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Navigating Diversity: Enhancing Social Work Practice through an In-Depth Understanding of Disability

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Abstract: This research paper aims to examine the relationship between disability and the field of social work. It highlights the significance of social workers in recognizing disability as a distinct diversity group and promoting inclusive interactions that go beyond traditional, charitable and welfare approaches. By utilizing the secondary sources of data, this paper identifies the core values and principles that underpin social work

practice with the disabled, elucidates the application of a multicultural approach, and also explores the role and space of social workers in fostering the development and empowerment of persons with disabilities. Thematic analysis was used to construct the sub-themes for confirming the main theme of the study.

Key words: Disability, Social Work, Inclusion, Empowerment, Diversity.

INTRODUCTION

Respect for cultural diversity is a fundamental value of the social work profession. The Professional Associations in social work charge social workers with the ethical responsibility to be culturally competent and set out the indicators to achieve the standards for cultural competence in social work practice. Cultural competence evolved throughout the last two decades, not only as an ethical standard but also as a concept, a set of principles, knowledge theory, and practice framework (Lum, 2011).

The emergence of Social Work as a distinct field of study and profession is attributed to its interdisciplinary nature, drawing upon various social sciences. Through collaborative efforts with individuals, families, groups, and communities, Social Work aims to promote collective existence at multiple levels and effect systemic changes that combat societal injustices.

Social Work engages with systems and policies, conduct assessments, develop interventions, and enhance social functioning and responsibility. Therefore, the domains of Disability and Social Work, multiculturalism and Social Work, working with vulnerable groups and Social Work, as well as social inclusion and Social Work, emerge as significant areas of focus within the field of Disability Studies. A pivotal responsibility of Social Workers is to empower marginalized groups and communities, while actively addressing prevailing social inequalities. Disability, as an inherent aspect of the human condition, is subject to multifaceted marginalization within the society. Consequently, Social Workers assume a crucial role in advocating for the rights and well-being of disabled individuals, as well as fostering inclusive practices.

Persons with disabilities endure persistent direct and indirect discrimination, abuse, and social stigmatization as a recurring aspect of their daily existence. This unfortunate reality can be attributed to the failure to perceive disability as an intrinsic facet of the human condition, the pervasive lack of understanding regarding the potential for anyone to experience disability at any given time and place, and the failure to acknowledge the inherent diversity among individuals comprising society. Persons with disabilities are recognized as constituting a distinct diversity group, and various intersecting factors, such as sex, age, gender, sexual orientation, religion, race, ethnicity, and economic status, contribute in shaping their unique life experiences and health requirements (WHO, 2023). However, disability is often excluded from the recognition of diversity in comparison to other forms of plurality. This exclusion frequently leads to the violation of the rights of individuals with disabilities, perpetuation of social abuse, discrimination, and enduring social stigma. Consequently, societal perceptions of persons with disabilities continually impact their overall well-being.

According to Jane McPherson et al. (2018), it is critical for social workers to become familiar with the larger set of human rights - including social and economic rights - and put them into practice because respecting and validating these rights has the potential to transform our clients, our societies, and our social work profession. At this juncture, the role of the Social Worker is to establish a discourse that acknowledges and treats individuals with disabilities with the same human dignity afforded to other members of society. Different models of disability, including the dialectical, charitable, medical, and social model approaches, have shaped societal perceptions, often leading to the exclusion rather than acceptance of persons with disabilities as a diverse group within society. In order to promote the

inclusion and acceptance of persons with disabilities as a part of human diversity, it is imperative to adopt a rights-based approach.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) emphasizes the principle of "dignity for the difference" and the acceptance of persons with disabilities as an integral part of human diversity and humanity. In this context, it becomes crucial to examine the relationship between disability, diversity, and the field of Social Work. Exploring this relationship can shed light on the ways in which Social Work can contribute to the advancement of inclusive practices, advocacy for the rights of individuals with disabilities, and the promotion of social justice within society.

Therefore, to foster an inclusive society through social work education, social workers should promote acceptance of multiculturalism and diversity. This paper aims to understand disability diversity in social work practice. The main purpose is to address the following questions: What is the relationship between disability, diversity, and social work? How disability is currently perceived? What are the barriers in promoting disability as a diversity group? What is the role of social workers in promoting disability as a diversity group?

