

Ghana and the road to equality

The Charter of the United Nations affirms the essentiality of "a universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction". This universal respect is something that continues to be sought out. Read on as writer Britt Dunn describes her experiences working in a small school for disabled children and her observations on the status of disabled persons in Ghana.

Nervous and with butterflies in my stomach, I ran to catch a tro-tro headed across town. It was the first day of my internship with a school for the disabled in Accra, Ghana; I had no idea what to expect. The tro-tro's door opened and I jumped inside. I nestled into a seat between a large woman with a baby tied to her back and a regal looking man wearing a batik shirt. The tro-tro set off and I looked out the window, eagerly taking in my surroundings.

We were soon speeding down a red dirt road, passing goats and street vendors selling plantain chips from baskets perched upon their heads. I soon began to notice that every few minutes we would pass a beggar on the street. What occurred to me was that all of the beggars were disabled. It was at this moment that I began to wonder about the living conditions and treatment of Ghana's disabled.

Upon arriving at my destination, a small school for disabled children, I was greeted with smiling faces and happy greetings. The carefree children were a stark contrast to the beggars I had seen on my

journey. I began to feel more at ease; I assumed that if these students were any indication, Ghana's disabled could not be so badly treated. Unfortunately, I soon found out that this was not true. These children were the lucky ones, they had been given the opportunity to attend a private school built to address their needs. But, even among these privileged students, there were stories of heartbreak and prejudice.

Ghana is a society with strong religious and traditional beliefs. These beliefs have influenced how the disabled have been treated. Many Ghanaians believe that disability and ill health are caused by witchcraft, evil spirits, or by not adhering to taboos. Because of this belief, people with disabilities are often seen as sinful. Mothers feel guilty for having given birth to a disabled child and they are often blamed by others for causing the disability of their child. Families wracked by guilt and fear will often abandon their disabled newborn in a field to die.

Some of the abandoned children are lucky: they are found and taken into orphanages. But even the lucky ones do not necessarily find acceptance. I was told the



story of one such young disabled orphan. The young girl loved to hug; everyday she would try to hug the nurses of the orphanage. The nurses would ignore the girl and refused to show her affection. They were the closest thing to a mother that the girl would ever know; they were her family in the orphanage. Yet the nurses were unable to give the girl love because of their discrimination against disabled persons.

Janneke Krijgsman, an occupational therapist working in orphanages such as these, explained to me, "Because of this, [disabled children] are banished not just from the family, but from the whole society because everyone says it is not worth it to help this child. Put them away, we do not want to see them."

Disability is not just a struggle for children. Once a disabled person reaches adulthood, he/she faces a new set of problems. When trying to find a job, he/she is often faced with prejudice.

Take for instance, the case of a disabled accountant trying to find work in Accra. This man applied for a job with 50-60 other people. Only three of the 60 applicants, one of which was the disabled man, were chosen for an interview. When the man arrived for his interview, he walked up to the panel of interviewers with the use of his walker. One of the panel members exclaimed, "Ah, but you didn't write on your application that you are a disabled person!" The man was then dismayed to find that he was not asked about his skills or education, he was only asked his name and told that he would be receiving a phone call. He

waited, but never received a call. The panel could not see anything beyond the fact that he was physically disabled. They did not bother to look at his credentials or ask any questions simply because they could not see beyond their discrimination of disability.

Many other skilled Ghanaians with physical disabilities have suffered the same fate. Despite their accomplishments and credentials, they are unable to find employment. Employer discrimination has led to the high number of disabled beggars living on the streets of Accra.

During my time in Ghana, I spoke to many disabled people. Upon hearing their stories of hardship and intolerance, I became saddened. The disabled children at the school where I interned appeared to have a tough life ahead of them. I could not imagine the smiling, loving children I had come to care for being treated with such prejudice. Yet, there is hope.

On July 1, 2006, the Ghanaian Parliament approved the Persons with Disability Bill. The Bill aims to improve the quality of life of Ghanaians with physical and mental disabilities, allowing them to more successfully integrate into mainstream society. Many of the actions set out by this bill have yet to be realized, and hopefully will come to fruition in the upcoming years. Furthermore, religious and traditional beliefs are slowly beginning to change. More and more Ghanaians, especially among the educated, are beginning to attribute disability to physical sources rather than



the supernatural. Change takes time, but I hope that one day all Ghanaians will be treated with respect and equality.

Read the article and listen to it online:

DEUTSCH

[http://www.teatime-mag.com/
magazines/21-de/](http://www.teatime-mag.com/magazines/21-de/)

ESPAÑOL

[http://www.teatime-mag.com/
magazines/21-es/](http://www.teatime-mag.com/magazines/21-es/)

FRANÇAIS

[http://www.teatime-mag.com/
magazines/21-fr/](http://www.teatime-mag.com/magazines/21-fr/)

