

An Introduction to Disability Discourses in Kenya

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Abstract:

Disability Studies is closely linked to social justice and activism. This collection of contributions began at a symposium in 2017 in Nairobi and is a refreshing perspective from the Global South in the field. The four parts of the book bridge different disciplines (law, social sciences, accessible education, media studies) and provide important data for further discussion. The editors Nina Berman and Rebecca Monteleone powerfully connect different voices and reflect on the variety of discourses involved.

Eine Einführung in Diskurse der Behinderung in Kenia

German Abstract:

Disability Studies, soziale Gerechtigkeit und Aktivismus sind eng miteinander verbunden. Diese Aufsatzsammlung begann 2017 als Symposium in Nairobi und ist eine erfrischende Perspektive des globalen Südens zu dem Themenfeld. Die vier Teile des Buches verknüpfen unterschiedliche Disziplinen (Jura, Sozialwissenschaften, Sonderpädagogik, Medienwissenschaften) und liefern wichtige Daten für weitere Diskussionen. Den Herausgeber_innen Nina Berman und Rebecca Monteleone gelingt es verschiedene Stimmen miteinander zu verbinden und unterschiedliche Diskurse zu reflektieren.

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An Introduction to Disability Discourses in Kenya

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Disability Studies is an established field in anglophone literatures and cultures and while it was for a long time dominated by research in and about the Global North, it has become a field in which the Global South is refreshingly just as present in academic discussions. Recent handbooks such as *The Routledge History of Disability* (Roy Hanes, Ivan Brown, and Nancy Hansen (eds.), London and New York 2018) and the *Routledge Handbook of Disability Activism* (Maria Berghs, Tsitsi Chataika, Yahya El-Lahib, and Kudakwashe Dube (eds.), London and New York 2020) include numerous contributions and perspectives from the Global South. Such fruitful collaborations truly enrich the academic landscape and the book *Disability and Social Justice in Kenya* can be added to this absolutely refreshing conversation. Although the editors Nina Berman and Rebecca Monteleone are scholars teaching at universities in the United States, they reflect their position as white privileged women who do not seek to dominate the discussion that they assembled for the book.

The book powerfully begins with a poem by Lawrence Murugu Mute, the Kenyan disability activist and lawyer called “How to Negotiate a Disability Convention in New York.” Just as the poem, the book enhances a “conversation between theorists and practitioners in Kenya and abroad” (p. 2) beginning with a brilliant introduction that reflects on the use of language in connection to dis/abilities. The authors then sketch the history of disability connected to activist organizations in Kenya starting in the 1950s, although it is not always clear how, exactly, these organization have been formed and how they connect(ed) to British organizations at the time as they were established before Kenya’s independence (p. 9). The introduction then focusses on language and the cultural model of disability that most authors of the book favor.

Each contribution begins with an elaborate introduction of the author(s), which often helps readers follow the approach the article takes. Although the book consists of four parts dividing the focus of contributions into disability rights, access, education, and stigma, these key terms are present throughout all the articles of the book. However, in terms of discourses, the parts vary clearly as, for example, part one “From Human Rights to Disability Rights” focusses on legal issues such as the 2010 Constitution of Kenya which defines disability in its article 26o (p. 61). Activist and lawyer Patrick “Paddy” O. Onyango weaves his own experiences, including that of incarceration without trial, into suggestions for the field of laws and policies (p. 64). The other contributions in the first part of the book are likewise concerned with policies and legal means, reminding people with disabilities of their legal possibilities and agency as citizens. Thus, the article by Arlene Kanter and Everlyn Milanoi Koiyiet points to the vulnerability of girls and women who oftentimes have difficulties taking legal actions as they are not believed or do not have the access (financial, educational, infrastructure-wise) to the legal apparatus. The last contribution of this part of the book is by one of the editors, Rebecca Monteleone, and focusses on prenatal testing and is among the very few contributions that look at different cultural concepts within Kenya concerning disability. She cites a study conducted among the Maasai which underlines that a child with disabilities is not perceived as a curse or crisis but part of life’s experiences (p. 121).

Contributions that offer first-hand experience are among the best of this collection. One of them, by Theodoto Ressa, begins the second part “Access and Inclusion” and is called “Claiming our Space.” Ressa documents his travels of “two-hundred-plus miles between Busia and Nairobi with different modes of public and private transportation” (p. 139). The contribution includes photographs that reveal the inaccessibility of public transport and highlight the connection between disability and poverty. The latter is further explored by other contributions in this part highlighting the financial aspect of access. While most articles in the book stay on a very general level with their discussions, referring to statistics and policies, the transcribed lecture by Christopher Odinga gives a concrete and well-illustrated example of disability activism. Odinga, the cofounder of the Diani Art Centre Disabled Youth Group, shares his experiences as a sculptor and the ground work of building an organization to support people with disabilities.

In the third part of the book, “Education and the Media” most contributors focus on accessible education for children with disabilities. While the New Constitution of 2010 is repeatedly

referenced, the practices seem to be challenging, although the articles refer to organizations such as the Girl Child Network that create a change towards a more inclusive system. The authors, all involved in the Girl Child Network organization, conclude that “the project encouraged active engagement, supported child-centered teaching, and improved learning outcomes for all learners” (p. 209), thus echo many of the conclusions in this volume that sound hopeful but leave the readers with questions. How exactly has this been achieved? Details of campaigns of these organizations, promotional material or interviews with those working at the front lines would have been helpful, although the challenges are repeatedly reflected, too.

In the last part, “Stigma and Culture,” one of the contributions by co-editor Nina Berman looks at heroin use by young men in Ukunda-Diani. That substance-use disorder is part of Disability Studies is particularly important in this context in which most contributions focus on physical disabilities. The last article of the book, by the founders of Kupenda for the Children, a US-based nonprofit organization, sketches their work, which focusses on educational community workshops that address belief-systems in which children with disabilities are perceived to be cursed. While the article does not explain what these workshops look like, they stress the positive outcome and provide evidence in the form of statistics.

The epilogue already expresses some of the criticism this book might receive, such as that none of the contributors focus on a specific ethnic group or even specific areas. A critical assessment of the work of organizations, a discussion with several perspectives could have broadened the scope further. While the introduction provided a little bit of history in terms of the founding of organizations, the epilogue also calls for further discussions especially of disability in precolonial Kenya (p. 298). Nevertheless, the book is an excellent introduction to current disability discourses in Kenya and succeeds in bridging different discourses of various disciplines (law, social sciences, accessible education, media studies) to form a point of departure for further discussions.