Secondary data sources, including published books, research papers, internet articles, and YouTube lectures, were used for this research paper. Qualitative analysis was conducted through thematic analysis in line with the objective of understanding the diversity of disability for social work practice.

Disability, Diversity, and Social Work

Social Work is a multifaceted profession that combines practice-based expertise and academic knowledge to facilitate social change, foster social cohesion, and empower individuals. Central to Social Work are principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities. Drawing upon a range of theoretical frameworks from Social Work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge systems, Social Work engages with individuals and societal structures to address life challenges and promote well-being. This comprehensive definition acknowledges that the understanding and application of Social Work may vary at national or regional levels, reflecting diverse social contexts (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014).

Since its inception, Social Work has been recognized globally as a Human Service Profession, contributing to social change and transformation. Similar to its counterparts in Western countries, Social Work has gained international recognition, evolving from a charitable approach to a professionalized and empowering model. This profession has traversed a trajectory encompassing welfare, development, social justice, and a rights-based approach, emphasizing empowerment (Bhatt and Sanyaal, 2019).

The core purpose of Social Work is to improve society and safeguard marginalized and vulnerable populations (Farkas and Romaniuk, 2020). In the realm of crisis and disaster risk management, it is essential to identify and address the needs of vulnerable groups, including the elderly, children and individuals with mental and/or physical impairments. These groups exhibit varying levels of susceptibility to hazards and crises, experiencing disproportionate impacts. The concept of a vulnerable group refers to a population within a country that possesses specific characteristics placing them at a higher risk of requiring humanitarian assistance and facing exclusion from financial and

social services. During crises, these groups require additional support and specialized measures, necessitating enhanced capacities within the emergency phase of disaster management (Kuran et al., 2020).

It is also to be noted that Persons with Disabilities often experience low rates of economic and social participation, heightened poverty levels, abuse, poor health, and social exclusion (Bigby et al., 2018). Consequently, it is crucial to comprehend society's perception of Disability and gain a comprehensive understanding of the fundamental concepts related to persons with disabilities. This knowledge encompasses the complex and sensitive issues that contribute to their victimization and/or exclusion. To effectively educate Social Workers working with persons with disabilities, it is essential to grasp the services and programs available to address their challenges and to implement appropriate intervention strategies to enhance their well-being. This empowerment is pivotal for the development of effective practices in working with individuals, groups, and communities affected by disabilities within the current scope of Social Work (Bigby et al., 2018).

In light of these considerations, it is important to explore the positive relationship between Disability, Diversity and Social Work. When contemplating diversity within a society, one typically considers dimensions such as gender, race, class, religion, and ethnicity. Disability, however, is often overlooked in this context. Nevertheless, like other aspects of identity, persons with disabilities face exclusion and marginalization due to their differences. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) emphasizes the principle of recognizing and respecting persons with disabilities as part of human diversity and humanity, positioning the discourse on Disability within the broader framework of diversity, pluralism, and social inclusion.

Even in countries like Sri Lanka and India, Disability has not been widely recognized as a component of human diversity. It is not acknowledged as a natural phenomenon that can affect anyone at any time. Furthermore, the classification of Disability reveals a significant degree of diversity, with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act in India identifying 21 types of disabilities. These include blindness, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and various other conditions. Individuals with disabilities can be found in various settings, including families, educational institutions, workplaces, and public transportation, highlighting their presence within the fabric of society.

The proportion of people with disabilities is expected to rise steadily due to factors such as increased longevity for those with lifelong disabilities, higher survival rates among those who acquire disabilities in adulthood, and the correlation between aging populations and age-related disabilities. Disability is a broad concept that encompasses individuals across the lifespan and impacts multiple aspects of their lives. Moreover, individuals with disabilities are also part of other populations, defined by factors such as gender, class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and geographic location, which often compound the disadvantages they face as disabled individuals (Bigby et al., 2018).

Recognizing Disability as a dimension of diversity holds significant importance within the domain of Social Work. While diversity in society typically encompasses dimensions such as gender, sexuality, color, race, class, caste, religion, culture, language, and ethnicity, the inclusion of Disability as part of this diversity is not always immediately apparent. However, the experiences of individuals based on these grounds often entail similar instances of exclusion and marginalization.

