

COVID-19 exposes Canada’s ableism

Stephanie G. Brooks, MA¹; Leah Bennett, MSc¹

¹ Temerty Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, Medical Sciences Building, 1 King's College Circle, Toronto, Ontario

Abstract

COVID-19 has imposed numerous challenges onto Canadians including income insecurity, reduced access to healthcare, and last-minute workplace adaptations. Although these obstacles have altered the lives of thousands, many people in the disability community have been struggling with these challenges for years. This paper outlines how Canada’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic uncovers the pervasive ableist attitudes that are present at both the government and societal levels.

of their positionality in order to bring any biases they may have into consciousness, to ensure they are not speaking on behalf of the disability community. Being the voice for people with disabilities would go against the “nothing about us without us” philosophy that is upheld by many community members, and this is a motto the authors support and respect. Furthermore, as individuals who are unable to fully appreciate what it is like to live with a disability, this would be inappropriate.

Terminology

In Canada, both person-first language (i.e. person with a disability) and identity-first language (i.e. disabled person) are used by disability communities/disabled folks. As a result, both terminologies will be used throughout this article. The Law Commission of Ontario’s definition of ableism was also used.¹ It reads as follows:

“[Ableism] may be defined as a belief system, analogous to racism, sexism or ageism, that sees persons with disabilities as being less worthy of respect and consideration, less able to contribute and participate, or of less inherent value than others. Ableism may be conscious or unconscious, and may be embedded in institutions, systems or the broader culture of a society. It can limit the opportunities of persons with disabilities and reduce their inclusion in the life of their communities.”

Preface

Land acknowledgement

SGB and LB are white settlers living in Ontario. They believe it is important to recognize the province’s history of colonialism and perpetuation of colonial beliefs. With this in mind, they would like to acknowledge that the land on which they are studying is the traditional territory of many Indigenous Nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee, and the Wendat peoples. It is now also home to many diverse First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. SGB and LB would also like to recognize the current treaty holders, the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation. Living part-time in Nova Scotia, LB also acknowledges that she is studying in Mi’kma’ki, the traditional territory of Mi’kmaq people.

Positionality

SGB has a master’s degree in Critical Disability Studies; however, both SGB and LB identify as white, presently able-bodied cis-women, and are by no means experts in the field. They acknowledge that their identities have afforded them many privileges in their life, which will continuously impact the way they perceive the world around them. Throughout their research and the writing of this article, it was imperative for them to be critical

Commentary

Ableism in Canada during COVID-19

COVID-19 has stripped away the normalcy of our day-to-day lives and many are yearning for its return. Given the biological, psychological, social, and financial impacts of the pandemic, the desire to “get things back to normal” is valid. However, simply returning to the status quo once the pandemic is over will not benefit everyone and these individuals are being left out of very important conversations.

Approximately 20% of Canadians over the age of 15 live with one or more disabilities.² Prior to the pandemic, many people with disabilities faced barriers (i.e. physical, technological, attitudinal, policy, etc.) that prevented them from fully engaging in some or all aspects of society, and unfortunately, COVID-19 has not made anything easier. As Bonnie Brayton, the national executive director of the DisAbled Women’s Network Canada, said in an interview with CTV News, “if you think it’s tough for you to try and get your supplies, to get your food, to get the things you need to feel well,

Corresponding Author:
Stephanie G. Brooks
stephanie.brooks@mail.utoronto.ca

imagine what it's like for somebody who's already got all kinds of barriers".³ Although the discrimination disabled people face from these barriers violates section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, Canada has done little to support the disability community, and COVID-19 has made this clear.⁴

Ableism at the government level

In the spring of 2020, the Canadian government launched the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) to provide financial support to individuals directly affected by the pandemic. Applicants were eligible to receive \$2,000 for a 4-week period and re-apply six other times, so long as they met the eligibility criteria.⁵ Through CERB, the government indirectly stated that \$2,000/month should be able to provide some form of financial security to Canadians with or without dependents. So why then is the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) only providing \$672/month to eligible, single disabled individuals without any dependents to help them with their basic needs?⁶ The answer is simple - ableism.

