



COVID-19 Pandemic and People Living with Disability

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With the grave impact of COVID-19 on various aspects of life, strategies and protocols have been put in place by various countries and organizations on curtailing the virus. The question comes about how do the disabled people also adhere to the protocols and importantly protect themselves. Research has shown that there are about 1 billion disabled people in the world. It is estimated that globally, about one-fifth of the world population has one form of disability or the other with a higher prevalence in the developing countries (World Bank, 2021). It is also believed that disability in the poorer regions go as high as 20% with the disabled at school estimated to be about 5-10% which had further created a negative vice of begging for alms in order to survive (Disabled World, 2018). According to the United Nations, disabled persons are the most affected by the pandemic as there is already less likelihood to benefit from health care, employment, education and a higher chance of experiencing violence or living in poverty. COVID-19 further compacts this problem especially for disabled people who are feeble. They experience barriers in implementing hygienic measures, having access to a health facility or even adequately receiving and comprehending public health information (. Where it concerns mental health, COVID-19 brings about a great challenge across the global health system as with the pandemic, there has also been an increase in mental health conditions, a reduction in availability of staff capable of properly managing mental health issues as a result of possible infections or the need to self-isolate. Mentally challenged people may also not be able to properly incorporate standard hygiene practices that curb the spread of the virus like proper hand washing, practicing safe distancing, and making use of a face mask. Those admitted in hospitals also have a higher

chance of being infected with the virus. With this in mind, they are most vulnerable and also most likely to transmit the virus (Nhamo and Midzi, 2020). It is paramount that research is done in this area for the sake of global health equity.

DISABILITY IN THE PANDEMIC

People living with disabilities have largely been ignored as a population for public health interest. This reality is shocking since disability is a major part of being human. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that over one billion people, that is, about 15% of the global population live with some form of disability and this number is increasing (WHO, 2021). Moreover, disabled people face a large and growing inequality in accessing health care, especially in the rural areas of poor countries. This inequity has further been widened by the COVID-19 pandemic that struck the World in early 2020.

Although the precise definition of the term "disability" is contentious, it is generally agreed to have two features. First, it is a physical or mental characteristic labelled or perceived as an impairment or dysfunction. Then, there are personal or social limitations associated with the impairment. Moreover, it is recognised that a disability is a dynamic interaction between health conditions, environmental and personal factors (Wasserman et al., 2016). Thus, a disability results when limitations based on a health condition interact with personal and contextual factors in the environment, which creates a barrier. This environment involves not just the physical environment but also the social factors like attitudes, culture, economics and policies that make up people (Khran et al. 2015).

A picture of the scope of the problem is painted when the number of disabled people worldwide is considered. More than 1 billion people living with disability worldwide. Of this number, 253 million people are affected by blindness or a form of visual impairment, about 446 million people have a form of disabling deafness and hearing loss, about 200 million people have an intellectual disability and about 75 million people need a wheelchair on a daily basis (Wagner, 2021).

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The outbreak of COVID-19 (the disease caused by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2)) has had a detrimental effect on all aspects of life including health care access. On January 30, 2020, it was declared a pandemic by WHO. Among the measures adopted to stop the spread of the disease was a shutdown on transportation systems, quarantine and a general lockdown. These measures severely affected people. However, the effects were more seen in disabled people. The health of disabled people during the pandemic was affected very greatly. The WHO reported that people living with disability are more likely to contract the virus. This arose from a constellation of factors. Primary among these reasons is the fact that disabled ones may have difficulty in carrying out basic personal hygiene as recommended due to inaccessibility to hand washing stations or due to inability to rub the palms together in handwashing. There were simply no provisions to meet the needs of disabled ones in this regard. There was also disparity in passing timely and up-to-date information regarding preventive procedures. For example, adverts on handwashing did not incorporate instructions on how to meet the special needs of disabled people who may not be able to carry out handwashing like others do. Information regarding the pandemic, including current trends and events was not passed in a way accessible to disabled people (Braille or sign language). This paucity in information greatly increased the risk of disabled people being infected by the virus (Sabadell et al., 2020).

Their health was further affected by the lack of transportation access for them. The lockdown imposed and corresponding guidelines made transportation a very difficult task. For disabled people that are housebound or unable to independently travel, movement to health facilities to cater for their challenges which included COVID-19 testing was a major challenge. In most cases, because of a lack in this area, disabled people did not gain access to their medications during the pandemic.

Disabled people living during the COVID-19 pandemic also faced a series of challenges relating to their welfare. For example, communication was hampered for the deaf who need to read lips and perform sign language to communicate. These ones were negatively affected by the COVID-19 prevention protocols of social distancing and mask wearing which effectively stopped communication. Disabled people were also isolated from their caregivers, a situation which made life difficult for them especially those that require social, physical and emotional support (Kendal et al., 2020). It is evident that during the COVID-19 pandemic, disabled people were greatly affected. However, there is more. The economic situation during the pandemic was very poor as a result of movement restrictions and lockdown and its attendant consequence of economic shutdown. However, disabled people were hit hardest. Before the pandemic, disabled people faced marginalisation in the workplace. With the pandemic and its dearth of economic activities, the financial status of disabled people has taken a turn for the worse. During the first 3 months of the introduction of the first lockdown in the UK, it was seen that people with disability were more likely than their peers to be working reduced hours and experience higher levels of financial stress (Emerson et al., 2021). Therefore, it is likely that after the pandemic, disabled people would face more financial stress and pressures. As financial pressures mount in the world's economic

space, it is likely that donations from charity and governmental support to disabled people would dwindle. Faced with this, the health and economic status might worsen (Kendall et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it is imperative that family members take up care givers roles towards the disabled. It is also important that government makes policies to target the people living with disability to ensure equity among its citizens regardless of health status.

WAY FORWARD

Just like Race, gender, colour, religion; disability is also a part of human diversity. Regardless of the diversity, persons with disabilities represent a significant number of the population and as a matter of fact should not be marginalized in the society. A long-term mainstay will be Advocating to be able to eliminate the impact of stigmatization. The need for disability inclusion cannot be over-emphasized. As long as the pandemic continues to linger on and the world continues to adjust to the new normal, program designers will have to conduct a rapid review of the WASH related challenges for them to be addressed properly. It is also important to consider training Healthcare personnel on disability inclusion as well as discussing innovative ways to improve service delivery to persons with disabilities. Empowering the disabled people is a very important step if we must work at achieving Universal Health Coverage and equity.

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