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The “Invisibles” of Kosovar Society

Roads with narrow and high sidewalks, limited number of elevators in multi-store buildings, lack of adequate public transportation, stairs that in one moment present unbearable obstacles, and the complete lack of public toilets make the life for people with disabilities very difficult in Kosovo. Loaded with the weight of their psychophysical shortcomings, in most cases they quietly pass on these challenges in their daily lives trying to be invisible to their environment. But do we also need to carry on this in silence? Should they be treated as visible creatures only in international days as a reminder of their existence for the Kosovar society?

Despite progress in addressing this aspect of social life in post-war Kosovo, my observation of this problem indicates a need for greater improvements, especially when viewed in the context of human rights. Although current legislation regarding disabilities is based on international documents that guarantee and protect fundamental human rights, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the non-signing and non-ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006), puts a black shadow to government commitments regarding this issue. Thus it is critical that national policies are bolstered by ratification of international documents, so that people with disabilities as well as children and other vulnerable groups in Kosovo, can live life’s that are qualitative and protected by government mechanism.

Various reports and assessments provided by local and international experts, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and civil society in Kosovo indicate that this issue deserves greater attention and commitment from national institutions and from Kosovar society (National Plan for Persons with Disabilities of the Republic of Kosovo 2009-2011, 2009).

For this issue to have importance it deserves, there is a need for advocacy in three key areas that are fundamental to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006): greater awareness of society regarding this issue, elimination of stigmatization for persons with disabilities, and the right to live their life’s in the community.

The foundation for these key strategies can be found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). The international standards established by these documents are intended to promote, protect, and ensure that all persons with disabilities enjoy full and equal treatment in a way that promotes respect for their dignity. In order to emphasize the importance to Kosovar’s of having a substantive discussion on these fundamental protections, I am presenting a suggested plan of action, in an ordinary day of the year that is not associated with an official date for paying attention to persons with disabilities. I intentionally do this to elevate the dialogue from non-formal discussion, as is the norm.

Awareness of Kosovar Society

Article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) obligates ratifying states to take appropriate measures to sensitize the population about the rights of persons with disabilities. Paragraph (a) of this article obligates states to sensitize society including families, and guarantees respect for human rights and dignity of persons with
disabilities. In addition paragraphs (b) and (c) prevent stereotypes, prejudices, and other harmful practices that violate the integrity of persons with disabilities. Therefore if our goal is to take human rights seriously and to integrate these protections in to daily life, initiatives must focus on creating a positive environment where the rights of persons with disabilities are respected. Because Kosovo has a majority population that is relatively young in age, seminars at the primary and secondary levels of education are the most effective approach for achieving this objective. Such an approach would facilitate the development of conditions and circumstances that would enable incorporation of respect for human rights and freedoms into the personalities of the young people of Kosovo.

Elimination of Stigma
In addition to the problems with infrastructure mentioned earlier, the challenging socio-economic status and low levels of education among citizens regarding the causes of disabilities increases the degree of vulnerability of persons with disabilities in Kosovo. In most cases, this vulnerability is manifested by stigmatization and labeling. As a result people with disabilities are isolated in society as a way of reducing the already high level of psychosocial stress. The saying that, "shame should be kept in home" illustrates the wrong adaptive mechanisms that families exercise when confronted with this challenge of their family member. This social approach has contributed substantially in the installation of a social mentality, where family members of persons with disabilities feel ashamed. The only solution is seen isolation at home or in specialized institutions. Of course this way of thinking does not make the everyday life for people with disabilities easier. To have a society where isolation and stigmatization of persons with disabilities is minimized and is not a characteristic of Kosovar society, family and community members must become integrally involve in the process of reintegrating their loved ones into the various social, political, and cultural activities of society. At the same time the mass media, NGOs, and other key community leaders must work to actively change the norms around people with disabilities.

Living in the Community
Article 19 of Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) guarantees the right of citizens to live independently and as equal members of the community. This provision of the convention, also suggests the need for easy access to a range of home, residential, and other community support services that are designed to promote inclusion in the community, not isolation or segregation from the community. Although Kosovo has undertaken many initiatives in the post-war period to integrate people with disabilities, they still have not been sufficiently involved in the development of national policies and legislative systems, and also monitoring, evaluation, and implementation of these policies and legislative systems. Various international reports (WHO, 2010) indicate that families can facilitate the adaptation and integration of persons with disabilities into the community. They also can provide social support for their family members. This approach has particular relevance for Kosovar society, which largely has maintained family support for people with disabilities. Therefore finding alternative, creative, and innovative approaches for integration of persons with disabilities in the community life, presents opportunities and necessity of the time. This will also improve the quality of life for persons with disabilities and make them more visible in Kosovar society.
Thus if our goal is to live in a society where people with disabilities are a part of the society, where they are supported in meting day-to-day challenges of their life’s, and where they are respected by every citizen in Kosovo, we must focus our efforts coordinating all social resources with a particular focus on family and community.

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