

DISABILITY

THERE ARE MORE AID WORKERS WITH DISABILITIES THAN YOU THINK

APRIL 2, 2015 | GUEST AUTHOR/S | LEAVE A COMMENT

February 1, 2015



125

Like

By Peter Fremlin

Not so long ago, I was wondering about the interaction between my disability and the career I'm starting in international development. I don't feel discriminated against; on the contrary, I feel very privileged working in Bangladesh in an international position. Plus, I'm white, European and male, and I studied at some fancy universities.

It took me several days to remember that I was sitting on the ground floor of my office, away from my project colleagues on the third floor – no lift, you see. Sometimes people would come to see me, and they would come down for meetings, but hardly ever just to say hello. I felt isolated and left out.

There have been barriers, but disability has also had a positive effect on my career.

Sometimes it's an implicit reason organisations hire me; it's good for them, after all, to have a disabled person working on disability inclusion. I am lucky that I'm disabled: it's given me a connection and a reason to be among a tremendous global movement. My disability shapes the way I interact with people here in Bangladesh, and it's one of the reasons I learned the Bengali language when most of my international colleagues don't. (Otherwise, how would I get around?) My disability is part of who I am, and it's a part of why I'm great at my job.

In a recent WhyDev post, Rebecca Berman asked, "Where are the aid workers with disabilities?" It's the first in an important series of posts, followed up with an explanation of the benefits of hiring people with disabilities and recommendations on how to hire us. It's certainly true that people with disabilities face many barriers entering into work in this sector and developing their careers. But there are more of us already here than might be expected. We need to recognise that disability is a normal part of everybody's life experience, and we need to look at how the social barriers creating disability are relevant to all, be they in environments, accessibility, attitudes or policies.

Now, some people like me are obviously disabled. But you can't tell whether someone's disabled just by looking at them. You can't tell just by looking how many aid workers have disabilities. If we only look at the obvious cases, we overlook many experiences of disability, and we also make people with disabilities sound as if they're a separate group.

An aid worker friend of mine says, “We have loads of people with disabilities in our office, but they all seem to think that I’m the only one.” Her colleagues with hearing or mobility difficulties or mental health conditions don’t see themselves as disabled. Part of this is because people have different definitions of disability, and it’s partly because disability is still quite a negative term. But as my friend explains, this has important consequences for how we see things:

It’s still considered as something we’re working on, and a certain group we’re working for, and that we try to include, for instance by hiring them. My colleagues don’t yet recognise what disability and difference really mean in everyday life, including their own.

Someone else I spoke with had to leave her job overseas and go back home because of a health issue. She’s not sure she would identify as having a disability, but she now insists that her organisation treat her health condition the same way they would a disability, and through this, gets the accommodations she needs to keep working.

Neither of these people wanted to be identified in this piece. *We’re not comfortable talking about this.* Disability is hidden, even though it affects us all. We don’t feel we can discuss the barriers that exist, or that there are safe spaces to talk about our own experiences. If we bring it up, we worry about how it will be received and whether it means we’ll lose control. If disability is a separate issue we work on in the field, it’s hard to talk about how it’s relevant to our own lives and in our own organisations.

And relevant it is. The ILO, the United Nations agency specialising in labour issues, recently did a survey on disability inclusion among its own staff. My own assumption, and the assumption of many people responding to the survey, was that the ILO didn’t have very many disabled employees. But the survey returned a massive 15.5% rate of disability among the respondents. A bit over half of the 15.5% were people who would call themselves disabled; the other half have functional limitations in a range of day-to-day activities, from sight, hearing and movement to memory, concentration and self-care. Many people mentioned mental health conditions. Further, half of the respondents with disabilities acquired them while working at the ILO.

The 15.5% figure, though, isn’t a final answer. It’s only of respondents to the survey, and maybe people with disabilities were more likely to fill it in. However, the crucially important finding is that disability is a common experience among staff. Stefan Tromel, a Senior Disability Specialist at the ILO, adds, “I don’t think the ILO will have more (or less) disabled staff than other UN organisations.” So, not only is disability a common experience at the ILO, but we should expect it to be common at other organisations, too.

How do we go forward? Well, let’s first be very clear that we all make mistakes. And unfortunately, from the development workers with disabilities I’ve spoken to, we also often feel marginalised and that our needs aren’t addressed properly. While many organisations specialising on disability have been able to hire persons with disabilities, even in these organisations, we don’t always feel our needs are met adequately.

Rebecca already pointed out steps employers can take to hire aid workers with disabilities. I want to add that we need to look more at the disabling barriers that exist within our organisations and work. For me, “disability” is a vision that helps people see these barriers. These barriers might have to do with expectations about the way work is done, physical access and access to information or the way organisations make accommodations for their staff. They exist for all of us, whether we call ourselves “disabled” or not. There are plenty of us already working in aid, with physical, sensory or intellectual difficulties or complications from health conditions. Let’s find the ways these things don’t limit our careers, and the ways our lived experiences with disability contribute to the strength of our work.

Peter Fremlin is a consultant who has been working on inclusion and disability-related issues in Bangladesh for the past four years. There, he has worked at the ILO, Handicap International and UNDP, among others. Peter writes about disability and development issues at Desibility, and you can follow him on Twitter.

Featured image shows Australian volunteer Caroline Conlon, who is deaf herself, teaching at special needs education school in Samoa. Photo from the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs.

You might also like to read:

1. How to hire aid workers with disabilities
2. Where are the aid workers with disabilities?
3. Why including people with disabilities is common sense.

Bio	Latest Posts
 Guest Author/s	