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**Youths with Disabilities at Risk the Current Situation and the Way Forward**

**Abstract**

This paper explores three key social evils facing youths with disabilities. These evils present social risks threatening the mental, emotional and bodily integrity as well as the very survival of these young people as individuals and as a sector.

The paper draws on literature linking disability with identified social issues and goes on to present strategies for addressing the risks implied based on interviews with technical experts in the fields of National Security, Social Work and Disability Studies/Affairs. It concludes by highlighting the critical and urgent responsibility of national authorities to take strategic actions to protect youths with disabilities in particular against the ravaging tide of social ills facing this vulnerable sector of national populations.

**Key Words**

Youths with Disabilities; Risk; Situation; Way Forward;

**Introduction**

*Persons with disabilities* (PWDs) including children with disabilities have been marginalized for millennia in the international community and in particular the developing world. PWDs have been sidelined in multiple spheres of societal functioning including education, training,

employment, health and access to a range of social and other services. Children with disabilities in the developing world are at a particular risk as mainstream education has not generally provided reasonable accommodations to ensure that they have access to the highest standards of education and training. They are further at risk of unemployment once they come of age on account of the gaps in the education and training opportunities available to them and the discrimination against PWDs that exists in mainstream employment. These factors present direct threats to their social security which has critical implications for their life decisions as they mature, the options they have for survival and self-actualization and the situations in which they find themselves. PWDs are also often marginalized in their families, peer groups and other facets of human functioning which can create isolation and severe emotional distress, making such persons even more vulnerable on many levels. Existing justice systems also undermine the integrity of the redress which such persons have when their rights are violated as modern justice systems are plagued by poor communication standards (e.g. lack of alternative communication methodologies, reasonable support mechanisms for persons with mental and intellectual disabilities and the like) that limit the opportunities of PWDs to have an equal voice on the issues that hurt them. These factors work together to make persons with disabilities and youths with disabilities in particular, as the more vulnerable age group, demanded targets for sociopathic agendas. This implies social risks of the most urgent and critical forms, threatening the mental, emotional and bodily integrity as well as the very survival of *youths with disabilities* (YWDs) as individuals and as a sector.

## **Youths with Disabilities at Risk – The Current Situation**

With the rising tide of social evils facing young people in the modern world, youths with disabilities (YWDs) are particularly vulnerable to a range of dangerous and predatory trends that threaten their security and well-being. Three of these evils are highlighted here but this list is not exhaustive. These issues are discussed as a means of sensitizing target readers to the need to focus on youths with disabilities at risk and explore strategies for mitigating against these risks.

The issues explored here as they present particular risks for persons with disabilities are:

- Human Trafficking
- Sexual Violence and
- Bullying

These issues are explored in the following sections.

### **Human Trafficking – Modern Slavery**

The modern day slave trade is one of the fastest growing illicit industries in the world with 30 million people enslaved today (Not for Sale, 2014). After drug trafficking it ties with arms dealing for the second largest criminal industry, attracting annual revenue of US \$32 billion dollars. The essence of the trafficking experience is the denial of a person's inalienable right to his or her freedom – including the freedom to choose where to live, freedom to choose whether or not to work (and hours of work), freedom from threats (and multiple dangers) and freedom of bodily integrity (US Department of State (2012)).

Persons with disabilities are one of the groups most at risk of trafficking on account of their marginalization in the social, economic and justice systems and their lack of access to social

protection. A common trend in the international community is the selling of children into slavery by family members. In some cases with children with disabilities where prospects of marriage or employment do not appear promising, parents may place those children into exploitative situations with the intent of shedding a burden or seeking an income (Langham, 2013). According to a report published by the Asian Human Rights Commission, human traffickers often identify a person with a disability and develop a link with their parents, luring them through offering lucrative packages including advance money (Dharejo, 2011).

