

Poverty, disability and violence

Pobreza, deficiência e violência

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For me this discussion is threefold. First, it will deal with an issue I have been investigating in the local area for the last three years. Second, it will have to be consistent with what the authors' have put forth in their proposal and third, I want to be consistent with what I have experienced in my 22 years practice in a public institution for people with disabilities. So, this discussion is an opportunity to address the data on social inequalities from Latin American and the Caribbean and to speak of their similarity to the Brazilian situation with respect to poverty, especially chronic poverty within the disabled community and its connection with violence and domestic maltreatment.

As Cavalcante & Goldson state, the reduction in poverty observed over the two last decades in Latin America and the Caribbean, and specifically in Brazil, coincides with the growth of the absolute number of poor people, resulting from population growth and the increased survival of people with disabilities. As a consequence, there is a disparity in the distribution of health and educational resources between the poor and the rich. In this context of social inequality, poor children are more disadvantaged, as pointed out by the authors. The unequal distribution of resources is seen as cause and consequence of social exclusion of people with disabilities and mental health disorders. This suffering from numerous disadvantages, stigma and discrimination is independent of race, gender, age and socio-economic level.

Extreme poverty and disability

As the authors state, "*the links between poverty and disability – that poverty causes disability and disability causes poverty, has not yet been addressed*". It should be noted that, in order for poverty and disability to be rigorously studied, one major barrier has to be overcome, namely the lack of an adequate and accepted definition of poverty. It is of fundamental importance that the authors in their article call attention to the lack of resources available to people with disabilities, poor or rich, who end up being denied educational and health resources as well as access to leisure time and employment opportunities. Consistent with that statement, the authors appropriately maintain that in the context of disability it is necessary not to re-

strict the concept of poverty only to its material or economic aspect but to take a much broader view.

In Brazil statistical data on people with disabilities living in poverty are scarce. One important step toward reducing poverty in Brazil was the Benefit of Continuity Contribution (Benefício da Prestação Continuada - BPC) as a public policy in the social assistance area provided to people with disabilities. The efficacy of this policy and its impact on quality of life (Organic Law of Social Assistance, LOAS, Brazilian Law 8742, from December 7th, 1993) are still being discussed. The LOAS is a law to reduce poverty by ensuring a basic quality of life, providing appropriate living conditions, addressing social contingencies and universalizing the human rights. However, this law only benefits families with a per capita income equal to or less than \$60/month, \$2 a day (an amount corresponding to ¼ of Brazil's minimum income), an economic criterion that only benefits those below the poverty line. As a result, many people with higher incomes but still insufficient for achieving decent living conditions are excluded from receiving services and access to needed resources.

The problems mentioned above are readily observed among the socially and economically excluded population living in the poor communities (favelas). Their lives are constantly disturbed by interventions of public and local authorities and agencies as well as by parallel powers existing in the favelas¹. So, what occurs is that extremely poor people are more visible to public agencies than people with disabilities. As the authors point out, although people with disabilities may not always be the poorest, they still suffer from the same lack of access to health care, education and employment opportunities as a consequence of social exclusion.

Social exclusion and poverty

The terms social exclusion and poverty were understood as cause and effect of each other, without taking into consideration the variations in social inequalities, especially with respect to disabilities. As we know, not all people with disabilities are poor. Nevertheless, as the authors have observed

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in Latin America and the Caribbean, even without official data on the impact of poverty on disabled populations in these areas, one knows that there is a high rate of chronic poverty among disabled people. What arises from the context of chronic poverty are social exclusion, low expectations, lack of access to social and health services as well as poor education opportunities, facts that limit the possibilities for people to live and to effectively participate in society with an adequate quality of life.

One example involving people with disabilities in Brazil is the employment sector. The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 changed from the assistance-based model to a new perspective based on social diversity and equal opportunities. According to Law 8.213/91, a percentage of jobs proportional to the number of employees in a company have to be destined to people with disabilities. Companies with 200 employees should give 2% of the available jobs to disabled persons. For those companies employing 201-500 workers 3% of the jobs should go to the disabled. Those with 501-1000 employees should have 4% of their jobs reserved for the disabled and those with more than 1000 workers should reserve 5% of the jobs for the disabled.

