

Editorial: Towards a Critical Understanding of the Disability/Forced Migration nexus

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Much has been written and documented on forced migration and the movements of people within and across national borders. People have always been forced to move, they always will, perhaps now more than ever. In light of environmental disasters, wars and conflict, food shortages, economic crises and environmental degradation among others, issues concerning forced migration are increasingly covered in the media, though often partially and rarely acknowledging the geopolitical and historical. The migration–development nexus has also been acknowledged and over the past years we have seen reasonable attention with the development literature infused within broader subjects of poverty reduction and humanitarian intervention (see for example Van Hear and Nyberg Sørensen, 2003; Faist et al., 2011).

However, within the research and literature on forced migration, one is continuously struck by the persistent absence of disabled people in its content (see for example O'Reilly, 2012) as well as theoretical disengagements with the subject that may develop the field, its objectives and approaches. This does not mean that attempts have not been emerging. Over the past few years a number of empirical studies, largely on the peripheries of, or outside migration studies, have in fact made a valuable and timely contribution to our understanding of how disability is lived out and experienced at the micro level, and have given voice to a hitherto invisible, ignored - ontologically and epistemologically erased population (see for example Women's Refugee Commission, 2008; Mirza, 2011, 2014). The Forced Migration Review special edition on disability and displacement published in 2010 was one such early example, providing an often disturbing account of the lived realities of disabled people displaced by war, conflict and poverty, and the complex interactions that emerge, as these disabled bodies and minds meet social, political and economic factors and processes, determining trajectories and outcomes of these lives in transit. Such analysis is vital in situating disability within the forced migration narrative, and conversely migration within disability discourse, and in the process highlighting stories, barriers, agency, and resistance. That said, descriptive empirical studies, on their own, will not advance our understanding of disability and forced migration, and more importantly will not develop theory. The research agenda needs to advance new questions, grounded in broader (interdisciplinary and critical) theoretical approaches. One small effort at advancing this agenda is the special edition on *Disability, and Forced Migration*. As will be amply evident, this issue does not attempt to generalise or take credit for developing this discourse. It is but one small effort at engaging with the subject of disability and forced migration in a critical and interdisciplinary way, and to open up the process for other/alternative spaces for critical debate and exploration. More importantly, we hope this special edition can influence and inform practice, and have a positive impact on the lives of disabled migrants, wherever they may be, residing or transiting.

In this special issue, we start by working backwards to explore the connections, or rather disconnections between disability and forced migration. In our own article entitled *Disability*

and Forced Migration: Critical Intersectionalities (Pisani and Grech), we highlight how disability has been historically excluded from migration studies, but also other related fields, including international development, anthropology, global health and humanitarian action to name but a few. We argue that what has kept disability in the shadows in these important fields has been their ableist approach and focus on heteronormative productive bodies, with the implication that disabled people continue to slip out of focus in neoliberal times: Neoliberalism is not only responsible for flight, but also determines the way ‘development’ is done, its collateral damage, and how forced migration is framed and ‘dealt with’. But the disability/forced migration nexus, we go on to argue, is not only excluded in migration studies, but also in disability studies, a Eurocentric field of thought which has yet to engage with the situation confronting disabled displaced people, their (re)negotiated identities, and their journeys across a range of geopolitical spaces. This is despite the fact that wars, conflict and environmental disasters that cause people to flee their homes are also a major cause of impairment and impoverishment, whilst the forced migratory passage impacts disabled people as they flee or attempt to reconstruct their lives in other places. In our article we suggest that much of disability studies literature and its emphasis on rights is in fact premised on an assumption of citizenship, namely, that all disabled people are citizens, and as such have a right to rights, or indeed, that they can claim their rights. We contend that this, together with the Eurocentric focus in disability studies, maintains the exclusions of disabled forced migrants from disability studies, and we thus call for a critical interrogation of such theoretical perspectives.

