

DISABLED PEOPLE AND SOCIETY

Introduction

Disabled people are people with long-term physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional or developmental impairments, which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society. They are people, who are blind or visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, physically impaired or very ill (usually with a rare illness), people with improper mental development (e.g. people with Down's syndrome), people with speech disorders (e.g. people with articulation disorders), people with deficits in certain learning areas (e.g. people with dyslexia), people with emotional and behavioral disorders (e.g. hyperactive people) and also socially disadvantaged people, who are entitled to the grant of social assistance.

Disabled people in numbers

More than 45 million citizens of the European Union aged between 16 and 64 have the status of a disabled person. This means that every sixth person is disabled. According to the World Health Organisation 600 million people in the world (almost 10% of the world's population) are disabled. In Slovenia the percentage of the disabled people is similar.

Prejudice is the main problem when dealing with the disabled people. There are two kinds of stereotypes about disability. The negative is that the disabled people are ugly and mean. The positive is that they are everlasting children and that their parents are extremely brave.

Everytime one sees a disabled person it's a special kind of experience. One feels discomfort, embarrassment, pity, compassion, guilt or even a wish of running away. No one can stay unaffected when confronted by someone as different.

Delphine Siegrist, a disabled woman said that in one night she could hear anything from "Oh, you poor thing" to "It's unbelievable what you can do". She also said that by others she was seen as an idiot who could not take care of herself but also when driving a car as a superwoman.

The prejudice is also shown by denying that the disabled people are able to choose for themselves, are able to think for themselves. For example, according to an independent study an airport employee would almost never address a disabled person, rather they'd talk to a person accompanying the disabled person.

Among the most common inappropriate reactions by undisable people are to talk loudly when talking to a blind person, the excitement when seeing a person in a wheel chair reading a serious news paper and to talk in syllables when talking to an adult with a Down's syndrome. There is also refusing to look at a disabled person's face, staring at a disabled person's face, running away, mocking, pitying and so on... Most people cannot help reacting in such a way, but we must understand that the disabled people have feelings as well and can be offended (they often are).

When a disabled child is born the society blames the parents, the mother in particular. She is often convicted to have had sexual relationships the society would not approve of, for example with many different partners, which is of course a total nonsense.

Besides the prejudice **employment** of the disabled people is a big problem all around the world, due to the fact that there are things the disabled people cannot do and due to discrimination of course. Almost 80% of all disabled people are unemployed. That is why governments are setting up

companies meant especially for the disabled people who cannot get a job elsewhere. In Slovenia, there are currently about 170 such companies.

A brief history of our attitude towards the disabled people

The Bible, mainly the Old Testament connects chronic illnesses with sin. According to the Jews in that time, every disability was actually a test and a sign of God's punishment for the lack of faith. On the other hand, Jesus supposedly cured many disabled people.

Ancient Greeks reacted very violently to disabilities. They saw them as expressions of the anger of their gods, thus they exposed all disabled people to wild beasts. An example of this is the legend of Oedipus.

In the Middle Ages the disabled people were regarded similar to criminals. According to many, they were guilty for the plague, therefore they were being punished, often burnt. Martin Luther, who believed the disabled people were evil, said "Take the changeling child to the river and drown it."

During the Renaissance people mostly pretended disabilities were non-existent. For example, there are several well-known paintings of Duke of Urbino, all showing the same profile. That was because the other side of his face was disfigured.

In the 19th century the concepts of heredity and infectivity emerged. People started fearing that they would get infected if they were near a disabled person (which is a concept still widely spread today). In 1881, Chicago passed an "ugly law" which said that anyone who was disabled in any way was forbidden to expose themselves to public view. That is why almost every disabled person was locked up in special institutions for life. Mothers of disabled children would often pretend that their children didn't exist. Until the beginning of the 20th century the disabled people were often shown as an attraction at fairs.

Nowadays, many experts are trying to help the disabled people by encouraging against discrimination, by making technological improvements (like braille, canes and a special leading system for the blind, special parking spaces, ramps and special elevators for wheelchair users ...), by offering disabled children a special educational support, etc. Still, even they do not do everything they could, because as always money makes the world go round. Thus if a certain research (like the research of drugs against rare illnesses) is not economically efficient, they simply won't do it, which in my opinion is unacceptable.

As you can read in my article, on our class mail, disabled people are willing to fight for their rights. The article talks about a march of about 40 blind people in May 2011 in London, during which the participants protested against the cuts to financial support made by the British government. This march was later followed by many demonstrations all around the UK with thousands attending them. I think they succeeded in the end.

Conclusion