

DISABILITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY – THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

My name is Jane Namarome and I was a summer student here at *Realize* working as a project assistant. This role was a new opportunity for me because I come with frontline experience particularly in HIV/AIDS and harm reduction work. I have always been a champion for equality with emphasis on feminism, equity and intersectionality, so while working at *Realize*, I began to reflect on the little to no representation of people of colour within the disabilities sector in Canada. I then also thought about all the movements that I have been a part of, which never really had people with disabilities represented. Intersectionality within the disabilities movement seemed to be the elephant in the room that no one in the disabilities sector, was speaking about.

Living with a disability comes with various barriers and challenges, but what about people with disabilities who play multiple roles in this world, such as, a woman living with a disability from a minority group whose first language isn't English? How will this person navigate their way within Canadian society? Provided the information is out there, is it accessible to them when they need it?

According to the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) Act, a “person with a disability” is a person with a substantial physical or mental impairment that is continuous or recurrent, and is expected to last a year or more. I couldn't help but feel this definition wasn't inclusive of all disabilities. The questions of episodic and intellectual disabilities lingered in my mind after reading this and I wondered where they were represented in this definition.

I came across a video online of “The Consumer Alert” which is a segment that is part of CTV news. In the segment, the topic was concerning the challenges people with disabilities face in gaining employment. CTV Consumer Issues Journalist, Pat Foran, interviews a man who has a physical disability and during the interview, he discloses that it took him a very long time to finally get the job that he had. Pat Foran then reveals that the individual has a master's degree, but despite all of that, he still had a tough time finding employment. I appreciated the fact that this conversation was being had, however, that did not represent the whole picture of what people living with disabilities have to endure in their day to day lives. In fact, it rather gives a one sided view.

In order to get a better understanding of disability and intersectionality, I spoke to two experts in the disabilities field in Canada, namely, Neil Belanger and Professor Laverne Jacobs. Neil Belanger is the Executive Director of the British Columbia Aboriginal Network on Disability Society (BCANDS). He is a member of the Lax Se el Clan (Frog) in the House of Nika'teen within the Gitksan First Nations and has worked with a variety of First Nations organizations across British Columbia throughout his career. Laverne Jacobs is a law professor at the University of Windsor and a Founding Director of the Law, Disability & Social Change Project.

My conversation with Neil gave me insight into the services that BCANDS provides, as well as the wide range of barriers that people living with disabilities that are from Indigenous communities face. To set the context, we discussed the history of discrimination against people living with disabilities and during this conversation: Neil added background from the Indigenous perspective. The first thing that came to his mind when he thinks about disability is the traditional definition of disability, in addition to that, however, BCANDS understands the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder and the impact of residential schools added to the racism

that Indigenous Peoples experience as a community. BCANDS looks at the full spectrum of an individual's experience – physical, mental, spiritual and developmental. When asked the same question i.e. how would she define disability, Professor Jacobs shared that she viewed disability not simply as impairment, but more so as the barriers that people face when they go out into society. To her, it's a lack of forethought and including everyone who happens to inhabit our world.

I also discussed the meaning of intersectionality with them both and how it is reflected in their work. Professor Jacobs disclosed that as a person living with a disability who is also from a Caribbean background, she tries very hard to vocalize intersectionality and disability. Neil shared that at BCANDS, when a person comes into their office for support and/or social assistance, his team makes it a priority to understand the individual as a whole. The organization seeks to find out the experiences that the person may be going through that aren't disability related, but impact on their whole life.

When asked about the impact of historical discrimination on people living with disabilities, Neil believed that with respect to Indigenous Peoples living with disabilities, we need to take a further step back to recognize how history has had a huge impact on society's view of Indigenous communities to begin with. We discussed the history of racial discrimination and residential schools. Neil believes that this history has largely contributed to the negative attitudes society has of Indigenous communities overall. In his opinion, there has been no real change in attitudes towards Indigenous Peoples, however, where discrimination related to people with disabilities is concerned; he believes that there has been some movement in attitudes towards less stigma and discrimination. This does not prevent, however, Indigenous Peoples who also live with a disability from experiencing discrimination on the basis of both their race, as well as their disability.

Neil stated that over the years he has realized that disability organizations do want to work with Indigenous Peoples, but they don't know how to go about it and seemed to have not made the effort to learn how to. The lack of being prioritized within the disability sector prompted BCANDS to begin "Indigenous Disability Awareness" campaigns.

Professor Jacobs, when asked the same question about the historical discrimination of people living with disabilities, told me that the history of discrimination against people with disabilities dates as far back as the 1800s – and beyond – and gave the example in the United States during the 1800s when there were municipal ordinances that referred to people living with disabilities as the "maimed". Those ordinances were called "Beggar Ordinances" because most people with disabilities had to resort to begging on the street as they were not allowed to work. Professor Jacobs is of the opinion that all types of service providers can address these issues by conducting surveys to find out what the real needs are for the people with disabilities that they may serve, thereby, also raising awareness and meeting the particular needs of that community. She also emphasized the importance of having information readily available for people with disabilities in places that are easily accessible to them.

