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Human Rights and Disability

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2017 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Contesting Disability and LGBTQI Rights

Presenter: Lowell Ewart, University of Waterloo

Title: Human Rights and Disability

Abstract:

In every context where racism, poverty, inequality, religious intolerance, or any other form of exploitation is present, persons with disabilities within the category experiencing discrimination are almost always worse off than their non-disabled peers. In this way, disability has the practical impact of magnifying discrimination and multiplying harmful practices. There is even evidence in some places that persons with disabilities have been deliberately targeted with violence. Additionally, sexual violence against disabled women and girls can be especially cruel.

Efforts to combat discriminatory practices that are primarily focused on addressing the concerns of the able-bodied often further exacerbate the general indifference experienced by persons with a disability. The disabled remain invisible even as social justice advocates believe they are making progress. Indeed, discrimination may simply become more deeply entrenched and inadvertently normalized.

Human rights practice offers a way forward to expose this hidden crisis. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) recognizes that disability is not simply a physical, cognitive, or emotional condition; rather, at its core, disability is the result of profoundly social and political acts. As stated in the CRPD Preamble, "Disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." In other words, human rights are as important as medical interventions to empower persons with a disability to take greater control over their future.

The purpose of this paper will be to explore how human rights principles can be effectively used by social justice activists to improve the conditions of persons with a disability, especially for women and girls.

About the presenter:

Lowell Ewart is a human rights lawyer with a J.D. from Washburn University in Kansas and an LL.M. from American University in Washington, D.C. He directs the peace and conflict studies undergraduate program administered by Conrad Grebel University College at the University of Waterloo that enrolls approximately 200 students pursuing a major or minor and a Master of Peace and Conflict Studies. He teaches courses on human rights, civil society, fair trade, and the relationship between business and peace. Ewart formerly taught as an adjunct at Lewis and Clark Law School and worked for 11 years in the field of international development. He has lived in Lebanon, Jordan, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Kazakhstan. The focus of his research has been on human rights and peace, human rights and disability, and rights-based approaches to development.