

ABLEISM AND SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES IN AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS FOR WELL-BEING, PRODUCTIVITY AND SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

Ableism, the systemic discrimination against people with disabilities, has profound implications for both national and individual well-being and productivity. This paper examines how ableism affects national well-being by contributing to societal inequities and impeding economic growth. It also explores the impact of ableism on individual well-being and productivity, revealing how social stigma and physical barriers limit personal and professional achievements. Through case studies focusing on Africa and Nigeria, this paper illustrates the specific challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in these contexts and highlights the broader economic and social repercussions of ableism. The analysis underscores the need for comprehensive strategies to address ableism, including improving accessibility, promoting inclusive education and employment, raising public awareness, and enhancing healthcare services. By implementing these recommendations, societies can improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities and foster greater national productivity and cohesion.

Keywords: Ableism, Social work, Productivity, Well-being

Introduction

The phenomenon of ableism is a widespread global challenge which many countries of the world are attempting to curb. Ableism means prejudice against Persons with disability. Though, Ableism has been defined as discrimination in favor of more able-bodied individuals it, much more than that. Fiona (2019) defines ableism as a network of beliefs, process and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. According to Johannsdottir, Agustsdottir & Bjornsdottir (2024), ableism generally refers to social level of oppression, while the term disablism commonly describes individual level of discrimination (Johannsdottir, Agustsdottir & Bjornsdottir, 2018). Ableism refers to stereotyping, prejudicing, discriminating, and socially oppressing disabled people. Dunn (2019) assert that these pejorative attitudes include stigmatization, labeling, stereotyping, prejudicing and discriminating, among others. According to Bogart & Dunn (2019), ableism has become a term used to describe the set of assumptions and practices that promote unequal treatment of people because of apparent or assumed physical, mental, or behavioral differences.

In recent times, there have been numerous changes in our society with respect to the management and treatment of people with disability. Prior to the twentieth century and currently, societal attitudes had always reflected the view that persons with disability were unhealthy, defective and deviant either because in, clinical diagnostic and/or functional development, disabled refer to individuals who require assistance for disabilities that may be medical, mental or psychological. Persons with disability can range from people with autism, Asperger syndrome, cerebral palsy, down syndrome, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, blindness, deafness, ADHD and cystic fibrosis. They also include cleft lips and missing limbs (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Ayeleso & Ayeleso, 2023; National Park Service, 2024; Abberley, 1998; Akhidenor, 2007; Etieyibo & Omiegbe, 2016; Fiona, 2012).

Manifestation of ableism in Africa

For centuries, society as a whole treated these people with disability as objects of fear and pity. The prevailing attitude was that such individuals were incapable of participating in or contributing to society and that they must rely on welfare or charitable organizations. Societal attitudes fostered this segregating style of management. Following, Amoako (2019) posit that variations in the treatment of persons with disability are manifest in Africa as in other parts of the world. Among the Chagga in East Africa, the physically handicapped were perceived as pacifiers of the evil spirits. Hence, care was taken not to harm the physically handicapped. Among the citizens of Benin (formerly Dahomey in West Africa), constables were selected from those with obvious physical handicaps. In some communities in Benin, children born with anomalies were seen as protected by supernatural forces. As such, they were accepted in the community because they were believed to bring good luck (Wright, 2018). Nabagwu (2019) observed that among the Ibos of Nigeria, treatment of persons with disability varied from pampering to total rejection.

Diversifications in perception of persons with disability exist in Ghana as they do in other places in Africa. Among the Ashanti of central Ghana, traditional beliefs precluded men with physical defects, such as amputations from becoming chiefs. This is evident in the practice of despoiling a chief if he acquires epilepsy (Rottray2018; Sarpong 2021; Danquah 2019). In contrast, the Ga from Accra region in Ghana, treated the feeble-minded with awe. They believed the retarded were the reincarnation of a deity. Hence, they were always treated with great kindness, gentleness and patience (Field, 2018).

Throughout Africa, persons with disability are seen as hopeless and helpless (Desta, 2018). The African culture and beliefs have not made matters easier. Abosi and Ozoji (2021) found in their study that Nigerians

in particular and of course, Africans in general, attribute causes of disability to witchcraft, *juju*, sex-linked factors and God/supernatural forces.

Furthermore, Franzen (2021) observed that in some communities in Kenya and Zimbabwe, a child with a disability is a symbol of a curse befalling the whole family. Such a child is a shame to the whole family, hence their rejection by the family or the community. In addition, children who are met by those beliefs and attitudes can hardly develop to their full potential. They, get; less attention, less stimulation, less education, less medical care, less upbringing and sometimes less nourishment than other children.

