

Women's Experiences of Disability and Community-based Rehabilitation in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The majority of people with disabilities (PWDs) live in the global south. Over the last four decades, community-based rehabilitation (CBR) programs have come to dominate the way development programs operate and intercede in the lives of PWDs, especially in low- and middle-income countries. This research uses participant observation and in-depth interviews to gather women's experiences of disablement and CBR in Sri Lanka. Major findings of this research detail ways CBR programs fail to address larger social inequities, specifically centered around ableism and sexism, and how these barriers are embedded in societies. Thus, these programs continue to target rehabilitation efforts at the level of the individual, without changing their shared social circumstances of discrimination. The failure to respond to social inequalities continuing to marginalize groups of individuals is a global issue, permeating nations regardless of their level of resources. CBR programs are intended to be more empowering than segregated forms of rehabilitation, yet few CBR-related studies use methods to incorporate the perspectives of PWDs. Centering the experiences of women with disabilities (WWDs) in CBR programs in Sri Lanka, this dissertation reveals glaring deficits in the CBR framework and argues the perspectives of WWDs are valid and important sources of knowledge needed to inform research and practice. The three main themes focused on within this dissertation connect inadequate childhood education and current employment experiences; a myriad of social factors shaping health and wellbeing; and an increase in mobility through social movements. The themes presented illuminate the need to refocus international development and intervention efforts away from individual deficit-based models toward systematic societal-level interventions that are informed and guided by the experiences of people the programs aim to serve.