



Youth at the United Nations

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Youth living with disabilities

Briefing Notes on Youth is a new awareness-raising activity from the United Nations Programme on Youth. The primary purpose of the Briefing Notes is to provide information on an issue from a youth policymaking perspective. It is hoped that it would also be a catalyst to promote further research and stimulate the debate on youth issues.

Introduction

Do you know a young person living with disabilities? Have you ever thought what their life is like and what concerns they might have? Maybe the thought has never crossed your mind. Throughout history, persons with disabilities (PWDs) were largely invisible, and despite being the world's largest minority they continue to be in a number of places. You might be surprised to learn that youth with disabilities (YWDs) are amongst the most marginalized and poorest of all the world's youth, whose basic rights are not well met and full societal acceptance has a long way to go.

Although the topics discussed in this brief such as education, employment, and relationships affect youth generally, they are more pronounced in youth with disabilities. Like PWDs generally, YWDs do not enjoy the same human rights as their non-disabled peers. The international community recognised this and after three years of negotiation, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in December 2006. More than 80 countries signed the Convention at the signature event in March 2007 and it is expected that the Convention will enter into force shortly.

At its core, the Convention ensures that persons with disabilities enjoy the same human rights as everyone else, and are able to lead their lives as fully-fledged citizens who can make valuable contributions to society if given the same opportunities as others. It marks a paradigm shift from seeing persons with disabilities as objects of charity and pity to acknowledging their human rights. In some instances, the Convention will give persons with disabilities effective human rights for the first time.

The Convention notes that "persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments." The extent that these impairments make someone disabled is dependent upon the level of attitudinal and environmental barriers in society. Examples of these can be seen everywhere from stairs into buildings, reading materials in inaccessible formats, and prevailing negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities. The more barriers the less likely persons with disabilities are able to participate in society.

Youth and disabilities: Selected trends

Youth with disabilities is a severely under-researched area, with limited data on its prevalence and the effects on youths themselves. There are over 650 million PWDs and around a third of these are youth. Nearly 80% of youth with disabilities live in developing countries (United Nations 1990). The lack of an agreed definition makes international comparisons difficult. Although the actual figures are uncertain, it is clear that YWDs form a significant proportion of the youth population in every society.

The number of YWDs is likely to increase due to youthful age-structures in most developing countries and medical advancements allowing those to survive who might not have just a few years ago. Indeed, youth itself can be a contributing factor, as young people are at an increased risk of acquiring a disability through such incidents as road traffic accidents, injuries from diving and other sport activities, violence and warfare (Aito et al. 2005, Cripps 2003, Karacan et al. 2000).

Statistics from several countries show that the incidence of spinal cord injury is highest among youth. In Canada, for example, over half of those with spinal cord injury were aged between 15 and 24 at the time of their accident (Canadian Paraplegic Association 2003). In Australia, the incident rates of spinal cord injury are highest for those aged between 15 and 24 (Cripps 2006).



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Family Situation

The family is the central unit in the lives of most youth. For some families having a YWD may bring them closer together, but for others it can pose significant challenges. In many places, there is considerable societal stigma and sometimes shame imposed on families with YWDs. Members of the community may disassociate themselves from individuals of that family. Many may question why they would want to raise a YWD. Perhaps there is even a curse associated with that family. Feeling embarrassed and ashamed, families often do not acknowledge having a YWD and may limit the interaction of the YWD with the rest of society.



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Many families believe that their children need protection, thereby stifling their independence that can lead to lower self-esteem and a weaker sense of identity. This attitude prevents YWDs from reaching their full potential. The proportion of YWDs living independently is considerably less than for the general population (United States 1993). YWDs are frequently in a vulnerable position within their family, and PWDs are more likely to be subjected to physical or sexual abuse than the rest of society (Groce 2003). Many may be institutionalized during their adolescence as their families find it too difficult or are too old to care for a grown individual (Groce 2004). A number of YWDs will find themselves on the street, with one estimate suggesting that 30% of street youth have a disability (UNICEF, 1999).

Education

Education is as critical for realising the full potential of YWDs as it is for their peers. Yet, UNESCO estimates that 98% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school and 99% of girls with disabilities are illiterate. By the time they enter adolescence many youth with disabilities run a high risk of being illiterate, leading to restricted opportunities to further education, employment and income. Many families do not feel that YWDs should receive an education often believing that disabled young people are incapable of learning (Groce 2004). In societies that favour males, female YWDs are

at a particular disadvantage as families may be particularly reluctant to allocate resources to them.

In other places, youth with disabilities may not receive sufficient training to be able to function fully in their society. Educational establishments are often inaccessible and lack appropriate facilities. Teachers frequently have preconceived ideas about what is appropriate for their students with disabilities, often resulting in the exclusion of YWDs from certain activities. These barriers cause many YWDs to dropout of school before their peers (Levin et al. 1986, Hollar 2005), thereby limiting their opportunities in the future. Studies in the United States show that youth with disabilities have higher rates of alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse than their peers (Hollar and Morgan 2004, Hollar 2005, Kessler and Klein 1995). YWD remain under-represented at higher education institutions, although numbers are increasing in several countries (OECD 2003).