The preamble of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities emphasizes the importance of recognizing the rights of individuals with disabilities, including the recognition of their human dignity, worth, and the principle of non-discrimination. Acknowledging the diverse nature of disabilities becomes crucial in safeguarding the rights of individuals with disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). Therefore, promoting discourse on diversity, pluralism, and social inclusion becomes essential in protecting the rights of disabled individuals within society.

Social Workers, by standing against injustices faced by disabled individuals, work towards their well-being and advocate for their equal rights. They serve as agents of change. Consequently, an understanding and embrace of diversity can significantly contribute to the well-being of at-risk groups through the intervention of Social Workers. Diversity is an indispensable aspect of success in the field of Social Work. Although not always apparent, Social Work professionals provide services that promote diversity, pluralism, and social interaction within society. Since its inception, the profession of Social Work has advocated for social change, recognizing the profound significance of diversity in achieving its goals.

Challenges in Recognizing Disability as a Diverse Collective

Barriers to the inclusion of individuals with disabilities within the spectrum of human diversity can be elucidated through various models of disability. Throughout the 20th century, two prevailing perspectives have significantly influenced our understanding of disability. The first perspective perceives disability as a tragic condition necessitating charitable assistance (Oliver, 1999). Within the framework of the charity approach, individuals with disabilities are regarded as passive recipients of benevolent acts or welfare provisions, rather than as empowered individuals entitled to political, cultural, and personal development opportunities. This approach fundamentally views persons with disabilities as incapable of self-sufficiency due to their impairments, thereby necessitating societal provisions on their behalf. The charity approach overlooks the impact of environmental factors and considers disability primarily as an individual predicament. Consequently, individuals with disabilities become objects of pity, reliant on the benevolence of society. Moreover, their needs are entrusted to duty bearers such as charitable institutions, residential homes, foundations, and religious establishments, to whom society delegates responsibility for disability-related policies and care provision. Under this model, persons with disabilities experience disempowerment, lack control over their own lives, and face limited or no opportunities for active participation. They are often perceived as burdensome to society. Due to the voluntary nature of charity, the quality of "care" provided may not consistently meet adequate standards or receive sufficient attention (UNHRC, 2014).

The second prevailing perspective that has shaped our understanding of disability throughout the past century is the medical model, which views disability as an illness necessitating medical intervention and the involvement of healthcare professionals. However, over the past three decades, this perspective has been increasingly challenged, largely driven by the advocacy of disabled individuals themselves. Disabled people have asserted that their challenges are not the result of personal tragedy, but rather stem from society's failure to accommodate their needs. Consequently, they argue for social change rather than relying on charitable assistance (Oliver, 1999). Furthermore, disabled individuals contend that disability and illness are distinct concepts, and many of their difficulties can be addressed through environmental modifications rather than individual medical interventions aimed at curing or altering them (Oliver, 1990).

Within the medical model, the primary focus lies on the individual's impairment, which is portrayed as the root cause of inequality. The person's needs and rights become subsumed within or equated with the medical treatment provided to or imposed upon them. The medical model propagates the notion that individuals can be "fixed" through medical treatments or rehabilitative measures in order to reintegrate into society. This is particularly evident in the case of individuals with mental impairments, where medical treatment offers an opportunity for a "bad" patient (as persons with mental disabilities are often stigmatized as being dangerous) to transform into a "good" patient. To attain self-sufficiency, individuals with disabilities are expected to be "cured" of their impairments or, at the very least, have their impairments minimized to the greatest extent possible. Within this framework, environmental factors are disregarded, and disability is treated as an individual predicament. Persons with disabilities are perceived as being ill and must undergo a process of fixing in order to achieve a state of normality (UNHRC, 2014).

The medical model of disability grants significant power to professionals such as doctors, psychiatrists, and nurses, who exercise considerable authority over individuals with impairments. Within institutional settings, decisions regarding patients' aspirations are made within a medical framework, and if complete rehabilitation is unattainable, individuals with disabilities may remain confined to these institutions. Achievements and failures experienced within these institutional walls are often attributed to the impairment itself, thereby justifying the outcomes. In extreme cases, this approach can legitimize exploitation, violence, and abuse (UNHRC, 2014).