The fragmentation or disconnect between disability and migration is not only theoretical, but has strong policy and practice linkages and influences, engaged in a strong and mutually reinforcing dialectic. The virtual exclusion of disabled displaced people from core international human rights instruments such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and the 1951 Refugee Convention, and key policy documents including the World Report on Disability produced by the WHO and World Bank (2011) are clear examples. These have serious implications for international and national policy, ergo, for real people, and real lives.

We (Grech and Pisani) argue that a critical approach to understanding forced migration and disability must necessarily engage with the broader geopolitical and historical contexts, the mechanisms that reproduce inequalities and the North/South divide, and issues related to sovereignty, borders, national/human (?) security and rights.

Maria Berghs in her paper entitled *Disability and displacement in times of conflict: Rethinking migration, flows and boundaries*, begins by looking at borders and security. She explores the changed relationship of conflict to migration as seen through a lens she calls of ‘fluidity’, to investigate what this entails for disabled people, in particular what boundaries and borders are involved. Berghs applies the notion of ‘ontological insecurity’, linking this with ideas of (dis)/ableism, to consider the enforcement of boundaries within a refugee camp, wherein, she argues, the territoriality of such a setting unmakes people into ‘strangers’. Caught up in protracted refugee contexts, she illustrates how the structural violence of poverty leads to a necessary fluidity and how disabled people use this to combat the ‘unmaking’ of the self and reinsert themselves back into social life and relationships. Berghs concludes by demonstrating how this fluidity is co-opted by bio-legal politics in medical humanitarianism, contributing to ‘necropolitics’ and its consequences.

While other populations, such as women and unaccompanied minors are given increasing attention among this often homogenised displaced population, disabled people are either ignored or not acknowledged among those who migrate, or are overshadowed by other sub-populations in what seems to be a hierarchy of ‘need’ and ‘vulnerability’. These exclusions are discursive, theoretical and practical, triggering a reinforcing cycle of research and programme gaps. The implication is that disabled people are either excluded, or programmes do not know how to engage with them. When they are, a number of critical concerns remain. In her paper on disability inclusion in refugee and displaced persons programs, Emma Pearce explores the barriers displaced disabled people experience in accessing humanitarian assistance programs, and how these same barriers intensify for them. Emma Pearce in her article, reports on field work conducted by the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) exploring the experiences of disabled people, care workers and humanitarian actors in displacement contexts. Her research identifies a number of protection concerns, including lack of participation in community decision making; stigma and discrimination of children and young persons with disabilities by their non-disabled peers; violence against persons with disabilities, including gender-based violence; lack of access to disability-specific health care; and unmet basic needs among families of persons with multiple impairments. Pearce concludes that the road to inclusion is long and arduous while suggesting a number of strategies that may support disability inclusion in humanitarian programming. These include the strengthening identification of protection risks and case management services for persons with disabilities; facilitating context-specific action planning around key guidelines; and engaging the disability movement in advocacy on refugee issues.

Remaining on the issue of displacement and humanitarian contexts, Mansha Mirza reports on an exploratory research study on healthcare access for forced migrants with disabilities in the context of camps. Adopting rapid ethnography as a methodology, Mirza highlights how in the sphere of health, critical barriers are pronounced for disabled people, including: misperceptions about their health-related needs, the fact that specialized health needs fall outside the ‘social minimum’ of humanitarian healthcare, and concerns about distributional ethics in relation to disability-inclusive healthcare. Given significant resource constraints in humanitarian camps, the paper adopts a practical approach to suggest a number of strategies for addressing disability-specific health needs, while remaining consistently aware of the practical and theoretical challenges in the fields of disability studies and global health.