Growing up in the affluent part of Uganda and then moving to an affluent neighborhood in Canada, I was accustomed to having resources and services being almost spoon fed to me. I was under the impression that if you needed a service, it was in near reach, however, I got a rude awakening when I got older and went on to live in underserved communities in Canada. Only

then did I see the discrepancies in the resources I had access to. Keep in mind, I was still Jane Namarome, only this time my address had changed, which for me and a lot of people means little to no access to various services.

During my conversation, I also wanted to find out if similar barriers, that is, barriers to accessing much needed services, were experienced in the disability community. Professor Jacobs finds that where people living with disabilities are concerned, they most often don't even have the information readily available to find out where they can access needed services and resources. Neil on the other hand, feels strongly that there is a huge discrepancy in health services and infrastructure available to non-Indigenous communities versus Indigenous communities. Both Professor Jacobs and Neil felt that accessible transportation for the disability community was a huge barrier. Neil disclosed that people living with disabilities in British Columbia can access 'HandyDart', an accessible public transportation service which is similar to 'Wheel-Trans' in Toronto; however, he went on to stress that it is not readily available or accessible to Indigenous communities, especially those that are in the west of the province, due to the fact that the service is very limited. It puts Indigenous Peoples in constant search of amenities and in a lot of cases, these needs are never met. Professor Jacobs, who is based in Windsor, Ontario, shared that public transit, called 'Handi-Transit', is available for people living with disabilities in that area, however, she put emphasis on the fact that this service has severe problems in terms of the wait times, over subscription and long journeys. This creates a major barrier for people with disabilities who use the service and may be employed or have time sensitive appointments.

In my work as a front-line service provider, I've been afforded the opportunity to participate in a variety of movements geared to various issues in the community. While I was doing my research for this article, I thought back and realized, seldom did I ever see representation or participation from the disability community within these causes. Professor Jacobs believes that some of what may be at the root cause of this lack of visibility is the unavailability of adequate transportation. Transportation or the lack thereof, is a major barrier that prevents people living with disabilities from participating in the community. The other point raised by Professor Jacobs is that quite often, the places where these meetings are held aren't accessible for people living with disabilities. It's not necessarily, therefore, that they don't want to attend, or participate, but rather, they're not even considered in the original planning of most of the public community events in the first place.

In this day and age, media is the biggest influencer in the world today. The media has a huge influence on how we perceive the world around us. It plays a big role in how certain groups of people are perceived and how stories are told depending on the community from which the story generated. Even those communities that the media has intentionally decided to represent rarely or not at all create an impression on society, for example, the few films that I have seen centered on disability have done a very poor job of representing the disability community; from hiring an able bodied actor to play the part of a person living with a disability, to the usual pity-driven narrative (rather than a strengths based one) and not to mention, the low actual numbers of people living with disabilities that are employed by this industry.

I wanted to get Professor Jacobs' and Neil's take on the issue of representation of people living with disabilities in the media, so I asked them that very question. In Neil's opinion, we still have a very long way to go to reflect authentic representation. The media uses the pity-driven narrative to praise organizations that hire people living with disabilities, but he suggests that

society should be instead normalizing the employment of people with disabilities rather than tokenizing it as a media opportunity for the employer's five minutes of fame. Professor Jacobs believes that social media has enabled people living with disabilities to come together in ways that they were never able to before and it has great potential to rally the disability movement even further if harnessed in the right way.

After all my time here at **Realize** and doing my research, I have learnt a lot about people living with disabilities and the disability organizations in Canada and there is still so much for me to learn. It remains clear to me, however, that one of the biggest challenges faced by people living with disabilities are the policies that have been put in place that do the bare minimum to support this community when and where the support is needed. Government bodies need to be more involved in addressing these issues and most importantly, put people living with disabilities front and centre in effecting change in this area.

From my perspective, I think every organization or business should be required to employ an equity officer who is a person living with a disability. Looking at the bigger picture, when we as a society start to normalize the full participation and inclusion of people living with disabilities, especially those from marginalized communities, this will lead us closer to eradicating negative attitudes towards these communities and amplify their voices in the process.

About the Author:

Realize was pleased to welcome Jane Namarome as our Summer Student for 2018. Jane is going into her second year at Trent University and is pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work. Jane has solid experience working on the frontlines in the HIV/AIDS and harm reduction fields. For as long as she can remember, Jane has always been passionate about activism and social justice policy, especially where women and children are concerned.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of **Realize**.

