Hope in the Himalaya: removing barriers for people with disability in the mountains of Nepal.

By: Steven Willems

Across multiple cultures in Nepal, having a disability is often considered a curse. This superstition fosters a climate of shame and prejudice that traps people with a disability and their families in poverty. Children are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. But attitudes are changing, with local and international organisations working together at removing the barriers to inclusion through education and material support.

Education is critical for inclusion Photo: Steve Willems, used with permission of AHF

“I saw a kid in Bung who had severely damaged legs, his legs weren't working, he was largely walking on his hands,” said Mark Morrissey, child safeguarding consultant for the Australian Himalayan Foundation. “He was nine or 10, heading off to school, his bag on his back just dragging himself along.”

With basic infrastructure, bad roads, and a weak economy, life in the mountainous country of Nepal is hard. It’s even harder for people with a disability, who also face cultural discrimination.

“My mother still blames herself,” said Sinora Tamang, a Nepalese expert in inclusive education with the University of Sydney whose brother is deaf. “When someone has a child with disability, they think it's a curse, like they might not have done their good deed in the other life.”

Across a range of Nepalese cultures, having a disability is linked to the spiritual world and possible sins of the past. It is still considered shameful for the family and a burden on the community. UNICEF states that while 1.9% of the population is listed as having a disability, many cases go unreported due to stigma. The World Health Organisation believes it could be as high as 15%, as poverty increases both the impact and prevalence.

“You see children with significant disabilities living on the streets, which is absolutely tragic,” Mr Morrissey said, explaining that children with disabilities are especially vulnerable to neglect, exploitation, and abuse, “and the range of disabilities often can't be observed. We can see kids with cerebral palsy or with a physical disability, but there's a lot of disabilities that aren't apparent.”

“When he was little, I remember my parents tell me all the time, he's deaf, you are the one who needs to do everything,” Ms Tamang said of her brother, “I think that's because there wasn't much opportunity for people with disabilities, which is slowly changing.”

In 2008 Nepal signed the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and put guarantees of equal rights in the constitution with the goal of eliminating discrimination. The Nepalese government also offers a disability pension to alleviate poverty, but a majority of those eligible don’t access the funds.

There is a lack of education about the payment, while having to apply in person means travelling to a major city because the government can’t afford an office in countless remote communities. “If you have a person with physical disabilities how would that person go? You have seen the roads,” Ms Tamang said.

A farmer with a disability in the remote village of Waku

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According to a report by Kathmandu University, supported by UNICEF, families often struggle with the loss of income to care for a child with a disability while the cost of education and health are higher. Quality education is considered critical in reducing poverty and discrimination.

“If you are in a really remote part of Nepal, then there is not much opportunities (to attend school), and if you don't go to school, you don't get a good job, then it has a ripple effect,” Ms Tamang said.

Schools in remote regions are often poorly resourced with a lack of training to provide inclusive education. Amrita Kulung* was assigned to teach deaf children at Garma primary school despite not having related experience. “I found it very challenging,” she said through an interpreter, “having to teach deaf children without knowing any basic sign language.” She taught herself how to sign, with the help of senior teachers, to gain the children’s trust.

The Australian Himalayan Foundation (AHF) together with REED Nepal are working together to help children with a disability access quality education in the poorest and most remote regions. “The AHF provide funds, technical assistance, monitoring and evaluation while REED implements the projects on the ground,” said Corinne Stroppolo, Head of International Programs for the AHF.

“We co-design the projects and the AHF provide capacity strengthening for REED as an organisation.” She said that all teacher training programs now include a component on disability inclusion that is supported by school officials and local governments. Teachers with a disability are also supported with training and resources to help secure employment.

“When I finish my study, I want to be a teacher, so that my future is bright,” says Pema*, a twelve-year-old girl living with her deaf father in a plastic tent. Their stone house was destroyed in the 2015 earthquake and still lies in ruins because he can’t afford to rebuild. Pema’s mother left when she was one, believing the father’s disability would keep them in poverty.

A scholarship from REED and the Australian Himalayan Foundation provides learning materials, uniforms, and cash, meaning Pema can go to school. She excels in class but can’t always attend, often helping her father with chores on the farm and around the home.

“Children whose parents do have a disability end up having to carry a lot more responsibility, both physically and emotionally,” Mr Morrissey said, “they often have to go out and get a job as a shepherd, or work in the tourist industry, cooking, cleaning. It really limits their access to education.”

Achieving inclusion is about creating self-sufficiency and changing the way people view disability, Ms Tamang said. “This thinking about disability as a curse is more embedded because of cultural practice, but even in other countries people view disability more from impairment side than the barrier side.” She explained that a visitor not knowing a local language could be considered as having a disability because of the communication barrier, and removing barriers will help people overcome the limitations imposed by discrimination.

Head of International Programs for the AHF Corinne Stroppolo
in a planning meeting with REED Nepal

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Lhakpa Sonam Sherpa was studying engineering when he became deaf at the age of 20. “The father said, he's now useless for me,” said Vreni Homberger, a Swiss photographer who first met Lhakpa while trekking with her husband Ruedi in 1982. “He had to go up with the yaks, up and down, portage, earn money for the family, and he could never go for his dreams.”

Showing interest in photography, Vreni and Ruedi taught Lhakpa film processing at their lab in Switzerland. They also raised money to build him a tea house in Namche to establish financial security. Lhakpa is now an internationally renowned photographer featured in National Geographic and a highly respected member of the Sherpa community.

“It's not a curse. It's just one part of them. They are not the disability,” Mr Morrissey said. “To improve the holistic life of a child, or a family or community, it's not just about compliance and funding. You will see that after some years the ideas are not only owned by the locals, but it's something they actually champion.”

*Names changed to protect privacy.