn money can lower one's status in society. In Cambodia, Bonnet continues, “Someone who cannot or does not work is either forever dependent on their parents, often seen as a burden to the family, or abandoned to fend for themselves.” As a result, “their ‘value’ as adults is erased.” The psychological toll can be devastating for these individuals.

Stigmas Associated With Children

“In some places, people believe that children are born disabled or deformed because their parents did something bad, or displeased the gods,” writes Werner in *Disabled Village Children*. “Or they may believe that a child was born defective to pay for her sins in an earlier life. In such cases, parents may feel that to correct a deformity or to limit the child's suffering would be to go against the will of the gods.”

As a result of these beliefs, neighbors sometimes blame a family because a member has a disability, and it may negatively affect even the able-bodied family members' chances for marriage (*Disabled People in International Development*). Because of this and because people sometimes make fun of people with disabilities when they go out in public, families sometimes hide children with disabilities away.

In addition, in poor areas, children with disabilities pose an economic problem for the family. “There will be additional expenses,” writes M. Miles, commissary for the Mental Health Centre in Peshawar, Pakistan. At the same time, “there is no hope that this new child will bring any upswing in the family's fortunes” (*Why Asia Rejects Western Disability Advice*).

Stigmas About Inability

In Afghanistan, amputees have become such a common sight that they are accepted as a normal part of life, writes Peter Coleridge (*Development, Cultural Values and Disability: The Example of Afghanistan*). While noting that parents' concern for their disabled children in Afghanistan is impressive, he also points out some problems that result: "over-protection" and "under-stimulation." These problems, unfortunately, lead to another type of stigma toward people with disabilities – that is, the stigma that they need to be protected and taken care of, that they are unable to care for themselves.

This same problem occurs in Latin America, writes Werner. "The family does almost everything for the child, and so holds her back from developing skills and learning to care for herself. Even a child with a fairly *mild disability* is often not allowed to play with other children or go to school because her parents fear she will be teased, or unable to do as well as the others." Because they are often hidden away and not given the chance to participate in the community, Werner continues, "everyone assumes that they cannot – and should not. Disabled children often grow up as outsiders in their own village or neighborhood. They are unable to work, unable to marry and have children, unable even to move about and relate freely to others in the community. This is not because their disabilities prevent them, but because society makes it so difficult."

Stigmas About Educability

The stigma that those with disabilities are less able or more of a problem also extends into the world of education. Some schools will not admit children with disabilities because they claim they will be a bad influence on other students. In Cambodia, Bonnet writes, "Teachers may deny entrance to classes if a child has a disability the teacher suspects is contagious." Moreover, he says, schools are often inaccessible for those with mobility impairments.

Writing in *Disabled People in International Development*, Javad Hassan explains how these obstacles can cause future problems for students with disabilities. "Special schools are inferior to normal public schools and children who pass out from these schools are not accepted for higher studies in 'normal' schools and colleges, either because of their disabilities, low standard of education, or the commonest of all excuses: inaccessibility."

Because of this, students with disabilities are less likely to be educated at the same level as others and are, therefore, less likely to be competitive in the workplace. In fact, according to Diane Driedger and April D'Aubin, "There is still a tendency for the school system to believe that disabled children do not really need an education as they will not be working or contributing to society" (*Disabled People in International Development*). This type of attitude also extends to parents. According to Bonnet, in Cambodia, "sometimes parents do not believe disabled children can or will benefit from education." Hassan agrees and explains that parents sometimes consider it a bad investment to educate children with disabilities because they

have such a low chance of getting a job in societies where jobs are so scarce that even able-bodied people with high qualifications often can't find work.

Seeing Those With Disabilities as Expendable

Once people with disabilities are dehumanized and seen as less useful, burdens on society, uneducable and shameful, they become more expendable to society.

Henry Enns, executive director of Disabled Peoples' International, provides a chilling example of this in the article *Disabled Refugees* from 1988. Unfortunately, he says, countries accepting refugees often only want the "cream of the crop" and often discriminate against refugees who have disabilities. All refugees must have a medical exam prior to resettlement, he says, and if a family member is found to have a disability, the entire family can be rejected. As a result, tragedies have occurred. "Stories are told about families leaving disabled children behind in order that the rest of the family may be resettled," he says. "There are even reports of disabled children having to be killed. In other cases disabled persons have taken their own lives to save the rest of the family." Though, he says, people with disabilities have over and over proven themselves as significant members of society, the stigma that they are a "burden" persists.

America Not Immune

While looking at the stigmas in other countries and cultures regarding disabilities, Americans should not be tempted to think that their own country has a perfect record. In fact, according to *Handicapped*, before the Nazis began sterilizing people, the U.S. "led the world in forced sterilizations." From 1907 to 1939, the book says, "more than 30,000 people . . . were sterilized, many of them unknowingly or against their will, while they were incarcerated in prisons or institutions for the mentally ill." Like in Germany, these policies were influenced by the "scientific" theory that controlled breeding could be used to improve the human race. Since people with developmental disabilities were housed in institutions on the outer edges of town, viewed as defective, deviant, dangerous and pitiful, and called such derogatory names as invalid, idiot and moron, it was easier to consider them worthless and a blight on the gene pool (*Oral Health Care for Persons with Disabilities*, University of Florida).

The U.S. has come a long way, no doubt, but there's still a long way to go before we can be satisfied with our attitudes toward and treatment of those with disabilities. People with disabilities are still called names and made fun of, interviewers for jobs sometimes prejudge them as less able, and many people in America might avoid dating or marrying someone with a disability or even divorce a spouse who becomes disabled. Stigmas exist here and throughout the world, and they cannot be changed through force. This "handicap" of society can only be destroyed by education. ■