

PANEL

Voices from the Margin: Disability and Inequality in Myanmar

Convener

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Panel Description

Globally, a significant body of research demonstrates not only the presence and degree of exclusion of people with disabilities from social, economic and political life, but the consequences of that exclusion in terms of inequalities of standards of living and health outcomes. Such inequalities are also shown to have a deleterious effect on the wider economic growth of countries. A decade of research on disability and inequality in Myanmar has shown the scale of exclusion and inequality, and in particular the degree to which disability affects the economic and social wellbeing of the entire household.

In ways akin to campaigns for gender and racial equality, political action to address inequalities is dependent on narratives which connect the concerns of voters with the often hidden nature of barriers faced by people with disabilities. Where the dominant 'public' narratives frame disability as a 'condition to be helped', public actions tend to be ameliorative at best, and exclusion and inequality remain. Where narratives shift to disability as the outcome of social arrangements in relation to impairment, the focus may turn to societal action to transform social arrangements to be more equitable and inclusive.

This panel first presents an overview of a decade of research on disability and inequality in Myanmar, particularly looking at the intersection of gender, disability and geography. This is followed by an in-depth study of disability and self-identity, exploring how religious beliefs intersect with gender to shape the narratives of disabilities amongst people with disabilities and their near-community.

The third paper follows this, looking more specifically at how autism is constructed narratively, attempting to analyze the curious phenomenon of the seeming higher prevalence of autism amongst the upper and middle class in Myanmar. Here, the absence of verifiable physical signs or medical tests results in the construction of autism as social deviance, or as a supernatural phenomenon, resulting in fear and anxiety.

The final paper draws from an action research project aimed at enabling greater inclusion of people with disabilities in government-led rural development programmes. Here, the role of narratives of change is explored as a powerful expediter of transformation of attitudes to enable inclusion. Shifting the narrative from disability as an individual experience to a shared concern furthers the process of leveraging budget appropriations, securing staff commitment and mobilizing community action.