Violence Against Persons with Disabilities is a Global Human Rights Issue

(State Dept.)

From the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor at the U.S. Department of State.

Over the past two decades, the disability community has more openly discussed the issue of violence against persons with disabilities. As a result, governments and members of society in more countries are paying greater attention to the issue. This increased awareness is also the result of a stronger, more organized disability rights movement, and the impact of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the more recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Emerging evidence suggests that women and girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to violence, including sexual abuse. Women and girls with disabilities are more likely to experience abuse, and do so over a longer period of time than their non-disabled counterparts. However, they are much less likely to report such crimes to the authorities. To address this kind of challenge, the SDGs call for the disaggregation by disability of proposed indicators for gender-based violence.

Children with disabilities, persons with intellectual disabilities, and persons living in institutional settings also face a greater risk for sexual violence. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, persons with disabilities are more than twice as likely to be a victim of non-fatal violent crime than counterparts in their age group who do not have disabilities. According to a 2004 study of the European Parliament, women with disabilities in the European Union were estimated to be four times more likely to experience sexual abuse than their peers without disabilities.

Violence against people with disabilities has, in many cases, not been properly addressed by law enforcement or judicial systems. People with disabilities often do not have access to the legal system. The law enforcement community may not respond appropriately to reports of violence against people with disabilities, leading to a lack of reporting and prosecution. Governments need to be held accountable to ensure that cases of violence and abuse against persons with disabilities is taken seriously and properly prosecuted. As long as perpetrators' of crimes are not prosecuted, people with disabilities are at great risk of being targeted for violence and abuse, as abusers will know they can do so with relative impunity.

Of course, to truly end the scourge of violence against people with disabilities, we also need to address the social stigma and isolation that accompany a disabled person in far too many parts of the world. That's why the Department of State, through our diplomacy and programs, supports efforts to empower women and men with disabilities, and ensure that they are visible, active participants in their communities.

Violence against persons with disabilities has been ignored by too many for far too long. More governments and civil society are increasingly recognizing abuse on the basis of disability, and are taking action to address this form of discrimination. The women's rights community must work proactively to address violence against women and girls with disabilities. We must also remember to engage in this work those people who become disabled as a consequence of violence, particularly

women and girls. It's time that we all recognize its harmful impacts. Violence against persons with disabilities denies us the inalienable human rights we all deserve; and we cannot afford to ignore it any longer.

HIV/AIDS is a human rights issue too

Students make a formation in the shape of the red ribbon, the universal symbol of awareness and support for those living with HIV, during a campaign to mark World AIDS Day. (State.gov)

Since 1988, December 1 has marked World AIDS Day to commemorate people who have died from the disease and to show support for those who are living with HIV. Because of antiretroviral medication, HIV is no longer an automatic death sentence. But the stigma surrounding people living with the chronic medical condition and their difficulty in getting access to health care has made HIV/AIDS a human rights issue as well as a health challenge.

According to Noor Raad, an HIV/TB policy intern at Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), misinformation has led to much of the stigma faced by people living with HIV. "One of the myths is that HIV is only for gay men, and so if you have HIV that means that you are participating in that type of behavior," she said.

"Another myth is just the ways that you can become infected with HIV," Raad said. Some incorrectly believe that the disease can be transmitted simply by touching someone with HIV or drinking from the same cup.

"Children who are HIV-positive face a lot of discrimination and judgment and social isolation at school because of this. A lot of their peers think that if they sit next to them they can get it, and this is an ongoing problem … all over the world," she said.

At the same time, she said, many people fail to understand that sharing a needle actually is a way to get infected.

Raad said HIV is prevalent among groups that are often already marginalized, like sex workers, gay men and drug addicts. She said up to 40 percent of adults in central and southern Africa are HIV-positive, and across sub-Saharan Africa the average infection rate has risen from 25 percent in 2005 to 36 percent today.

"There are a lot of human rights implications that have been raised for people living with HIV — in particular, the large and growing disparities and inequities regarding access to antiretroviral

therapies and other forms of care and treatment," including shortages of medication and an insufficient number of health care personnel, Raad said.