To date, the Canadian government has spent 81.64 billion dollars on CERB benefits.⁷ Given that only a subset of the Canadian population has a disability and that proving eligibility for ODSP is quite challenging, it is reasonable to assume that the government would be able to provide greater assistance to disabled citizens who are struggling to make ends meet.⁸ So why don't they? The message the government is sending is quite clear - the lives of Canadians with disabilities are not considered to be as valuable as the lives of able-bodied Canadians.

Many disabled Canadians not only require monetary support from the government to survive, but also rely on assistance from personal support workers (PSWs). PSWs are a vital part of the healthcare team, providing intimate and essential daily care; however, the government does not appear to truly value their work or care for the populations they serve. PSWs work in an unregulated field and are not awarded the same safeguards as their fellow healthcare workers, which has led to a shortage and gap in care for their clients.⁹ Furthermore, while disabled people may qualify for funding towards home care, approximately 20 million PSW visits are purchased out of pocket per annum, and COVID-19 has only exacerbated this issue.¹⁰⁻¹² In Ontario, the average cost of a private PSW is \$32/hour.¹⁰ For disabled people receiving \$672/month from ODSP, paying out of pocket for personal care can cause financial strain and may lead to poor mental health.¹³

Loss of resources due to the pandemic has also driven many PSWs to work in institutions as opposed to the community, leaving people with disabilities who live at home and rely on their services unsupported and unable to perform their activities of daily living.¹⁴ The lack of support and equipment puts PSWs under stress, and in turn, the people they assist.¹⁵ As a result, many disabled Canadians are unable to access their right to a standard of living that is adequate for proper health and wellbeing, which violates Article 25 of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁶ COVID-19 has illustrated that when further strain is put on an overworked healthcare system, people with disabilities are some of the first citizens to be affected and have their basic human rights at risk. Fortunately, the pandemic has forced Canadian government

officials to face the challenges associated with accessing personal care and as a result, the Ontario government has promised to invest \$461 million dollars in providing temporary support for PSWs.¹⁷ However, a temporary solution is not enough to ensure disabled Canadians will always have access to their basic human rights.

Ableism at the societal level

Unfortunately, ableism does not only operate at the government level. The 2017 Canadian Survey on Disability reported that 59% of disabled Canadians between the ages of 25 and 64 were employed compared to 80% of adults without disabilities.¹ Furthermore, 39% of persons with disabilities in the same age range who were not employed and not currently in school had the potential to work.¹ Although the report did not disclose the reasons for unemployment, it would be a disservice to the disability community to not acknowledge the ableist attitudes that serve to prevent people with disabilities from entering the workforce.

In 2011, Kaye et al. investigated the barriers to employing disabled workers.¹⁸ According to the interviewed employers, the presumed cost of accommodations, lack of awareness on how to "deal" with disabled workers, and the fear of legal liability were the top three reasons for not employing and/or retaining an employee with a disability.¹⁸ These attitudes are problematic for numerous reasons. However, what is particularly troublesome is how quickly companies were able to adapt their practices once COVID-19 began to invade Canada, which suggests that employers have the ability to adapt but choose not to when the government is not consistently enforcing penalties for violating the law. In 2017, two of the most commonly requested workplace accommodations by disabled Canadians were modified and/or reduced working hours and the ability to work from home, and COVID-19 has proven that these accommodations are feasible, particularly in the finance, education, professional/scientific/technical, and information/cultural industries.^{19,20} According to a StatCan COVID-19 report, "the Canadian labour market responded very quickly to the onset of the pandemic by increasing its prevalence of telework to the maximum capacity".²⁰ Although the transition to telecommuting has been relatively painless, many disabled individuals were denied the ability to work from home prior to the pandemic, highlighting the ableist attitudes held by employers.^{21,22}

Conclusion

COVID-19 has exposed the overt and covert discrimination towards disabled people within Canada. Since March 2020, able-bodied people have been urgently accommodated in ways that disabled people have been denied for decades. We urge society to use this pandemic as a learning opportunity. Instead of yearning for the pre-COVID world to return, reflect upon your privileges and use your newfound knowledge to ensure that government officials are held accountable for the continued mistreatment of disabled Canadians. We cannot and must not return to a pre-COVID era.

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