Franzen (2021), Thomas (2018) sees societal perceptions and treatments of persons with disability within cross-cultural settings as a kaleidoscope of varying hues that reflect tolerance, hatred, love, fear, awe, reverence and revulsion. The most consistent feature in the treatment of persons with disability in most societies is the fact that they are categorized as deviants rather than inmates by the society (Lippman, 2021).

Effects of ableism in Africa

According to Deal (2010), there is lack of knowledge and understanding of disability and for instance, there are many buildings and technology that are inaccessible to the disabled people. Again, policies and national practices abound of not reaching out to disabled people or considering disability as part of diversity. These practices include; subtle discrimination, not giving a person with a disability a chance at a job. Also, including "essential functions" that really are not essential (example, "Walking" when "Rolling" is just as effective). Too, not taking a holistic approach when it comes to disability (transportation, walking, bicycling, micromobility, housing, social life) particularly promoting modes most convenient and reliable. Again; societal attitudes: invisible disabilities tend to be more stigmatized (particularly things that are seen as someone's fault) such as:

- Chronic Illnesses

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- Intellectual disabilities
- Mental illness
- Addiction

However, visible disabilities may be more stigmatized in employment situations like job interviews (United States Seattle, 2022).

Implications of ableism on individual well-being

Ableism has detrimental effects on the well-being of individuals with disabilities. It contributes to lower self-esteem, increased mental health issues, and reduced quality of life. Social stigma and physical barriers can lead to feelings of isolation and depression, impacting overall well-being.

According to the US National Library of Medicine (2010) in, a study conducted to explore the reproductive health care experiences of women with physical disabilities and how reproductive health care experiences could be improved showed that, women with physical disabilities “encountered numerous barriers to quality reproductive health care services, including inaccessible equipment and facilities, limited contraceptive options, health care providers' insensitivity and lack of knowledge about disabilities and limited information tailored to their needs.” The study also noted that “accessing reproductive health care services is so difficult that some women avoid regular gynecologic visits.” Lack of accessibility can be detrimental to the health of many disabled people and is a major sign of ableism.

Individuals with disabilities often experience significant challenges in accessing healthcare, education, and social services. A study by the International Disability Alliance (2020) found that people with disabilities in Africa face high levels of social stigma and limited access to essential services, which negatively impacts their overall well-being. The lack of supportive infrastructure and societal attitudes exacerbates mental health issues and reduces quality of life.

In Nigeria, the barriers faced by people with disabilities, including inadequate healthcare services and societal stigma, significantly impact their well-being. According to a report by Human Rights Watch (2022), individuals with disabilities in Nigeria experience higher rates of mental health issues due to social exclusion and discrimination. The lack of accessible healthcare facilities further exacerbates these challenges, affecting overall well-being.

The impact of ableism on individual productivity

Ableism affects individual productivity by limiting opportunities for people with disabilities to contribute effectively in the workplace. Physical and attitudinal barriers prevent individuals with disabilities from achieving their full potential, which impacts their personal and professional productivity. Consequently, the productivity of individuals with disabilities is often compromised by the lack of accessible work environments and inclusive policies. A report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (2021) highlights that people with disabilities are frequently excluded from the workforce, leading to underutilization of their skills and talents. This exclusion not only affects individual productivity but also impedes economic development.

In Nigeria, the productivity of people with disabilities is hindered by numerous barriers, including inaccessible workplaces and discriminatory practices. The National Bureau of Statistics (2021) reports that people with disabilities face significant obstacles in accessing employment opportunities, which limits their ability to contribute effectively to the economy. This exclusion from productive activities has both personal and economic consequences.

The implications of ableism on national well-being and productivity

Ableism, a systemic and societal prejudice against people with disabilities, significantly affects national and individual well-being and productivity.

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This prejudice manifests in various forms, including physical barriers, social discrimination, and institutional biases. The implications of ableism extend to national productivity, individual well-being, and individual productivity.

The implications of ableism on national well-being

Ableism has profound implications for national well-being. It contributes to societal inequities by marginalizing individuals with disabilities, which affects overall societal health and harmony (Dana, 2019; Axtman, 2017; Etieyibo & Omiegbe, 2016; Fiona, 2012). Inaccessible environments and discriminatory practices prevent people with disabilities from fully participating in community and economic life. This exclusion not only diminishes the quality of life for individuals with disabilities but also impacts national well-being by reducing social cohesion and equality.

