

How pandemic responses neglected disabled people's rights

19 April 2021, by Vera Kubenz



Protesters march in Beirut marking the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, December 2020. Credit: Wael Hamzeh/EPA

The pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on disabled people, who make up six out of ten COVID-19 related deaths in the UK, [according to the Office of National Statistics](#). So far no other country has published the same data, making it difficult to assess the global impact, particularly in low and middle-income countries [where 80% of the world's disabled population live](#).

Despite the ratification of the [UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) by 182 countries, disabled people still face significant discrimination, stigma, and poverty globally.

Research on [COVID-19 and disabled people in low and middle-income countries](#) has found that the [pandemic](#) threatens to reverse progress towards reducing poverty and improving access to education and employment for disabled people.

While some may be more susceptible to the virus due to existing [health conditions](#), [social factors](#) also contribute to putting disabled people at

greater risk of contracting COVID-19. Many disabled people have struggled to get access to personal protective equipment and [health](#) information, with only 5% of countries around the world having [fully accessible health authority websites](#). Meanwhile, [36% of low and middle-income countries](#) don't have sign language interpreters at health briefings, nor does the World Health Organization.

Stigma and inequality

Disabled people have had to deal with health discrimination for decades but there's significant evidence that it has increased during the pandemic.

The issues they face range from [inaccessible COVID-19 treatment centers](#) to [triage protocols which assume disabled lives are less valuable](#). Many disability-specific health services also [closed during lockdowns after being deemed "non-essential"](#).

The impact of the pandemic goes beyond the virus, however. For many who live in poverty, hunger is a bigger and more immediate threat than the risk of catching COVID-19. Disabled people are [more likely to be unemployed or in informal work](#), and therefore more likely to lose their income during lockdowns.

COVID-19 restrictions led to neglect and death for many who relied on family and friends for care. In China, a teenager [died at home after his family members were forcibly quarantined](#) and no alternative care was provided. [Incidents of stigma and violence](#) also rose during the pandemic, with disabled people being blamed for the virus. In Uganda, police [shot a deaf man in the leg](#) for not following verbal commands.

Relief measures in most countries were [usually short-term](#) and often not targeted at disabled people, sometimes specifically [excluding those](#)

[receiving disability benefits](#) from additional COVID-19 support.

These issues are especially pronounced in low and [middle-income countries](#) because social welfare tends to be poorly developed, with [only 1% of disabled people in low-income countries](#) having access to [disability benefits](#).

Education was also a significant factor in rolling back progression on disability rights issues. Two major barriers to remote education were access to technology, particularly in rural areas, and inaccessibility of technology, [with learning often not adapted for pupils with disabilities](#).

While data on school returns since the pandemic is not yet available ([only half of disabled children](#) were in school prior to the pandemic), there are significant concerns about lower numbers of disabled children returning, particularly girls.

Those who do return face [increased attainment gaps](#), which schools are often poorly equipped to address.

Plugging gaps

While the pandemic has been described as an opportunity [to "build back better"](#) and address global inequality, there is little evidence that previous major disasters or emergencies resulted in significant positive change for disabled people.

In fact, disabled people are [more likely to be abandoned](#) during disasters, according to the UN.

The few existing studies on disability and disaster recovery highlight the importance of [working with disabled people](#) to build their requirements into emergency planning from the outset. But it's clear this lesson hasn't been learned. In most countries, disabled people were at best an afterthought, and often their needs weren't considered at all.

What's often missing from popular narratives about disabled people are stories about their resilience. [Disabled people's organizations](#) have been vital in many countries in distributing food, PPE and [health information](#) in the absence of official support.

Unfortunately, by continuing to stereotype disability as a medical problem or a tragic experience, society fails to recognize [the social factors that make disabled people vulnerable](#) in the first place.

In order to build towards a better future, it's crucial to recognize the role of social oppression in holding back human rights for disabled people. That means moving beyond the medical sphere and using data on the pandemic's impact on disabled people to understand how structures around the world lead to systemic disadvantage.

It's time we recognized disabled people as experts—both at understanding their own needs, and at dealing with crises and unforeseen emergencies in a world that is not built for them. A disability-inclusive recovery from COVID-19 means disabled people are not only considered, but take a central role in planning what recovery may look like.

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