

Persons with Disabilities and the Profession of Social Work in Pakistan: A Review of LiteratureDr. Sajjad Hussain^{*1}, Dr. Amir Alam², Sana Ullah³**Original Article**

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Abstract

Persons with disabilities in Pakistan face various hurdles in their adjustment in the society. These problems do not allow them to lead a descent life in society. The current study, by reviewing the existing literature, seeks to identify multiple problems faced by persons with disabilities in contemporary Pakistani society. In addition, it also explores the role of professional social workers in addressing those problems. The study summarizes that due to negative attitudes of the public at large, these marginalized people are stigmatized and are considered a burden by the concerned families. Moreover, girls and women who suffer from any disability are more prone to social and cultural barriers. Due to these barriers, they lack access to services and facilities which add to their problems. The study recommends that in order to lessen the problems of this marginalized segment of society the professional social workers should perform their roles in different capacities to help solve their issues on sustainable basis. Social workers can perform the role of bridge between this weaker section of society and government and non-governmental organizations to get maximum assistance for them.

Keywords: Disability; Problems; Social Work; Profession; Deprivation; Vulnerability; Stereotyping

Introduction

Disability is part of human life and throughout the world a large number of people suffer from disabilities (Institute of Development Studies, 2017). According to estimates, more than one billion people have some type of disability in which 80 percent belong to third-world countries. This deprived section of society face severe challenges in their daily lives such as health, education, participation and accessibility issues (WHO, 2011). The Convention on the Rights of Disable Persons state that disable comprise those who are suffering from intellectual, mental and sensory impairments from long time (Rab, Fahim, Khan, & Jones, 2018).

Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) are those vulnerable sections of society which need special attention in terms of provision of all facilities required to live a decent life (Leonardi, Bickenbach, Ustun, Kostanjsek, & Chatterji, 2006). In this regard, almost all nations of the world have launched measures to provide basic facilities to this special section of society. United States of America introduced Disabilities Act (1990) which led to the provision of maximum facilities like accessible buildings, ending discrimination, developing positive discourse about disable persons (Coastal Bend Centre for Independent Living, 2009).

While in develop nations, very little work has been done to ameliorate them. In this connection, Convention in the Rights of Child (1989) and Education for All (1994) are certain policies promulgated to bring them to the mainstream society (Whitburn, 2015). In addition, declaration of 1981 as international year of disable persons and approval of convention "Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), 2006 by United Nations is of vital importance for Pakistan as its signatory (Ahmad, Khan and Nasem, 2011). In light of these covenants, Pakistan has framed various laws and policies which have positively effected on the rights of disable persons including equality, civil rights and inclusion (Whitburn, 2015).

Government of Pakistan extends support to these Persons with Disabilities (PWD) through the Directorate General of Special Education and Social Welfare, as well as, Provincial Directorates of Social Welfare & Women Development. These include the ordinance of 1981 about Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation), followed by a National level Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002) and National Plan of Action for Persons with Disabilities (2006) (Ahmed, & Khan, 2011). Besides, Accessibility Code of Pakistan, 2006; Special Citizens Act, 2008; and Special Citizens (Right to Concessions in Movement) Act, 2009 are other efforts on the part of the government. Although realization of the aforementioned legislations in true spirit is yet to be materialized, steps have been taken in right direction. As Pakistan is a signatory to the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), it has to follow the universal convention. Pakistan's Government has ratified UNCRPD on July 5, 2011 (Ahmad, Ullah, Akram, Ali, & Gul, 2016). However, implementation of these policies is still a challenge.

Although almost all the nations of the world are trying their best to fulfill the needs of disabled population, still these persons with disabilities need assistive technologies, wheelchairs, prosthetics and hearing aids (Matter, Harniss, Oderud, Borg, & Eide, 2017). The conditions in Pakistan are also the same where 31 million people are likely to be living with some form of disability. These persons with disabilities face multiple problems like mobility issues and discrimination in socio-cultural spheres in contemporary society (Rathore and Mansoor, 2019). This paper aims to identify multiple problems faced by PWDs in Pakistani society. The paper also aims to identify grey areas in the existing policies regarding persons with disabilities (PWD) by reviewing the existing literature on the subject.

Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature and aims to examine the available literature in the form of books, research articles published by national and international publishers (Mohajan, 2018). The main focus is on issues related to disability, its impacts on PWD in particular and society in general. Help has been taken from available, United Nations Reports, Oxford Dictionary and research papers published during the year 2010 to 2020. Online literature was also consulted to present a clear picture of the problems to the readers, educators, planners and policy implementers. The study is based on analysis of secondary sources because a lot of studies have been conducted on the subject, but mostly these were based on primary sources. In addition, there was gap in the existing studies, that's why qualitative approach was adopted for the study.

Literature Review

Disability has been defined as incapability to carry out an activity due to loss of any organ or deformity in the body (WHO, 1980). It can affect a person directly or indirectly. Traditionally, while coping with disabled people, segregation and removing them from normal society was thought of as a solution. Over time, such thinking has changed and now disabled population is treated on

more inclusive grounds instead of the old pathological understanding of disability (World Health Organization, 2011). The most vulnerable among disable persons are those having visual or hearing impairment and persons on wheelchairs due to certain reasons, and amputation or arthritis. Stark stereotyping is faced by people with visual impairment, people on wheelchairs and auditory impaired people among the group of disable population (Gul, 2020). The PWDs are usually faced with the following challenges while living in society:

1. Social Stigma & Discriminatory Attitudes

Disability can affect a person at any stage of his/her life and due to pseudo thinking it is considered as curse of God on the person or family. Due to discriminatory attitudes, these persons with special needs are isolated from society and become a burden on their families (Mackelprang, 2010). Pakistan is also included in those South Asian Countries where these vulnerable persons face discrimination in all fields. In addition, people with disabilities face extreme conditions in society in the form of discrimination and social stigma (Rathore, New & Iftikhar, 2011). CRPD admits the issues faced by disabled people are a result of negative attitudes which do not permit them to live a descent life (United Nation, 2007). These negative attitudes and beliefs towards PWDs in Pakistan are against the religious values. According to Islamic teachings, PWDs are to be treated equally in all spheres of life (Bazna, & Hatab, 2005). In Pakistan, mostly the people do not consider them as useful members of society. They lack access to shopping centers, railway stations, hotels and educational institutions. Due to their stereotyping attitudes, they are considered as curse of God or punishment for their sins (Rathore, Farooq, Muzammil, New, Ahmad, & Haig, 2008). Sometimes the family members of the disable person consider them as a source of shame and guilt and use to hide them from people. Due to such behaviors the disable persons also feel themselves as burden on their families causing behavioral and emotional disorders for them (Rathore, New, & Iftikhar, 2011). Results of the research study conducted by Masih, and Ahmed, (2018) conclude that among persons with disabilities, mostly boys face more problems as compared to girls as the former have to go out of homes for education and in fulfillment of economic needs. Furthermore, they face challenges due to inaccessible facilities and negative attitudes of people. Moreover, girls with disabilities keep themselves limited to their houses and they seldom participate in social gatherings or attend education institutions. Shapiro (2000) elaborates that due to stereotypical behaviors towards PWDs, this marginalized section of society cannot contribute in development of society (Kennedy and Olney, 2001). These PWDs cannot perform their roles until and unless the social barriers in the form of negative attitudes of teachers, co-workers and peers are eliminated from society. These negative attitudes towards these marginalized people create hurdles in the performance of their roles and attainment of future goals (Anwer, & Awan, 2003).

According to advocates of social model, disability consists of all factors which does not permit the persons with disabilities to live a standard life and also include negative social behaviors, discrimination at workplace, lack of accessible infrastructures, unusable transport system, inaccessible educational institutions, libraries and hotels etc (Oliver, 1996; Hiranandani, 2005).

