

Breaking down Barriers

photo: One Family People

PROJECT SHEET

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Can exposure reduce prejudice?

The introduction of police officers with disabilities in Sierra Leone

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Executive summary

Awareness-raising initiatives are crucial to address discrimination against People With Disabilities (PWDs). But what makes such initiatives successful? Building on evidence from Sierra Leone, this paper clarifies the factors that shape the success of disability awareness interventions. More concretely, it examines an initiative in which police officers with disabilities were employed by the Sierra Leone Police to work alongside 'abled' police officers with the aim of challenging negative stereotypes. The study unfortunately did not find clear evidence that sustained interaction between abled and disabled police officers resulted in the former revising their negative views of PWDs. Four explanatory factors emerged: (1) different selection procedures used for disabled and abled police officers contributed to the belief that unqualified and inadequate PWDs were hired; (2) this belief was further strengthened by the importance attached to bodily strength within police culture; (3) disabled police officers were appointed to positions hidden from the public, and (4) were provided with limited career opportunities, which both reinforced existing negative stereotypes and strengthened the idea that PWDs are incompetent.

Introduction

With an estimated 10 percent of the world's population living with a disability, it is not surprising that PWDs represent the world's largest minority, with 80% estimated to be living in developing countries. People living in poverty are more vulnerable to impairments and in many developing countries, PWDs face margin-

alization in all sectors of society, including education, health, employment and justice. Discrimination is often underpinned by the deeply entrenched belief that sin, voodoo or black magic are causes of disability. Challenging attitudes is typically seen as the first step towards building an inclusive society for PWDs. Awareness-raising initiatives are key to this. The

¹'Breaking down Barriers' was initiated by the Liliane Foundation and the African Studies Centre (Leiden University) in 2015 to identify the factors leading to successful advocacy for children with disabilities. Together with One Family People in Sierra Leone, The Cameroon Baptist Convention Health Services and Cheshire Homes Society of Zambia, the programme used academic research as input to build capacity for effective disability advocacy.



Presentation of preliminary research findings in Freetown in December 2017.

question, however, is under what conditions such initiatives can be effective. Drawing on evidence from Sierra Leone, this paper seeks to improve our understanding of the success factors in disability awareness interventions. It examines an initiative in which police officers with disabilities were employed by the Sierra Leone Police to work alongside ‘abled’ police officers with the aim of challenging negative stereotypes.

Case study

In Sierra Leone, many PWDs are rejected by their families and end up living on the streets. It is not uncommon for them to engage in illegal and often degrading activities such as begging or sex work in order to satisfy their basic needs. Police officers are regularly involved in actions against PWDs, and both groups have developed negative views of each other. There is a common perception within the police force that PWDs are troublemakers; people that like to fight and use abusive language: “Na dat mehk God mehk u so” [this is why God made you that way] is an expression frequently used towards them during conflicts.

In 2012, the Sierra Leone Police started out by hiring four PWDs in their Communication department in Freetown with the aim of challenging the stereotypical attitudes of police officers towards PWDs, and improving the relationship between the two groups. Five years later, in 2017, a total of ten police officers with disabilities were working with the Sierra Leone police force in the Communication and Maintenance departments in the Western Area. All newly hired police officers had a physical disability. The initiative built on the assumption that by having police officers

with disabilities as colleagues and creating sustained, positive, intergroup encounters, ‘abled’ police officers would revise their negative perceptions of PWDs. In other words, that positive experience with individual PWDs would result in police officers revising their negative views of PWDs in general.

This paper analyses and discusses whether and how the initiative contributed to a change in attitudes of police officers towards PWDs. The research was carried out in Freetown over a period of six months in 2017, using a combination of semi-structured interviewing (32 in total) and participatory observation. Interviews targeted a range of respondents and informants, including police officers of various rank, police officers with disabilities, PWDs and staff of disability NGOs. Participatory observation was carried out at various police stations, barracks, detention centers, PWD-communities and a disability NGO.

Lack of change

The study first of all found that, given the huge stigma attached to disability in Sierra Leone, the fact that the Sierra Leone Police implemented this initiative was already a major accomplishment in its own right. In addition, the research found that generally, police officers with disabilities maintained cordial relations with most ‘abled’ colleagues. In a few individual cases, friendships emerged between the disabled and ‘abled’ police officers. Overall, however, the study did not find clear evidence that sustained interaction between abled and disabled police officers resulted in the former revising their negative views of PWDs. Four factors emerged that explain why the initiative failed. First, different selection procedures for disabled and abled police officers resulted in the widely shared

belief that unqualified and inadequate PWDs had been hired. Unlike 'regular' recruits, police officers with disabilities did not have to pass an entrance examination or motivational interview. Because the selection process for PWDs was less demanding compared to the normal selection procedure for police recruits, many police officers believed that disabled police officers had been hired only because of their disability and had thus received preferential treatment. This created a feeling of resentment towards disabled colleagues, which had significant implications: (1) there was a risk of devaluing disabled police officers' real accomplishments, (2) The idea that disabled police officers cannot stand on their own feet was reinforced, and (3) it may have increased tensions, as police officers were convinced that disabled police officers received the same benefits without deserving them.

