

Foreword

Back in 2002 when I joined the Addis Ababa University (AAU), Faculty of Law, I was one of the two students with physical disabilities in a cohort of approximately 120 students. I remember, as if it occurred yesterday, how excruciating it was for me and my classmate with a similar disability as mine to attend our classes every single day by climbing the stairs of the antique, disability-unfriendly, two-floor building where the AAU Faculty of Law was, and still is, housed. I recall how I was not able to use the University's largest library, the John F. Kennedy Memorial, for five solid years until I was just about to graduate, because the library did not have a simple ramp for those of us with mobility limitations and our appeal for the authorities to rectify this remained in vain across those years. Long story short, I barely had pleasant memories of 'college life' as a student with disability due to multi-faceted external barriers that could and should have been alleviated, if not averted altogether.

While the aforementioned and a plethora of other structural, deep-rooted instances of disability-based marginalization we used to grapple with a few decades ago still do exist to a certain extent in our universities, there are nonetheless some visible strides being made too. The publication of this first-ever Special Issue of the Ethiopian Journal of Human Rights (EJHR) within the auspices of the AAU Center for Human Rights focused entirely on *Disability Rights in the Ethiopian Context* is one such indicator of a milestone step in the right direction which would have been unfathomable in the not-so-distant past. As a polio-survivor myself and an alumnus of the AAU Faculty of Law, it a humbling honor for me to have been invited to write a Foreword to this EJHR Special Issue on *Disability Rights in the Ethiopian Context*. I would like to extend a profound thanks and note of congratulations to the Editor-In-Chief for not only envisioning but making a pioneer project of this kind happen against all odds. I can imagine the uneasy labyrinth of coordinating and bringing any academic journal into fruition, let alone one that is fully dedicated to the often sidelined theme of Disability Rights. A word of immense thanks also goes to each author and reviewer who made the time, out of their busy schedules, to contribute outstanding pieces of chapters on six diverse topics analyzing Disability Rights in the Ethiopian legal and policy arena.

Critical Disability Studies, in general, and Disability Rights Studies, in particular, are nascent territories in the global human rights academia. It is in the past decade, especially with the advent of the international binding treaty on Disability Rights, i.e. the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which entered into force in 2008, that academic institutions worldwide have realized the evident need to incorporate disability as a subject in their curricula. Some renowned universities in both the global North and South have even gone a step further and launched full-fledged, standalone undergraduate, graduate

and post-graduate courses, programs and journals on Disability Rights. For centuries, disability and persons with disabilities have been deemed objects of charity and/or, at best, a mere medical concern falling within the ambit of public health and rehabilitation studies; not more, not less. It is this erroneous disposition that the CRPD, ratified hitherto by 184 UN Member States, is fundamentally challenging and beginning to uproot. Disability, as per the CRPD and contemporary schools of thoughts, is essentially a social construct that manifests itself when one's impairment (caused by natural or unnatural causes) meets social, environmental and systemic barriers, including discriminatory laws and policies. Disability is much more about structural and societal factors imposed on a person with an impairment or impairments than it is about the individual's limitation *per se*. Accordingly, asserts the CRPD, persons with disabilities are entitled to their inherent dignity, human rights and freedoms on an equal basis with others, irrespective of their disabilities. Ableism – that is, a tacit or explicit prejudice against persons with disabilities – is now in the same category of identity-based discrimination outlawed under international human rights law such as racism, sexism, etc.

Ethiopia has ratified the CRPD in July 2010. The country's current Constitution stipulates, under Article 9(4), that all international treaties ratified by Ethiopia shall *ipso jure* become the laws of the land. Eleven years since the ratification of the CRPD, the inclusion of disability and citizens with disabilities in socio-economic and political agenda in Ethiopia, albeit better than the pre-2010 era, continues to be far from satisfactory. Meanwhile, several sources estimate that persons with disabilities constitute at least 17.6% of the country's total population. The impact that human rights research institutions and notable journals with wide readerships such as EJHR can have in enabling positive systemic changes in this regard, in the interest of creating a better nation for all, cannot therefore be overemphasized. This Special Issue on *Disability Rights in the Ethiopian Context* contains well-articulated pieces on the following wide-array of pertinent topics:

- Exploring Adolescents with Disabilities' access to Education, Social Protection and Employment Opportunities in Ethiopia
- Supported Decision-Making for Persons with Mental and/or Intellectual Disabilities: An examination of Ethiopia's legal and institutional framework in light of the CRPD
- Recognition' Status of Ethiopian Sign Language and the Deaf in Key Legislations on Languages: A Critical Review from Linguistic Human Rights Perspective
- Muted voices online: the role of the internet in amplifying freedom of expression of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia.
- The role of civil society organizations in promoting the rights of persons with disabilities in Ethiopia

- Rights of Persons with Hearing and Speech Disabilities in Criminal Prosecution under the Ethiopian Criminal Justice System

I do not have an iota of doubt that readers will find these chapters practical, useful and richly informative for their works of advocacy, studies and further research on Disability Rights in Ethiopia.

Thank you,

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