2. Problems Faced by Girls and Women with Disabilities

There are more physically/mentally challenged females than males. These female disabled persons receive much more harsh attitudes from the society in comparison to their male counterparts. In such patriarchal society, such females cannot participate in almost all the social spheres of life. The situation becomes bleak in rural societies, where impairment is made worse by neglect, ignorance, absence of healthcare at puberty, and strong patriarchal setups (Saeed, 2013).

Due to this male dominated society women suffer the most as compared to men. The situation is worse in rural areas, where due to illiteracy and ignorance they are ignored in all spheres of life. Due to cultural barriers like Purdah (veil) they cannot be helped by men. In addition, women with disabilities are operated for removal of their reproductive organs which limits their chances of getting married (Ahmed, 2019).

According to Helen Keller, the main handicap of the blind is not blindness, but the negative behaviors of people towards them. Attitudes can be either positive or negative (Dunn, 2015). Positive attitudes can lead to inclusion while negative attitudes may lead to discrimination and marginalization. Research studies confirm that negative attitudes of health care professionals have also been proved to be a constraint in their re-integration in the society (Kleintjes, Lund, & Swartz, 2013). Results of the study summarize that Pakistani doctors and nurses have little knowledge about health issues faced by PWDs. Their attitudes towards these marginalized people are also not good as they are not aware about their needs like assistive devices, interdisciplinary referrals and transport issues (Iftikhar, Alamgir, Maqbool, Rehan, & Akhtar, 2019). Research study conducted by Rabeea Hadi in two cities of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa i.e., Charsadda and Nowshera and Islamabad confirm that 77 % of women and girls are confronted with physical violence and among them 72% never complains or report it. In addition, women and girls with speech impairments and intellectual disabilities are more prone to both physical and sexual abuse because of their incapability to identify the responsible persons (Imran, 2019). COVID-19 produced more problems to the girls and women living with disabilities in Pakistan. In addition to the existing socio-economic problems, they suffered increasing domestic violence during lockdown due to disruption of protection (UN Women, 2020).

Role of Professional Social Workers in Rehabilitation of Persons with Disabilities

Social Work profession, like the practice of other professions, is the combination of value, knowledge, and methods – aims to enhance the capabilities of individuals, groups and communities to cope more effectively with their problems in social functioning (Bartlet, 2003). The main emphasis of this profession is to assist the marginalized sections of society including orphans, widows, elderly, children and persons with disabilities. In addition, social workers also work for awareness enhancement and for the protection of rights of persons with disabilities. They also strive for disable-friendly legislation in order to address their problems on sustainable basis (International Federation of Social Workers, 2010).

Throughout the world, professional social workers are delivering services for reintegration of persons with the disabilities in the society. According to National Association of Social Workers, it is the moral obligation of social workers to perform the role of advocates for provision of securing the rights of PWDs (Hassan, Khalid, Arshad, & Qursam, 2020). Contrary to this, Gilson, Bricout, & Baskind, (1998) hold that despite some achievements of social work profession in the field of disability, this profession could not promote the rights of disable persons, and social work theory and practice on disability is far behind in dealing with these marginalized people.

According to modern social work perspective, disability is termed as social relationship and not a fault of the affected person. This perspective stresses on the need and importance of social workers to work as bridge between the disable person and the society. In Australia, inclusion of PWDs is the function of the state authorities (Meekosha & Tamp; Dowse, 2007). By using the primary methods of social work like case work and group work; social workers can assist the client (disable person) and the group of disable persons. The worker, through collaborative efforts of the family members, can adjust them in society using the available resources (Trevillion, 2006).

In Pakistan, although state is trying its best to bring this weaker section of society to the mainstream, the state – due to meager resources – cannot support them fully. That is why the professional social workers can perform different roles for their inclusion in the society in the form of advocates, motivators, counselors, fund raisers and liaisons. There is scope for engagement of social workers because these professionals are aware of their functions and have knowledge and experience in the field of disability (Hussain, Shahzadi, & Khan, 2020).