"What ends up happening is patients feel very isolated and they lack peer support," she said, noting that the isolation can lead to mental health issues, in addition to the challenges of living with HIV. "A lot of the patients that I worked with, I think like 80 percent of them, were either depressed or anxious or had suicidal thoughts, or tried to kill themselves. So I think on top of all of that, if you have negative energy from your peers and you are being socially isolated, it's just kind of a setup for disaster," Raad said.

Despite the fact that many countries have laws protecting people living with HIV, the laws are not always enforced. For sex workers, gay men and drug users who are disproportionately affected but whose activities are often criminalized, many fail to seek help, fearing legal punishment as well as the judgment of their community. The result is that those who most need information, education and counselling will not receive it, even where such services are available.

Raad said it is usually not possible for people to hide the fact that they have HIV because it is a required disclosure at work or school, and in smaller communities people will likely know why a person is visiting a health clinic. Those living in poverty or in rural areas also have difficulty accessing medical care when facilities are far away or poorly staffed. Raad said MSF has made supplying decentralized care an important part of its mission, especially in central and West Africa.

There are several ways you can help people with HIV feel less stigmatized, she said.

- Educate yourself on the myths and facts surrounding HIV transmission.
- Speak out when you hear jokes or derogatory comments made about people with HIV.
- Join a local NGO or support group that is advocating for the rights of people living with HIV or a support group that is actively trying to combat stigma and get medications to them.
- Organize a workshop or training session at school or work, or through your community or your religious organization, to spread the word on how to prevent infection and to better educate your peers so those living with HIV will not be targeted or judged.
- If you know someone with HIV, create a safe space for them to talk about their condition and feel less socially isolated. "The fact that they shared that information with you is a pretty big deal," Raad said, since many don't even tell their parents or families. "The most important thing is to gain the person's trust and make them feel that they are not being judged," she said.

Stay tuned to the YALI Network to find out how to participate in our upcoming human rights course. Earn your certificate and share your stories of what you are doing to promote inclusiveness and end marginalization! Learn more and get involved at yali.state.gov/4all!

Why equality is not the same as equity

The words “equality” and “equity” look similar, sound similar, and even point to the same concept of fairness. So it is understandable if, at first, you think they mean the same thing.

As the YALI Network kicks off its #YALIStands4All campaign focused on human rights, not only the rights but also the opportunities of minority groups and other communities will be discussed in greater detail. Understanding the difference between equality and equity is a great way to start thinking about human rights in your community.

Put in the simplest terms, equality means “sameness,” and equity means “fairness.” People who grew up impoverished are probably familiar with the difference, since they had to work much harder to receive the same level of education as many of their peers or to find networking opportunities that came more easily to others.

(State Dept./Doug Thompson)

Should every student receive exactly the same amount of resources and funding for their education? That is a question of equality. Should students who come from more difficult circumstances get more in order to ensure that they can catch up? That is a question of equity. By ensuring equity, a society can ultimately enjoy equality.

Leslie Lefkow, deputy director for Africa at the organization Human Rights Watch, said these types of questions fall into a broader discussion of access and the differences in how various governments deal with economic, social and cultural rights.

Unfortunately, “what we often see is an overlap between corruption and marginalization of vulnerable sectors of society and access to state attention or resources,” she said.

Governments can address equity by taking action that favors disadvantaged groups. They can devote additional resources, for example, to ensure poorer households are not disproportionately burdened with health or educational expenses, or require businesses and all public services to be accessible to people with disabilities.

But there are also steps you can take for your business, organization or community to be proactive and demonstrate awareness. For example:

- Create a public statement of nondiscrimination with regard to gender, ethnicity, religion, disability or sexual orientation and include it with your written and online materials.
- Actively recruit members of marginalized or disadvantaged communities to be a part of your organization or create formal partnerships that encourage cooperation.
- Train staff, teachers and others not only to value and respect diversity, but also to see each individual as themselves — not as a category or a member of a certain group.

As an individual, don’t forget about your own role as an internet user. Lefkow said the internet has “obviously been an incredible tool for people economically … to access markets and to strengthen entrepreneurs and businesses.” But “it also has real potential downsides, like being a vehicle for hate speech and incitement.”

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