**Disability inclusive development**

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Architectural accessibility is not everything people with disabilities need. An antidote to their marginalisation lies in their voices being heard at the policy-making and legislative platforms where they are under-represented in discussions and decision-making processes at all levels.
While the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) broadly underscore the importance of disability-inclusive development; people with disabilities face exclusion especially in developing countries because of systemic corruption and the absence of a political will.
Too often, children with disabilities are defined by their limitations rather than their strengths. Bullying is ubiquitous. Discrimination arises not as a result of the intrinsic nature of children’s disability, but rather, as a consequence of a lack of understanding of its causes and implications, fear of contagion, and negative religious or cultural views of disability. Numerous obstructions hinder the access of children with disabilities to education, employment, health and relationships.
In educational institutes, teachers are not fully equipped and trained to deal with such students; consequently, further shattering their confidence. Things become worse in a mixed environment as children with disabilities need extra support for adjusting to other students who do not have special needs. This transition further leads to anxiety, stress and depression in children with disabilities.
“Commuting from home to the university was a nightmare; I cringe at the thought of it. The rickshaw uncle will always ask for a higher fare because of my cartridges. During the recess in the varsity; I usually have to sit alone as other students go to the sports. In class I always felt unwanted,” said Talha who recently got an undergraduate degree in computer science from a private university in Lahore. Though he is delighted with his achievement, he sighs at the turmoil he has to go through all these years and laments that he had to miss most of his class trips because transportation and infrastructure is not disability-inclusive. Another visually impaired girl from a government university was able to complete her degree in medicine only because her mother was able to read books aloud to her during the five years of her degree.
For the less fortunate ones, the system is a monster. With no career path and rampant exclusion, the people with disabilities are rendered vulnerable, losing respect for their dignity, their individuality, right to marriage, and even their right to life itself. The digital divide further compounds these challenges, with technology at times deepening inequality.
Youth experiences are shaped by the intersectionality of their multiple identities. During their teenage years and early adulthood, young persons with disabilities find the services they so desperately need are non-existent and their rights as persons with disabilities are not upheld.
To safeguard the rights of persons with disabilities, the programs, policies, and initiatives currently focused on supporting children with disabilities and older persons with disabilities must be expanded to include and encompass the specific requirements of young persons with disabilities. They should have reserved seats in the parliament and provincial assemblies. It is not enough to engage a single young person with a disability. The views and inputs of a diverse range of young persons with disabilities are generally required to ensure meaningful outcomes. This will also alleviate the social biases which exist in society against people with disabilities.
Young persons with disabilities currently do not have enough advocacy opportunities or the capacity required to effectively advocate for their rights in the country. The limited leadership results in someone else taking decisions for them which in reality does not translate according to their expectations.
Too often, the policies crafted for people with disabilities are either superficial or unrealistic. A cursory search on the internet for instance shows that to get a CNIC, people with a disability in Pakistan have to follow four more steps compared to a person without a disability; acting as a deterrent for them to progress in society.
Governments need to urgently address the unique inequalities and barriers that young persons with disabilities face in accessing rights such as education and information, job training, employment opportunities, and social protection systems by focusing on disability-inclusive development and representation. Once we pave a road for the disabled; we will be surprised at the contribution they can make to our society.