The medical model of disability is frequently intertwined with the charity approach. Charities, for instance, raise funds for and operate rehabilitation facilities. In this combined model, the medical industry and the State assume the role of duty bearers. Additionally, charity houses, residential homes, foundations, and religious institutions play significant roles. Within this model, persons with disabilities experience disempowerment, lack control over their lives, and have limited or no opportunities for active participation. The interests of persons with disabilities are commonly represented by the medical industry, professionals, and charitable organizations, as they are perceived to possess the knowledge of what is best for their patients (UNHRC, 2014).

The predominant perspective within social work regarding disability has been the medical model, which views disability as a functional limitation, individual problem, pathology, dysfunction, or deviance. According to this model, the "problem" of disability is situated within the individual, and functional limitations or psychological losses are seen as inherent to the individual's deficits (Vidya-Mitra, 2016). The medical model often associates disability with personal tragedy, highlighting the individual's suffering within a competitive social context. In contrast to the medical model, social work should adopt a social and cultural viewpoint rather than a framework rooted in personal tragedy, encompassing grief, loss, bereavement, and mental and physical difficulties (Vidya-Mitra, 2016).

The social approach presents a markedly different perspective, recognizing disability as the outcome of the interaction between an individual and an environment that fails to accommodate their differences. This lack of accommodation hinders the individual's participation in society. Inequality is not attributed to the impairment itself but rather to society's inability to eliminate barriers faced by individuals with disabilities. This model places the person at the center, shifting the focus from the impairment to the recognition of the values and rights of persons with disabilities as integral members of society. The social model is crucial in examining disability models, including the charity model,

utilitarian model, and medical model. The most suitable framework for analysing disabled people and diversity is provided by the social model, which addresses disability comprehensively (UNHRC, 2014).

Within the social model, disability is not regarded as a "flaw" or mistake of society but as an aspect of its diversity. Disability is considered a social construct resulting from the interaction between personal and environmental factors within society. It is not an individual problem but rather the consequence of a societal organization that fails to accommodate diversity. Accordingly, society should restructure policies, practices, attitudes, environmental accessibility, legal provisions, and political organizations to dismantle the social and economic barriers hindering the full participation of individuals with disabilities. The social model opposes the charity and medical approaches by emphasizing that all policies and laws should be designed with the active involvement of persons with disabilities. In this model, the duty bearers include the State, encompassing all government ministries and branches, as well as society at large. Individuals with disabilities are empowered, assume control over their lives, and enjoy full and equal participation alongside others. The burden of disability is not placed on them but on society (UNHRC, 2014; Vidya-mitra, 2016).

The human rights approach to disability builds upon the social model by recognizing persons with disabilities as rights holders and emphasizing the responsibilities of the State and others to respect these rights. It considers societal barriers as discriminatory and provides avenues for individuals with disabilities to address such barriers through complaint mechanisms (UNCRPD, 2006). A rights-based approach to disability is driven by principles of dignity and freedom rather than mere compassion. Its goal is to create conditions that enable meaningful participation of a diverse range of individuals, including persons with disabilities, in various aspects of society such as education, employment, politics, culture, and access to justice (UNHRC, 2014).

The core values and principles of the human rights approach to disability are enshrined in Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006). These principles include the freedom to make choices and individual autonomy, non-discrimination, full and effective participation and inclusion in society, respect for diversity, and the inherent dignity and autonomy of persons with disabilities. Other principles encompass equality of opportunity, gender equality, respect for the evolving capacities of children with disabilities, and the right to maintain one's identity (UNCRPD, 2006).

Social work has also approached disability from an ecological or psychosocial perspective to promote diversity, inclusivity, and pluralism in society. It recognizes the importance of expanding the traditional medical perspective on disability to include social factors such as stigma, architectural barriers, and awareness of a social structure constructed by able-bodied individuals. This perspective emphasizes that the extent of disability is influenced by the dynamic interactions between individuals and their environments, rather than being solely attributed to the individual (UNCRPD, 2006; Vidya-Mitra, 2016).

