

Reflecting on Disability Rights in Contemporary Ethiopia

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The World Report on Disability published by the World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO) state that over 15% of the global population live with disabilities. Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) across the globe are often denied their fundamental human rights through systemic discrimination, prejudice, stigma, and abuse. The social model of disability has for long been at the center of academic discussions surrounding the 'problem' of disability as a socially constructed entity, whereby PWDs often face societal barriers. This model has been praised on the ground as a powerful tool for socio-political activism (Oliver 2009);¹ and for igniting discussion on the socio-historic nature of oppression that PWDs face (Longmore 2003).² However, this discourse has been challenged on the due emphasis it gives to societal barriers and its essentialist tone, while undermining other structural factors (Terzi 2004).³ The post 20th century human rights movement has embraced and advocated for the human rights approach to disability. The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities creates a substantial global commitment to adopting a human rights framework providing a key source for a Human Right Based approach. Such a human rights perspective means:

viewing people with disabilities as subjects and not as objects. It entails moving toward viewing persons with disabilities as rights holders. Importantly, it means locating any problems outside the person and especially in the manner by which various economic and social processes accommodate the difference of disability or not as the case may be (Quinn and Degener 2002).⁴

Discussions in Disability studies, emphasizes the need to critically examine and challenge the discourse of *ablenationalism*, "the degree to which treating people with disabilities as an exception valorizes able-bodied norms of inclusion as the naturalized qualification of citizenship" by modern States (Snyder and Mitchell 2010).⁵

¹ Oliver, M. 2009. *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice*, 2nd ed, Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

² Longmore, P. 2003. *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

³ Terzi, L. 2004. 'The Social Model of Disability: A Philosophical Critique'. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 21(2): 141-57.

⁴ Quinn, G. and Degener, T. 2002. *Human Rights and Disability: The Current Use and Future Ppotential of United Nations Human Rights Instruments in the Context of Disability*. Geneva.

⁵ Snyder, Sharon L. and Mitchell, David T. 2010. 'Introduction: Ablenationalism and the Geo-Politics of Disability.' *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, 4(2): 113-125.

The World Report on Disability published by the World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that persons with disabilities in Ethiopia constitute at least 17.6%, albeit the exact data has yet to be substantiated by a disability-inclusive national census. There is scant academic/non-academic literature and consolidated database providing basic information on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia. As a result, existing accounts on protection and/or violations of the rights of persons with disabilities are by-and-large anecdotal.

Most persons with disabilities in Ethiopia reside in rural areas hit with poverty where basic rehabilitative services are inaccessible and where cultural stereotypes are deep-rooted. The Ethiopian government took a number of legislative and policy measures to advance the rights of persons with disabilities ranging from signing and ratifying international instruments, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), to developing national laws and policies. They often, however, face wide-ranging human rights abuses. Regardless of the magnitude of disability-based violations of rights, there are only few local civil society and international organizations engaged in working towards promoting the rights of persons with disabilities.

This themed issue of EJHR incorporates high quality articles on a wide range of themes including contributions with a critical perspective on legislative and policy landscape, global, regional and national jurisprudence in interpretation and application of the rights of people with disabilities in the Ethiopian context (E.g., contributions by Tamru, Endris, Elizabeth, and Yilikal). Some of the contributions assess the role of organizations of PWDs (OPDs), the civil society, and non-governmental organizations in promoting the right of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia (E.g., see contribution by Tamiru). The discussion raised in this volume underscores the need to pay attention to inclusiveness of services to persons with disability and attending to the hierarchies of the rights of persons with disability i.e., the ways in which some voices remain unheard and certain identities are more protected than others (see contributions by Workneh et.al., Endris, Elizabeth and Yilikal). The contribution by Elisabeth on its part underscores how the internet plays a great role in amplifying the opinion and action of persons with disabilities and critically reflects on issues of internet accessibility and digital inclusion in the context of contested political transition where inclusive policy-making could be a challenge. The insightful contributions included in this volume accentuate that adopting a human rights perspective and an effective monitoring mechanism will play a significant role in protecting and realizing the rights of Persons with Disabilities.

As the Editor, I foresee threefold contribution of this volume. First, it contributes to the existing gap of literature on the subject matter. The

second contribution is the academic contribution it makes to conceptual, theoretical, and methodological discussions on disability research. Third, it has practical implications in the areas of inclusive strategies.

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