In many African countries, ableism is deeply entrenched in societal norms and practices. Traditional beliefs and lack of infrastructure exacerbate the challenges faced by people with disabilities. For example, physical barriers in public spaces and limited access to specialized healthcare services hinder the integration of individuals with disabilities into the workforce and educational systems. This exclusion results in diminished national productivity and perpetuates cycles of poverty and marginalization (Fouad, 2021).

Nigeria illustrates how ableism impacts national well-being through its significant barriers to accessibility and inclusion. According to the World Bank (2020), people with disabilities in Nigeria face severe infrastructural deficits and social stigma. This marginalization is compounded by limited access to quality healthcare and education, which hinders their full participation in economic and social activities. The National Disability Act, although a positive step, has not yet fully addressed the systemic issues affecting the disabled community.

The impact of ableism on national productivity

Ableism affects national productivity by excluding a significant portion of the workforce. People with disabilities, who often possess untapped potential, are frequently denied employment opportunities due to physical barriers and discriminatory practices. This exclusion reduces the overall productivity of the labor market and limits economic growth.

In Africa, the economic impact of ableism is substantial. According to a study by the African Development Bank (2019), people with disabilities are underrepresented in the labor market, leading to a loss of potential economic contributions. The lack of inclusive policies and accessible work environments contributes to lower employment rates among people with disabilities, thereby affecting national economic growth and development.

In Nigeria, the exclusion of individuals with disabilities from the workforce has economic repercussions. The lack of inclusive policies and accessible work environments limits the potential contributions of these individuals to the economy. A report by the Nigerian National Bureau of Statistics (2021) highlighted that people with disabilities face significant barriers to employment, including physical inaccessibility and discriminatory hiring practices, which undermine national productivity.

Implications for social work and social policy

According to International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) (2014), the social work profession is founded on the principles of human rights and social justice. The IFSW (2014) also stresses that the profession draws on theories of human development, social theory and social systems to facilitate individuals, organization, social and cultural changes (Ngwu, 2014). The IFSW (2014) set out three key action areas for social work which are categorized thus:

1. Promoting social change on the basis of social work research-findings regarding the needs and the avoidable causes of problems

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confronted by individuals and groups seeking or requiring assistance.

2. Problem-solving in human relationships, whether interpersonal, interfamilial, within the wider community or vis-à-vis the authorities and their agents
3. Empowering people to enhance their own well-being, as opposed to creating ongoing dependency and thus maintaining inherent vulnerability.

Given such a range of social work and social practice areas of intervention, together with the basis and approaches that inform its action, it is clear that the social work profession as, a mandate is, required to evolve and promote positive direct and indirect impacts on the well-being of people with disability. Thus, social workers are by practice to make sure;

1. Social services are accessible on a self-referral basis and respond appropriately to any individual or family experiencing such social-service difficulties.
2. That people with disability are given maximum attention.

Since the area of social work is structure thus, social workers are expected to be part of policy making; program creation, design/implementation that will also aid in meeting the needs of people with disability. Social workers generally are expected to; understand societal challenges, advocate for marginalized populations and implement effective interventions to promote social justice and well-being of the people. This includes; access to healthcare, affordable housing, mental health services, education, among others. The profession of social work thus is structured to; assist individuals, families, groups or communities, to get the best out of their skills, living for improved well-being and national productivity (IFSW, 2014). Subsequently, one of the primary goals of social work profession is to help meet the basic needs of disabled people, the vulnerable, less privileged for, the interest of their social wellbeing.

Addressing ableism: recommendations and future directions

To mitigate the effects of ableism, it is essential to implement inclusive policies and practices that address physical, social, and institutional barriers.

Recommendations include:

1. Improving accessibility: Ensure that public spaces and workplaces are accessible to individuals with disabilities.
2. Promoting inclusive education and employment: Develop policies that support the inclusion of people with disabilities in educational and employment settings.
3. Raising awareness: Educate the public about disabilities to combat stigma and discrimination.
4. Enhancing healthcare services: Provide comprehensive and accessible healthcare services tailored to the needs of individuals with disabilities.

Conclusion

Ableism has far-reaching implications for national and individual well-being and productivity. By addressing the barriers and discriminatory practices that contribute to ableism, societies can improve the quality of life for individuals with disabilities and enhance overall national productivity. In contexts like Africa and Nigeria, targeted efforts are needed to overcome the unique challenges faced by people with disabilities. Creating a more inclusive and equitable society benefits everyone by leveraging the full potential of all individuals.

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