In Pakistan, social workers are assisting this weaker section of society in government hospitals as well as in private institutions. They are helping them to get prosthetic and orthotic appliances and help them adjust in the society. These social workers also support them in getting medical aid as and when required in health settings (Hussain, Munir, & Ibrar, 2020).

According to Riaz (2015) medical social work is becoming more and more important due to their multiple roles in health settings in the form of being counselor, case manager, crisis intervention specialist and social medical officer in drug abuse treatment centres and psychiatry wards and rehabilitation centers for PWDs.

Conclusion

The study summarizes that persons with disabilities are the weaker sections of society and are suffering from various problems. The main reasons of their problems are their disabilities on one hand, while attitudes of people towards them on the other hand, which are not appropriate. They are not treated equally and due to discriminatory attitudes, they are stigmatized in their families, relatives, general public and even in their schools and workplace. Girls and women with disabilities are also not an exception. In Pakistani culture girls and women with no disabilities are not at par with their men counterparts in getting required services and facilities. While the handicapped girls and women are in worst position and are considered burden on families and even their reproductive organs are removed as men prefer to marry a normal girl than a disabled. In rural areas, they lack access to medical facilities, education and recreation. In addition, due to cultural constraints like Purdah (veil) the disabled unmarried women cannot be helped by other men except their parents and siblings. If a girl with disability succeeds in getting education in one way or the other, she faces other problems like employment, accessibility, transportation and domestic violence. Government of Pakistan has introduced various measures for provision of maximum facilities to all persons with disabilities, but still a lot needs to be done both by government as well as non-governmental organizations. Social Work professionals are also trying their best to provide services to this weaker section of society to bring them at par with their able-bodied persons in society in terms of provision of services and facilities. These include provision of psycho-social support, provision of orthotic and prosthetic appliances, educating people both formally and informally regarding the rights of PWDs and advocacy for their rights. Still there are some gaps on the part of social workers which need to be filled to make this profession more updated and effective. The facilities available for PWDs are mostly concentrated in big cities while those living in rural areas lack access to these few services.

Recommendations

The study recommends that in order to make PWDs as productive members of society, they need equal treatment on the part of general public and governmental level as well. The government, by making necessary legislation, can afford them maximum facilities for their effective reintegration in the society.

These PWDs should be provided with accessible transport for pick and drop from home to educational institution, workplace, hospitals and shopping centers. In educational institutions, the

classrooms, offices, libraries and recreational centers should be accessible. Mobile applications should be introduced for their guidance to reach the buildings.

Mass media and social media should be used to create awareness among people regarding the rights of PWDs. The religious leaders can also play an effective role in guidance of people regarding facilitation to PWDs. Through their religious teachings and sermons, they can mould public opinion and remove misperceptions of people regarding disable persons and disabilities.

The professional social workers can bring a lot of change by highlighting the gaps in the existing laws and can recommend legislation in order to make it more useful. Laws should be strictly implemented and those who torture, abuse and sexually and physically exploit girls and women with disabilities should be punished.

A twenty-four hour toll-free help line should be established where these PWDs, in case of any emergency, can report their problems to the concerned persons and get immediate help. The nongovernmental organizations and bar councils in each tehsil and district should provide free legal aid to disable victims.

Academia, government departments especially ministries of social welfare and women development, and non-governmental organizations need to work together and explore ways to overcome the problems of this weaker segment of society. Seminars and workshops should be organized for creating awareness regarding the rights of PWDs. Small and medium enterprise development authorities should launch programs for productive employment of those PWDs who want to start their small businesses at their homes.

Curriculum of medical sciences and orthotic sciences should be revised and material regarding special education and disability related concepts should be taught to the medical students. In addition, nurses, both male and female, should be trained to assist PWDs in institutional care.

Online training programs should be started for engagement of PWDs so that they can earn money in a dignified manner and can make themselves self-sufficient. Their capacity should also be enhanced regarding online sale and purchase.

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