Berghs, Mirza and Pearce each explore the experiences of displaced disabled people in the global South, particularly within the context of the humanitarian camp. Indeed, images of such camps have become almost familiar to us as they flash across TV screens, and are shared on social media - the wretched of the earth, to use Fanon’s (1963) words, that have become the source of pity, perhaps ‘compassion’, but these are all too often conditional. It is a comfortable compassion, experienced from a comfortable distance. Paradoxically, when a small minority of these very same people leave the camps and reach the borders of the global North, they somewhere, somehow, morph into a burden or a threat: to national security, to national wellbeing, to national purity, to productivity. Within this frame, disabled people are particularly disadvantaged. Karen Soldatic and colleagues in their article entitled *‘Nowhere to be found’: disabled refugees and asylum seekers within the Australian resettlement landscape* critically and in a nuanced way engage with restrictions on the immigration of disabled people in the Australian context, in particular, those defined as ‘refugees’ and ‘asylum seekers’. As a result of this policy landscape, they argue, there remains limited

rigorous research that seeks to understand the social inclusion and participation of disabled refugees and asylum seekers within the resettlement process. Soldatic and colleagues go on to provide an extensive review, illustrating how disabled refugees and asylum seekers remain largely absent from both resettlement literature and the global North disability studies and research. Their paper summarises the limited available research in the area around the following themes: processes of offshore migration and the way that disability is assessed under Australia's refugee legislation; the uncertainty of the prevalence of disability within refugee and asylum seeker communities; the provision of resettlement services, both mainstream and disability-specific, through the transitional period and beyond; and the invisibility of disabled asylum seekers in Australia's immigration detention centres and community-based arrangements. The authors conclude by outlining implications for further research, policy and practice in the Australian context.

In a similar fashion, Rebecca Yeo explores the condition of disabled refugees, but this time in the UK. Reporting on a study conducted with disabled people seeking asylum in the UK, that used art as a means to bring out and promote people's key messages in public spaces, Yeo suggests that people with these intersecting identities lack sufficient numbers, resources or allies to assert their needs and rights in statutory, non-statutory or even peer support organisations in the UK. The upshot of this, she argues, is deprivation, isolation, and an existence too often obscured at policy and programme levels. Yeo argues that not only does such marginalisation cause unnecessary suffering among disabled refugees, but also negatively impacts on the whole population. Drawing on the citizen/non-citizen dichotomy, she articulates a hierarchy of entitlement that may impede recognition of the causes and commonalities of oppression which hinders solidarity, perhaps perpetuating a domino effect, of consequences onto other spheres. Where reduced standards become acceptable for certain people, the imposition of similar standards on others is facilitated, particularly in the context of neo-liberal austerity. Yeo concludes by calling for systemic change to end the differential ranking of people's worth and to build greater solidarity.

In 2014 more than 3500 people lost their lives in the Mediterranean, and 2015 seems set to break this appalling record. As the humanitarian crisis unfolds in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa, this blue border has become the deadliest in the world, as displaced people take ever more dangerous routes, and engage ruthless smugglers in their efforts to reach security in Europe. That disabled people are part of this tragedy, that they often weather harsher journeys and face tougher barriers in settling, are narratives that would seem obvious to many, but which are seldom heard because few bother to listen, and because many of these stories are seldom echoed. Attempts at understanding and intervening in sensitive and responsive ways also remain scarce. Concerted efforts have to be in place to prevent the human suffering that ensues, for all, as a matter of rights, as a matter of human dignity and survival. In his short and harrowing account, Dr. Ayman Mostafa, a Syrian surgeon, now living in Malta, who lost his wife and daughter at sea, recounts the intensified hurdles encountered by disabled people in flight, and throughout all the stages of the journey. The brief UNHCR Malta report, presented in our Voices from the Field section recounts how these barriers, though, remain pronounced, as disabled asylum seekers confront systems that are unprepared, unadapted, and perhaps unwilling to cater for them and their needs. This special issue acknowledges its remit and limitations. Nevertheless, with its contributions from academics as well as activists and practitioners, and multiple voices within, we hope to do

some of these journeys justice, to articulate some critical concerns, and, to reiterate, all this in the hope that the situation may change, even if at a discursive level.

Notes

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