The World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY), adopted by the United Nations, in 1995, calls upon states to pay particular attention to the education of youth with disabilities. The Convention has provisions to ensure that persons with disabilities receive an education that allows them to develop their full potential. In particular, it emphasises the right to an education within an inclusive education system.

Employment

Not receiving the skills and qualifications to function in the wider society, limits the employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. Unemployment rates for PWDs are higher than the non-disabled population in every society. For example, in some countries of the Asia-Pacific region the unemployment rate of PWDs is over eighty percent (ILO, 2002). With limited education and skills, YWDs have difficulties competing in the labour market. Negative perceptions of YWDs held by employers, for example, that they are less productive than their peers, require too much assistance, affect the employer's image, and/or concerns over initial hiring costs (e.g. building ramps, accessible IT) pose a formidable barrier to YWDs looking for employment. YWDs are given little room for error, and are quickly labeled unemployable if they are unsuccessful at their first job. For female YWDs, the situation is even worse as they have to counter societal prejudices against women and disabilities. Even with a good education, female YWDs take a longer time to find a job (Roggero et al. 2005). These negative perceptions do not correspond with studies that show that PWDs are just as productive, dependable, and less absent from work than non-disabled workers (Du Pont 1993, Zadeck and Scott-Parker 2003).

The WPAY urges countries to take measures to develop the possibilities of youth with disabilities. The Convention also addresses employment concerns by stipulating that PWDs have the right to work as everyone else and should not be discriminated against in the workplace.

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Sex and Relationships

Can you remember your first date? Do you remember your anxieties, insecurities, and nervousness? Sexual relationships are difficult to manage at the best of times, but having a disability adds further dimensions. In most places, society incorrectly believes that youth with disabilities are asexual and/or cannot be abused (Milligan and Neufeldt 2001, Groce, 2003, 2004). Access to reproductive health information is often not available to YWDs, or disseminated through such inappropriate means as inaccessible clinics or by providers who cannot communicate with YWDs. Few education programmes cater for the reproductive needs of youth with disabilities. In Rwanda and Uganda, for example, YWDs do not receive advice on HIV/AIDS, as the clinics are physically inaccessible, material is not available for those with visual impairments, and providers are unable to communicate in sign language. Moreover, most health care professionals have no disability awareness and consequently feel unwilling or unable to address their issues (Yousafzai et al. 2005). This example is far from unique and highlights that YWDs are vulnerable to sexual abuse and rape.



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The lack of social acknowledgment of their sexuality has several negative consequences for YWDs. Many will believe these negative attitudes and refrain from sexuality and intimacy altogether (Milligan and Neufeldt 2001). Well-meaning parents may not acknowledge their children as sexual beings and discourage them from expressing any form of sexuality (Di Giulio 2003).

Other YWDs will have relationships, but without receiving appropriate education may undertake high-risk activities. Some might go through several uncertain relationships, as the marriage of PWDs is frowned upon in a number of places and in some cases even legally prohibited (Groce 2003, United Nations 1995). In polygamous societies, young women with disabilities are unlikely to become the primary wife (Groce 2004). One study found female YWDs are more likely to be mothers three to five years out of school than their peers (United States 1993).

The Convention recognises the right of persons with disabilities to form relationships, marry and to start

a family. It also states that countries should provide persons with disabilities access to the same sexual and reproductive health that non-disabled individuals enjoy.

Acceptance

How would it make you feel knowing that people do not want to interact with you because it makes them feel uncomfortable? Imagine your feeling of loneliness and hurt if this occurred to you. Picture also the frustration of youth with disabilities wanting to be with their friends only to find that transportation is inaccessible, entertainment venues are unable to accommodate them, and/or are perhaps inappropriate as meeting places such as discos or cinemas for deaf youths.

As social creatures, humans desire a sense of identity and belonging - a desire to be part of a community that respects and appreciates you for who you are. Yet for YWDs, societal prejudice, other youths feeling awkward in their presence and environmental barriers largely prevent them from being accepted. The greatest impediments continue to be discrimination, prejudice, and social isolation (Despouy 1991).

Ignorance of disability concerns results in the needs of YWDs being unrealised, leading to a loss of self-esteem, self-worth and the creation of social isolation. Youth programmes seldom address issues of youth with disabilities; much less include them into activities. Other initiatives directed at youth often overlook those with disabilities. However, these societal misapprehensions need not be the case. When YWDs interact with their peers, and there is a sense of belonging, these barriers collapse (Green 2003).

Greater awareness and understanding of disabilities is fundamental to improving this situation. Technological innovations such as the Internet and appropriate software adaptations have created opportunities for YWDs, giving them a sense of belonging. The Internet has helped put YWDs in touch with their peers without the disadvantages of other ways of meeting people. It helps to break down barriers and heightens the sense of belonging. Can you think of other ways?



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Concluding Remarks

The experiences that people face in their youth shape the rest of their lives. Youth with disabilities face the same issues as their non-disabled peers, but societal prejudices, barriers, and ignorance exaggerate their concerns. To date most societies have not fully integrated YWDs, leading to segregation and the condemnation of a whole segment of the population. Clearly, more work is required. The new Convention offers hope for improving the current situation. In many places, it will offer youth with disabilities human rights for the very first time, facilitating the process that empowers them to address the multiple societal challenges they face.

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