

## **Justice and Rights for Children with Disability: A Global Situation Analysis**

*By, Cynthia Bauer, Kupenda for the Children Founder and Executive Director*

*March 20, 2016*

People with disabilities are often overlooked, even by organizations focused on the marginalized. While listening to the many amazing speakers at the Justice Conference I noticed that not one mentioned people with disabilities as a marginalized group when listing the vulnerable of the world. I do not think this is purposeful considering the vision of the Justice Conference is to “reach tens of thousands of people over the next decade to educate, inspire and connect a generation of men and women around a shared concern for the vulnerable and oppressed.” I wonder if, just like the rest of the world, those with disabilities are forgotten...even when we are trying to mobilize people to support the oppressed.

According to the World Health Organization in 2004 “A billion people in the world, 15% of the population, have a disability severe enough that it limits their participation in family, community and political life. Eighty percent of those billion people live in low and middle-income countries, where often access to basic health and social services is limited for all citizens.” Not including the 50% of families impacted by disability in the underdeveloped world (UN report), if all people with severe disabilities were in one location they would constitute the third largest nation in the world! According to multiple sources, only five to ten percent of people with disabilities are included in the outreach of the church. If one considers this percentage and the number of people impacted by disabilities they would be larger than the largest unreached people group. Since there is a likelihood that anyone could become impacted by disability at some point in their lifetime people with disabilities are not truly equivalent to an ethnicity or culture. Although missiologists may not consider people with disabilities an official “people group”, the high magnitude of people left out of many Christian missions is important to consider. Issues that impact everyone effect people with disabilities to a greater extent. Many people have difficulty understanding the needs of people with different kinds of disabilities and need support from experts to include them. Therefore, if proper training is provided to missions/justice organizations for inclusion of all people, we would more thoroughly follow the mandate of reaching ALL God’s people with His love. This would mean inclusion of people with disabilities in the justice conversation and subsequent action. Examples of areas that impact people with disabilities, more than those without, include; poverty, education, healthcare, abuse, legal rights, and church outreach. An entire book could be written about each of these areas as they pertain to disability. I’m just going to touch on each category based on some basic research and my own experience working with families impacted by disability in East Africa and the U.S.

Poverty covers most of the issues of social justice and mission. It is both the cause and result of disability around the world due to lack of access to proper healthcare, war, and other issues related to low socioeconomic status. Many poverty focused organizations are taking steps to prevent disabilities but few are making significant efforts to ensure inclusion of those who are irreversibly disabled in

their work. Research reveals that “poverty rates for working-age people with disabilities is almost two and a half times higher than that for people without disabilities.” ([Talkpoverty.org](http://Talkpoverty.org)). Lack of employment opportunities results in many people with disabilities being more susceptible to participation in criminal behavior and begging. One of the major issues that motivated me to start the organization I run for kids

with disabilities was the high number of people with disabilities begging on the streets. Too many of the special needs girls we work with have sold their bodies for food and become pregnant at an early age and forced to drop out of school. Even though people impacted by disability are more likely to need assistance, accessibility is often not considered when developing job programs, affordable housing, or other access to financial assistance. A friend working in Baltimore city with affordable housing told me that they had to spend thousands of dollars to make one low income living space accessible because it wasn't considered when building the housing in that neighborhood. There are some disability organizations focused on poverty issues connected to disability but not enough to impact such a large global population. Partnership and awareness is key to even make a dent in the numbers of people with disabilities stuck in poverty.

There are many people with disabilities that would be capable of escaping poverty if they had access to education. A large number of countries have legal mandates requiring education be made available to all children regardless of ability yet lack the ability to implement them. According to [Global Citizens](#), up to 95% of children with disabilities are not in school due to a combination of discrimination, lack of properly trained teachers, and physically inaccessible schools. Since education is the key to resolving a great deal of suffering in the world many organizations focus on it. However, it is rare for children with disabilities to be a consideration in their strategic planning. For example, when I was in Tanzania an American nonprofit organization built new school facilities but they did not have ramps for wheelchairs and the toilets were all too narrow to be accessible. The expense to change this was minimal so it was simply a matter of disability just not being on their radar. Others believe it is too much of a challenge when so many children without disabilities are in need. This makes it seem as if those without disabilities are a priority over those who do. The disabilities that require more attention from teachers and/or expense in the school should be discussed with experts in disability to help meet their needs.

Although not true for all disabilities, a large number of children would be able to get education if there was a change in the attitudes of teachers, parents, and students. Too often I have seen children with physical abnormalities put into the few existing special needs boarding schools in Kenya even though they have no mobility or intellectual limitations. If education focused organizations included awareness about children with disabilities in their training programs, giant steps could be made for inclusion of these special kids without significant cost or staffing increases. This awareness could also provide more incentive to increase funding and staffing for children with disabilities that require more intensive attention and/or equipment.

Many with disabilities need more healthcare than those without disabilities. Some also have additional

conditions that require medical attention. Therefore it is strange that, in addition to the prohibitive costs of healthcare, people with disabilities encounter other barriers to proper medical treatment. For example, in some places, women in wheelchairs cannot get mammograms because the equipment requires the patient to stand. In addition to a multitude of physical barriers at medical facilities (inaccessible equipment, poor signage, narrow doorways, internal steps, inadequate bathroom facilities, etc.) many health care workers have poor attitudes towards those with special needs, especially in underdeveloped countries. According to the World Health Organization people with disabilities seeking medical attention are “four times more likely to report being treated badly and nearly three times more likely to report being denied care.” In addition to being refused care some with disabilities never get to medical facilities in the first place due to transportation or communication limitations. Some of those we work with in Kenya, in need of immediate medical attention, have reported that they were denied public transportation due to their wheelchair taking up space for other able-bodied people. We also recently lost a teenage girl in Kenya who was deaf because she was unable to properly inform anyone about her symptoms to receive timely medical attention. The key to resolving these issues is for organizations focused on health to consider the obstacles, those with disabilities face, when conducting trainings and constructing medical facilities.