According to a survey by the *Stop Child Begging Project* in Thailand, children with disabilities earn three times more than those without disabilities, making them much more vulnerable to forced begging. Furthermore, Langham (2013) makes reference to Benjamin Skinner's book, *A Crime So Monstrous* in which the journalist gave an account of his most haunting undercover experience - being offered a young woman with Down Syndrome in exchange for a used car. In this horrifying industry a human being is viewed as an asset that can be "creatively leveraged" for life through forced prostitution, forced begging and other activities that undermine the very essence of what it means to be a person. The trauma associated with trafficking can cause victims to feel worthless and emotionally imprisoned. In this way victims may lose their sense of identity and security. (US Department of State (2012). They are also forced to live in abject misery until they acquire their freedom.

### **Sexual Violence**

According to the US National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (also in the US) people with physical or mental disabilities are at higher risk of sexual violence than persons without such disabilities (US National Library of Medicine and NIH, 2012).

Statistics linking disability, youth and sexual violence are alarming and highlight the critical need for interventions to address this issue. Sexual violence is an act (verbal or physical) which violates a person's safety and is sexual in nature (Wisconsin Coalition against Sexual Assault, 2014). These authors cited Johnson and Sigler (2000) who found that among adults who are developmentally disabled 83% of females and 32% of males are victims of sexual assault; and Hiday et. al (1999) who found that for individuals with psychiatric disabilities the rate of violent criminal victimization including sexual assault was twice as high as that in the general population. Children with disabilities are approximately 4 times more likely to experience violence than children without disabilities and 3 times as likely to be victims of sexual violence. Children with mental or intellectual impairments appear to be most vulnerable with close to 5 times the risk of sexual violence as peers without disabilities. (World Health Organization, 2012)

These statistics highlight the gaping and festering holes in humanity where persons with disabilities and children in particular are concerned. Clearly predators are attracted to what they perceive as vulnerability and childhood and disability are interpreted as easy marks for unthinkable violence.

## **Bullying**

Bullying is a relationship problem that occurs when persons are subjected to aggressive, harassing or manipulative behaviour when the intent by the person bullying is to harm the victim. People can be bullied at any age but children on account of their vulnerable maturity are at greater risk of bullying and its effects than adults. The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability (NCWD) in the United States reports that youths with disabilities are ten times more likely to be bullied than a typical student (NCWD, 2014). Child bullying can occur at the

peer level or a child may be victimized by older persons in the home or community. Professionals working with YWDs report that some children with disabilities are bullied in their homes on account of their disabilities and this may include being called derogatory names, other forms of emotional abuse, physical and sexual violence. Children who are bullied face many social and emotional risks including a higher risk of depression, anxiety, poor academic performance and suicidal thoughts or actions (Campbell and Missiuna, 2011).

As noted above, these issues are only three of a spiralling range of severe dangers to youths with disabilities in modern society, threatening their very existence. In accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the international legal framework, nations have a particular responsibility to protect persons with disabilities and assure them of their rights and freedoms as human persons. The threats to their security and survival posed by the predatory practices discussed above are in direct conflict with their human rights. As such, strategic interventions are required to address this conflict and mitigate against the impending violations posed by these social evils. The next section explores strategies for dealing with these chronic threats to the lives and safety of youths with disabilities. These strategies are based on recommendations made by technical experts in National Security, Social Work and Disability Studies/Affairs.

### **Youths with Disabilities at Risk – The Way Forward**

The situation as it is was explored in the context of interviews with technical experts in the fields of National Security, Social Work and Disability Studies/Affairs. The following strategies are based on the themes arising out of these interviews:

### **Review of the Social Security Systems for Youths with Disabilities at National Levels –**

National strategies must ensure that youths with disabilities are assured of lifelong social security. In the developing world this calls for a comprehensive review of existing social and educational services for persons with disabilities. For example, from the time of birth a child with a disability should be assigned a team of doctors, social workers, counsellors and education specialists to provide holistic guidance, support and lifelong follow up. Such follow-up would include the provision of protective services to ensure that the child is not being taken advantage of, abused or neglected; is accessing his/her full range of human rights and is accessing every possible opportunity for self-actualization. Governments must carefully assume their responsibilities to ensure that each individual with a disability has access to *authentic* social security for life through multi-pronged strategies including rigorous education and employment interventions targeted specifically at persons with disabilities as well as appropriate support mechanisms for those PWDs who are unable to access sustainable, well-paying employment - mechanisms that exceed disability grants that are insufficient to cover the true costs of living.

