



# THE PLIGHT OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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According to the World Health Organization (census 2017), an estimated 30 million people are living with some form of disability in Pakistan. Unfortunately, they are often not visible in the community due to inaccurate data and evidence on disabilities, inadequate resources and poor healthcare facilities. Cultural factors, religious beliefs, high poverty rates, endemic diseases and natural disasters are the most common factors leading to increased statistics of persons with disabilities.

There is great difficulty in collecting data and making meaningful policy changes because individuals and families are hesitant to accept disability. In more traditional circles of Pakistani society, having a physical or mental disability can be interpreted as an affliction from God as punishment for wrongdoing or even as part of a test of faith.

Pakistan made early efforts to include persons with disabilities in social and economic development activities, including policies aimed at education, employment, and business opportunities. Although these efforts were met with some success, including founding several special schools and rules requiring businesses to

hire persons with disabilities in a mandated percentage, these were short-lived. The resources available did not support inclusive practices, and the stigma against disability continued to embed itself deeply in society. Furthermore, Pakistan became one of the 141 signatories to ratify the CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), a landmark agreement for the global community, but not much has changed.

The core reasoning observed is that the voices of individuals with intellectual disabilities are not heard regarding policymaking and strategising. There is a faint presence of identification processes that recognise these members of society and their specific impairments. To make matters worse, the availability of professionals qualified to work with those having any degree of intellectual impairment is in short supply; data from a 2008 World Health Organisation (WHO) report indicates that for every 100,000 people living in Pakistan, only 0.49 trained psychologists and psychiatrists can be found.

As the world continues to evolve, policymakers are showing a greater understanding of the needs of

persons with disabilities. Michael Stein, director of disability studies at Harvard's Kennedy School and founder of the Harvard Project on Disability, says that creating laws and regulations to protect those with disabilities is nice – but only goes so far. The real key lies in changing people's attitudes toward those with special needs. Although there is a strong culture of sympathy for persons with disabilities, this needs to be replaced by a rights-based approach that recognises persons with disabilities as equal members of society. The thought process must shift away from pity or charity and instead focus on empowering them to live their lives.

Establishing a robust legal framework to safeguard the rights and worth of those with disabilities in every aspect of life is an absolute necessity. Such a framework must include laws that protect against discrimination, provide equitable education opportunities, ensure secure jobs, facilitate communication, allow access to infrastructure and transport services, and guarantee civil liberties. Such rules are essential for securing equitable living standards for individuals with disabilities.

Introducing a dedicated governmental department is essential for protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. Both federal and provincial governments should be responsible for setting up such an entity to create and enforce the necessary regulations. Establishing effective utilisation of government and other stakeholder resources and funds towards rehabilitation, healthcare, education and employment services is vital.

Other than relying on the government, inventive mechanisms within the community can prove beneficial. Pakistan offers inspiring examples of such initiatives, like Niaz Support or similar programs that foster awareness and promote transformation.

Niaz, founded by Hussain Odhwani in October 2022, is a social enterprise pioneering the provision of customised wheelchairs to Persons with Disabilities (PWD) in Pakistan based on their body measurement and disability needs. Niaz partnered with the manufacturing unit, collaborated with PWD associations keeping records of deserving individuals and developed an e-commerce platform, [www.niazsupport.org](http://www.niazsupport.org), to enable donors to gift wheels to the most deserving PWDs, ensuring transparency and payment-security in the process. Certified engineers manufacture customised wheelchairs, while the workforce also includes PWDs giving them employment opportunities. Mr. Jahangir Khan, renowned Singer-Songwriter, Philanthropist & Politician, Mr. Abrar-ul-Haq and Country Head Siddiqi Hospitality, Former Minister of State, Special Assistant to the Prime Minister & Chairman PTDC and Mr. Azam Jamil are the Goodwill Ambassadors of Niaz to create awareness and support the cause.

Disability Rights Organisations (DPOs) also need to collaborate to facilitate the transformation of their work towards a rights-based approach. Currently, some DPOs mainly concentrate on providing charitable services or medical assistance, both essential for areas where

government initiatives are deficient. However, it is crucial to be aware of the necessity for larger-scale alterations.

Strong measures must be taken to better protect the rights of people with disabilities, from giving the right kind of education and support enrolment of PWDs in schools and universities to finding them employment in both the private and public sectors.

Inclusive education, where students with disabilities are placed in the same classroom as mainstream learners, is seen to be more beneficial than promoting segregation via specific educational services. Research has proven that this approach has a favourable impact on attitudes and costs. To implement this type of schooling successfully, investment in better teacher training and changes to the school infrastructure is necessary.

When it comes to finding employment, persons with disabilities should be provided with an environment that promotes fairness and equality, and specific regulations must be put in place to stop any form of discrimination. These small steps would go a long way in ensuring that disabled individuals are treated equally and respectfully.

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