Every kind of abuse encountered by people around the world occurs more by those impacted with disabilities. A new [national survey](#) found that more than 70% of people with disabilities have experienced physical abuse, usually repeatedly. According to the [Washington Coalition of Sexual Assault Programs](#), 83% of women with disabilities will be sexually assaulted and more than half experienced it multiple times. Sexual assault on young children with disabilities is far too common and we have known of many cases. For example a nine year old Kenyan girl supported by our program was raped by her neighbors. Her cerebral palsy limits her cognition, communication, and control over her limbs.

Therefore she was helpless against her attackers and could not identify them. The inability to easily report crimes, is the major reason deaf women are targeted by sex traffickers in Kenya and Tanzania. Children with physical disabilities are trafficked to earn money as beggars for their kidnappers. The abuse also occurs by their own families. We have encountered children with autism chained to trees, children with cerebral palsy locked in their houses with no access to food or water, and even a child with Down syndrome in a cage. Any groups with missions targeting abuse issues, should be prepared to deal with a variety of disabilities. For example, knowing how to access a sign language interpreter could increase the success of those trying to stop the atrocities of sex trafficking. Understanding the behaviors connected to different emotional or intellectual disabilities would aid in helping more abuse victims. When developing programmatic strategies to minimize abuse, the obstacles of disability need to be addressed.

Legal rights of people with disabilities are often written in legislation but implementation is rare in underdeveloped countries. The [United Nations Enable Project](#) reports 159 countries signed the 2003 treaty on the rights of people with disabilities which was the basis for the development of more than 180 countries that are at some stage of developing legislation that protects these people. Even when

there is approved national disability acts, very few families impacted by disability are even aware that it exists. When we hold meetings with parents or government officials we bring a copy of the disability act of the country (Tanzania or Kenya). So far, it was completely new information for all involved. This is one reason that less than ten percent of people with disabilities attend school in Tanzania and Kenya even though both countries have laws that say all schools must cater to the needs of children with disabilities. People with disabilities are not only unaware of their rights they are often in prison at higher rates than people without disabilities without appropriate legal representation. According to [The National Disability Rights Network](#) “it is estimated that as many as 50 percent of prisoners have a mental illness or other type of disability. Jails and prisons have become the ‘new asylums’ -- a costly response to mental health care.” They also report “Those who are convicted and confined in penal facilities tend to serve longer sentences than others convicted of similar crimes, and prison conditions are harsher due to their disabilities.” Two teenage boys, who are deaf and supported by my organization, were falsely accused of rape and kept in prison for three days without anyone to interpret for them in prison. They would only allow a government appointed translator so no one else was allowed to visit and explain to them what was happening. There are many organizations that work to improve injustices in legal systems around the world. It is unclear if these groups have anything in place to ensure those with disabilities are included in their work for justice connected to legal issues.

The religious belief systems of most cultures is often a bigger obstacle than any other physical barrier. However church activities, including evangelism, are often inaccessible to families impacted by disability and many people in the church somehow forget the very people Jesus spoke about most. It is a result of oversight, ignorance, or intentional exclusion. According to the [Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism](#) less than 10% of people impacted by disability are effectively reached with the gospel. As mentioned previously, this means that people with disabilities equate the largest unreached “people group.” Many churches equate disability with evil or punishment from God. This often results in abusive practices within the church. In my experience in Kenya, I have known of children with cerebral palsy that had their skin cut to “release the demons” that caused their condition. Others I have known personally were told that if they had faith God would heal them. When they are not healed, they are even further alienated from the church. Some of our children with cerebral palsy have scars on their bodies where the pastors cut their skin to “release the demons” causing their disability. Many of those involved in church planting, pastor training, and other evangelical outreach, do not include the difficult theology surrounding disability and the biblical mandate to love all people regardless of ability.

Additionally, churches are often physically inaccessible. We were told that the first wheelchair ramp we constructed in Kenya, was the only one anyone knew of in the district. Other churches used it as an example. Physical inaccessibility is true throughout the world, not just developing countries. The church, the very institution that is supposed to reach out to the marginalized, forgets about those who need acceptance the most. I have not found any conclusive statistics for the number of churches that are physically accessible. Living in New England, with many historical churches, I’ve witnessed very few churches that are easily accessible to wheelchair users. I’ve also met several American families impacted by disability who were told to leave the church because they could not accommodate the

special needs of their child. There are multiple resources in existence on how to make churches more accessible in all ways. The key is to get churches and those organizations focused on evangelism to want the resources in the first place.

The categories of justice that impact people with disabilities barely touched on here include poverty, education, healthcare, abuse, legal rights, and church outreach. Each category overlaps with the others and there are certainly more areas that may not have been covered here that are included in justice efforts. Humanitarian and Evangelical organizations seek to follow God's call to serve "the least of these" so the lack of inclusion for people with disabilities is likely unintentional. It doesn't make it less real of an issue. Efforts seeking to improve the lives of those who are less advantaged need to understand how to include those with disabilities in their efforts. Those familiar with the needs of people with disabilities could serve as consultants to help organizations ensure they have the capacity to include all of those who suffer. Workshops focused on disability issues could be held to help organizations strategically incorporate disability in their work. People with disabilities are often ignored by their communities throughout the world. We need to ensure that justice organizations are not another place excluding the very people who need them the most.