### **Preventative Education on Recognizing and Responding to Predatory Behaviours –**

There is a need for specialized education for persons with disabilities, their families and caregivers about how to recognize and respond to predatory behaviours. YWDs and their caregivers need to be able to identify predatory advances and to take action to prevent these. In the tragic event that such advances have developed into criminal activities, YWDs and their support groups must learn how to prevent reoccurrences of such incidents. Such education strategies can target places of learning serving YWDs as well as the public at large through the mass media. They must be inclusive and made accessible to youths having the full range of known disabilities.

### **Self-Advocacy and Empowerment Training for Youths with Disabilities and Their Families**

– YWDs and their families need to be educated about their worth, their rights and their powers as individuals and social groups such that they can effectively self-advocate in a range of situations including those in which there is impending or existing violence or danger of any kind.

### **Heightened and Inclusive Sexuality Education for Youths with Disabilities**

– Programmes targeting youths with disabilities should be designed to help these young people to be aware of their sexuality and their natural needs for love and affection. These youths must be equipped to distinguish between safe and unsafe modes of sexual behaviour and how to channel their own needs for love, affection and sexual expression in positive ways. Such education would aim to help them to develop sexual and emotional awareness as a guard against predatory advances. It must be inclusive and made accessible to youths having the full range of known disabilities.

### **Nationwide Parent/Caregiver Support Groups**

– Parent/caregiver support groups should be designed and developed to provide sensitization, counselling, training, education and support for parents and caregivers of youths with disabilities to equip them to plan effectively for the long-term safety and well being of their children/wards. In these groups they would also learn to mitigate against the social risks discussed here as well as others that are on the rise.

### **Sensitization and Training of Social, Health, Protective and Judicial Service Personnel**

– All personnel in the social, health, protective and judicial services should be sensitized and trained to work effectively with youths with disabilities. For example, social workers, medical professionals, police officers, magistrates and judges should be trained to work with the deaf and hearing impaired, the blind and visually impaired, people with speech disabilities, intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders and people living with the full spectrum of known

disabilities. They should also be trained to work specifically with youths. This will facilitate a more effective flow of communication and equip them with the skills that will allow them to work at a heightened level with YWDs in the service of justice.

These strategies are not exhaustive but are intended to guide policy and programme development aimed at promoting the human rights and dignity of youths with disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

YWDs are at a particular risk of predatory attacks in comparison to youths without disabilities. The social issues highlighted in this paper - human trafficking, sexual violence and bullying – have been explored as a means of sensitizing target readers to the fact that YWDs require particular protection if they are to be assured of their human rights. Protective mechanisms that may be developed to mitigate against social evils threatening their well being and survival include reviewing of the social security systems for youths with disabilities at national levels; providing inclusive preventative education for YWDs and their support systems on recognizing and responding to predatory behaviours; facilitating self-advocacy and empowerment training for youths with disabilities and their families; providing heightened and inclusive sexuality education for youths with disabilities; developing nationwide parent/caregiver support groups to help parents and caregivers to plan effectively for their children's/wards' lifelong safety and wellbeing; and sensitization and training of social, health, protective and judicial service personnel to serve YWDs with greater effectiveness.

These strategies are not exhaustive but are intended to serve as a starting point for addressing the horror of criminal activity as it affects YWDs. It is important for nations to be proactive in responding to rising criminal trends and the targeting of YWDs is one of these. Countries must

give due consideration to these and other strategies to address the predatory threats facing youths with disabilities as this is demanded by their human rights and required for them to be assured of lives of safety, well being and self-actualization.

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