According to the Brazilian census of 2000² there are 9 million people with disabilities working in the country with more than half of them (4.9 million) receiving a minimum income estimated in R\$ 415.00 or \$245. The southeast region leads the level of employment of the disabled with 12, 132 individuals employed in 2007. The introduction of this law resulted in the hiring of 22, 314 people with some type of disability, almost 12% more than the previous year³.

In Brazil, people with disabilities still face a contradictory experience: after defeating the barrier of disability, they still have to defeat the barrier of social exclusion. Many companies do not employ people with disabilities because they are disabled and considered unprepared for the labor market as a result of inadequate education (less access to school, lack of adaptive transportation, lack of school environments adapted for different kinds of disabilities – educational exclusion).

Disability and quality of life

The authors state that for understanding the impact of poverty on quality of life it is necessary to know how the lack of resources influences the later lives of people with disabilities, and what it means to live in the world of chronic poverty and disability. In the Secretaria Municipal da Pessoa com Deficiência, an institution of the city of Rio de Janeiro dealing with reduction of poverty and exclusion of peo-

ple with disabilities through Community Based Rehabilitation Programs (CBRP) and De-institutionalization Programs for children, youth and adults with different disabilities and mental disorders, we are facing several forms of social exclusion: chronic poverty, lack of health care and educational resources, lack of social and cultural opportunities. The challenge we face in these programs is to break the cycle of chronic poverty by stimulating a network of resources with the help of families, communities, public and private local resources.

Being part of a research team as well, we concluded⁴ that the investment in education, health, rehabilitation and training for social, leisure and work activities, as a part of an institutional network, are an important contribution to changing peoples' expectations, positively affecting their quality of life and reducing poverty. Nevertheless, some issues related to the culture of poverty are still not easy to cope with: for example, the difficulty of some families in understanding some of the orientations they receive from the professionals and how to access and benefit from public resources. Sometimes, it is difficult for families and society (through its institutions) to distinguish the disability itself from the level of incapacity (or the efficiency expected and possible for each person with disabilities), making it more difficult to search for and to achieve more autonomy for people with disabilities. Subjective and cultural issues as the above-mentioned are related to the cycle of poverty and disability as described by the authors.

Disability and violence

The article is categorical in saying that Latin America is still a historical and social area involved in multiple forms of violence between individuals and groups. People with disabilities are the most exposed and vulnerable and depend on all kinds of external resources⁵. In presenting data about violence against children in the United States, the authors realized that there, the data about violence against children with special needs are also incomplete. But they concluded, according to what was already identified among children with disabilities, that this population is at increased risk for being abused. Unfortunately, Brazil and Bolivia do not have adequate child maltreatment and domestic violence reporting systems. Nevertheless, it is expected that, like in the United States, children with disabilities are at high risk of suffering domestic violence and maltreatment in these countries.

One of the central questions in Cavalcante & Goldson's article is why are children with disabilities more vulnerable to violence than children in

general? The authors provide a diagram identifying the main actors involved in the problem (the child, the family, and the community/society) each one with individual characteristics, needs and challenges that interact with each other, creating a constellation of conditions which may, or may not, predispose to maltreatment. As refers to the child, depending on the degree of the impairment (physical, cognitive, behavioral, emotional), there may be environmental tensions, which would influence the interaction between the child, the parents and caretakers. From the perspective of the family, one should consider the stressors, which lead the family to respond in a negative way toward the many demands of the children. Finally, with regard to the community and society the authors take into consideration the idea that society has a variety of perceptions and emotions about people with disabilities, ranging from feelings of pity and solidarity to rejection, and other variables that influence different levels of acceptance.

It is essential to recognize that violence does not occur only in environments marked by poverty. However, most consider poverty, especially chronic poverty and how it affects the quality of life of people with physical and mental disabilities, when seeking to reduce violence and prevent disability. It is also important to identify the disabled and to promote their inclusion in specialized programs for children and youth with disabilities as soon as possible.

Final considerations

It must be emphasized that the article is an important contribution to the field of violence and disability since the literature in this area is sparse, especially in Brazil, where there is still little interest in the theme of disability and its interface with poverty and violence. The proposal to include the issue strategies for the prevention of violence and reduction of poverty in the international agenda in the disability field is an important step forward, especially in Latin America and the Caribbean. In Brazil, to link the fields of disability and mental health and deal with the violation of human rights, poverty and violence is something that needs to be brought more emphatically to the social and political arenas.

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