Secondly, the research found that the importance attached to bodily strength within police culture contributed to scepticism regarding the potential of PWDs to be competent police officers. A common belief among 'abled' police officers was that disabled police officers were weak and not physically fit, and that there was *'something wrong with their body'*. They were therefore often sceptical about the role of *'physically unfit people'* within the police, which was an environment where the body was seen as a crucial asset to *'get the job done'*. Because they could not be sent to control riots, to patrol the streets, or arrest the public as front-line officers, disabled police officers were not seen as 'real' police officers. Third, disabled police officers were appointed to positions hidden from the public, which reinforced



Police officers with disabilities after graduation from the Police Training School in Hastings in 2012.

existing negative stereotypes and strengthened the idea that PWDs are incompetent. While disabled police officers were hired by the police, they were at the same time asked to remain invisible. Police officers with disabilities were all appointed to positions that did not involve direct contact with civilians. They were also not allowed to wear a police uniform. Both these decisions seem to have been made out of fear that police officers with disabilities appearing in public would negatively affect the reputation of the police, and that the public would ridicule a physically unfit police officer.

Fourth, disabled police officers were provided with limited career opportunities, which again reinforced existing negative stereotypes and strengthened the idea that PWDs are incompetent. The study found that disabled police officers did not have opportunities to climb the professional ladder in the police force. Not only were they prevented from working in different departments, a necessary requirement to be promoted to a higher rank, but there was also a common perception among police officers that disabled police officers would never achieve command positions because of their physical limitations. Overall, it can be argued that the professional environment of the disabled police officers reinforced the negative views that existed about people with disabilities, and consequently, the notion that disabled police officers were not full-fledged police officers.

Local understandings of disability

Whilst examining whether and how the initiative contributed to a change in attitudes among police



Two of the first police officers with disabilities recruited in 2012.

officers towards PWDs, the study also found that the phrase 'persons with disabilities' is problematic for disability awareness interventions. The initiative aimed at challenging police officers' stereotypical attitudes towards 'people with disabilities'. This terminology is part of the global disability discourse that is widely used by international NGOs and multi-lateral organizations such as the WHO and World Bank. This study found, however, that 'people with disabilities' as an over-arching expression reflecting different kinds of disabilities does not reflect local understandings of disability. In fact, police officers in Sierra Leone appear to have a compartmentalized and hierarchical concept of disability. For example, many police officers do not consider people with mental and intellectual impairments, or amputees and war-wounded, to be disabled. Their concept of disability mostly relates to physical and sensory impairment. Furthermore, police officers identify a hierarchy in types of impairments. In this hierarchy, physical impairments are considered somehow 'superior' (less disabling) to sensory impairments, while mental and intellectual impairments, as far as they are seen as disabilities, are placed at the bottom of this hierarchy.

This analysis has important practical implications for

international agencies seeking to promote disability awareness. First, they need to be aware that local understandings of disability may be different from theirs. In Sierra Leone, understandings of disability are heterogeneous and include different value judgments regarding different categories of impairment. The phrase 'PWDs' runs the risk of hiding the local perceptions of police officers and probably of many other citizens in the country. Second, the findings stress the importance of using locally recognized categories of disability in interventions, as opposed to the over-arching notion of 'people with disabilities'. Interventions that do not acknowledge local understandings of disability run the risk of failure by design. In Sierra Leone, the 'fragmented' and 'hierarchical' understanding of disability means that exposure to one type of disability is not likely to result in revised views of other types of disability. Third, disability awareness interventions must take into account that for some impairment types, addressing negative stereotypical attitudes may be harder than for others. People with disabilities that are ranked lowest in the hierarchy of impairments (e.g. mental and intellectual disabilities) also tend to be the most marginalized. This implies that change for the most marginalized PWDs is likely to be the most difficult to achieve.



photo: Silvia Peirolo

A squad of police officers with and without disabilities in Hastings in 2012.

Further reading

Peirolo S. (2018). *Cops without uniforms in Sierra Leone: challenging police officers' stereotypes towards people with disabilities*. MA-thesis. Wageningen: Wageningen University. See www.barriersfree.org

Notes

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