Role of Social Worker promoting Disability as diverse group

Social work is dedicated to promoting the rights of individuals with disabilities and their environment. Within the framework of disability rights, social workers adopt a rights-based approach to their work with diverse groups of individuals who identify as disabled (Vidya-Mitra, 2016). It is crucial for social workers to understand the perspectives embraced by disability rights movements and shift their focus

towards empowering and emancipating disabled individuals, rather than adhering solely to medically prescribed treatment plans or traditional psychosocial interventions. Social workers play a unique role in facilitating collaboration between disabled individuals, their families, communities, and relevant health, education, professional, and social services.

Promoting recognition of disabled individuals as a diverse group, social workers can facilitate significant psychological changes at the individual, family, group, and community levels. Given the negative societal attitudes towards disabled individuals, discrimination, and various myths, disabled individuals often do not feel like valued members of society. Therefore, social workers can intervene to foster positive behavioral changes, such as enhancing self-efficacy, improving group consciousness, reducing self-blame, and fostering personal responsibility for social change. Developing a sense of belonging and membership in society is essential for disabled individuals, and social workers play a vital role in creating that awareness.

Understanding the relevance of social work practice in the field of disability requires knowledge of various social work perspectives when working with disabled individuals. Acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively engage with disabled individuals is crucial, as is understanding the role social work plays in promoting social integration, respect for diversity, and meeting the basic needs of disabled individuals, including companionship, satisfaction, employment, adequate income, and access to entertainment.

Unfortunately, prevailing negative social attitudes towards disability often hinder social interactions and impact the well-being of disabled individuals. Thus, social workers have an important role in intervening with families that may fear stigmatization due to having a disabled family member. Intervening with families is one of the key responsibilities of social workers.

Professional social work is rooted in problem-solving and change management. Social workers can contribute to promoting interaction and diversity in society by employing a range of skills, techniques, and activities that focus on disabled individuals and their environment. By partnering with service users, families, caregivers, staff, and service providers, social workers aim to identify needs, empower disabled individuals and their families, and improve their quality of life. Through systematic intervention, knowledge, and professional practice, social work interventions can bring about significant societal change.

In order to effect social change at a macro level, it is important to also focus on indirect social work practices that address family groups and communities and promote disabled individuals as a diverse group. This approach involves developmental strategies for the integration of disabled individuals, policy-making, development programs that are disability-sensitive, and educational initiatives aimed at promoting understanding and acceptance of disability as a part of human diversity.

Drawing on the philosophy of Paulo Freire, Spencer (2008) argues that both dominant and targeted groups have a critical role in dismantling oppression and envisioning a socially just future. This suggests that achieving a just society for all requires collective efforts, not solely the responsibility of oppressed groups. To promote social justice and create social change, social workers must engage in self-reflective processes that examine the contradictions between their espoused values and lived experiences (cited by Sukramani & Verma, 2013).

Within a multicultural framework that emphasizes pluralism, culture is viewed as a political arena where minority groups advocate for recognition and resources. Social work's approach to multiculturalism and promotion is crucial in the politics of recognition and integration of disabled individuals as a diverse group into society. Social workers can contribute to promoting cultural dialogue, preserving unity, and fostering harmony among minority cultural groups. This, in turn, may lead to accommodation by all parties and enhance social harmony.

CONCLUSION

This paper emphasized understanding the diversity of disability for the use of social work. The paper sought to further promote the themes of acceptance of inclusive diversity and appreciation of pluralism, which are of central importance in social work education. This paper explores the intricate relationship between disability, diversity, and the field of social work, emphasizing the vital role of social workers in transforming societal perspectives on disability and advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities. By examining social work as both an academic discipline and a profession, this paper illustrates how it can contribute to social change by fostering the well-being and empowerment of disabled individuals through direct and indirect means. Furthermore, this paper goes beyond conventional approaches to disability, underscoring the significance of promoting social inclusion and pluralism by recognizing disability as an inherent aspect of human diversity. Multicultural and human rights approaches are particularly highlighted as pivotal in fostering this paradigm shift. Moreover, this paper elucidates the skills and methodologies that social workers can employ to challenge societal perceptions and dismantle stigmas associated with disability.

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