

**Review**

## **Accessibility to the public facilities: a mean to achieve civil rights of the people with disabilities in Iran**

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**Objective:**Civil rights may cover different aspects of citizens' lives. All the members of the society should have equal access to the public facilities and public transportation system. Barriers and obstacles in society may limit the accessibility of these facilities to the disabled people.

**Method:**This article contains a part of the results in a phenomenological study of the Disability Rights. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe experiences of disability rights among 11 physically disabled that were living in Tehran, Iran. The study involves secondary analysis of in-depth transcribed interview data, using Colaizzi's method.

**Results:**A total of 655 descriptive expressions were categorized in to 25 preliminary structural elements (sub themes). 7 essential structural elements (themes) emerged from an analysis of the sub themes. One of these themes was right to access which was emerged from an analysis of 6 sub themes.

**Conclusion:**These sub themes that were obtained from an analysis of descriptive expressions of the participants, are: right to access to housing, right to access to education and information, right to access to job facilities, right to access to medical care and rehabilitation, right to access to rest, leisure and sport and right to access to places and transportation system. The right to access theme, was then categorized in to the civil rights field. In this article we will describe the right to access as it was experienced by those physically disabled people who participated in the interviews.

**Key words:** phenomenology, accessibility, civil rights, physically disabled people.

### **Introduction:**

About 10 percent of the world's population lives their lives with a kind of disability. The disability rights movement aims to improve the quality of life of people with disabilities. For people with

physical disabilities accessibility and safety are primary issues that this movement works to reform. Access to public areas such as city streets and public buildings and restrooms are some of the more visible changes brought about in recent

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decades. A noticeable change in some parts of the world is the installation of elevators, transit lifts, wheelchair ramps and curb cuts, allowing people in wheelchairs and with other mobility impairments to use public sidewalks and public transit more easily and more safely. These improvements have also been appreciated by parents pushing strollers or carts, bicycle users, old people, and travelers with rolling luggage. Access to education and employment has also been a major focus of this movement. Adaptive technologies, enabling people to work jobs they could not have previously, help create access to jobs and economic independence. Access in the classroom has helped improve education opportunities and independence for people with disabilities.

These days most of the developing countries may experience difficult situations. They have to do things in the way that match the current situation of the developing world and this may be differ too much from what is the current situation of the developed world. Citizens of the developing and under developing countries may face the citizenship issues in a different perspective. We have to pay attention to the research and development in all fields so that we can manage the problems in the way that cover the issues in current situation of our country. Our problems may resemble those of the developed countries but they are not exactly the same. So it is needed to know more and to get familiar with how exactly things go on around us. One of the important fields that should take in to consideration is the rehabilitation system and implementation of disability policies in Iran. Every body may have her/his own unique experiences in life so the disabled people will do as well. In this study we tried to describe disability rights as it was experienced by the people with disability. One of the findings is the right to access. This article describes "accessibility" as it was experienced by those disabled people who participated in the study. Although it is said that disability is a normal experience for the person who experiences it but actually it is a kind of unique phenomenon that has sound effects on the life experience and the quality of life of the

people with disabilities. Disability and disability rights are two current worldwide issues. The United Nations (UN) has set up an international human rights convention on the rights of disabled people. It takes to a new height the movement from viewing persons with disabilities as "objects" of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as "subjects" with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free, and informed consent as well as being active members of society. In the United States the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) gives disabled people important rights of access to everyday services. Service providers have an obligation to make reasonable adjustments to premises or to the way they provide a service. Here in Iran, a few laws and legislations are present that cover the rights of the persons with disability. Actually there are some legislation on papers that could not make anybody consider the needs and the rights of the persons with disabilities among the society. The Comprehensive law of disability rights which was mandated in 2004 still has a long way to be accepted and to be performed. Service providers have no obligation to make reasonable adjustments to premises or to the way they provide a service; so people with disabilities face a vast perspective of limitations and obstacles to access to the public facilities and public transportation. Right to access to the every day services is a multidimensional concept and it includes different aspects such as right to access to Housing, Education and Information, Job facilities, Medical care and Rehabilitation, Rest, leisure and Sport, Places and Transportation system. Mohammad Kamali (2004) said that the Disability right issues are challenges for all societies and they should take it into consideration as a kind of priority to achieve human right goals and to access to equal opportunities in society. He pointed out to the accessibility to the public facilities and the buildings and the streets. And also he emphasized on accessibility of the public transportation system. Mustafa Alsan (2004) said that the disabled people are the citizens who should

have equal access to the job offers but they don't, because of the negative attitudes toward the abilities and their capacities. Imrie and Wells (1993; 1993) offer their opinion as to the ways in which the operations of the system have marginalized disabled persons and show that a 'segregationist ethos' has been created that serves to perpetuate discrimination against persons in the built environment. In another publication, *Disability and the city* (1996), Imrie explores some of the critical processes underpinning the social construction of disability as a state of marginalization in the built environment. Hahn (1986) also points to issues of social justice and the built environment, stressing that access to the built environment is uniquely important to the struggles of disabled persons for equality, because the segregationist ethos of society has quite literally been informed in concrete, as the physical forms of the urban landscape. Hahn described the lot of disabled persons in Los Angeles, pointing to the importance of considerations of distance, and their difficulties in moving through space, especially in consideration of that city's extremely high level of urban sprawl and limited public transit service. He later elaborated on disability and the reproduction of bodily images which promote the 'acceptance and the identity of persons with visible disabilities' (Hahn, 1989). McTavish (1992) and Gleeson (1993; 1995) emphasize the significance of the sociopolitical production of disabling environments, the social construction of disabled persons, the importance of critically examining the power relations which create and maintain an ablest status quo, and the degree to which the disability rights movement has been successful at promoting changes in policies affecting these issues. Perle (1969) and Kirby et al.'s (1983) articles on the mobility needs of disabled persons in urban areas are two of the earliest examples of researchers examining issues around the mobility of physically disabled persons, especially in relation to the provision of 'accessible' transportation services. Gant and Smith (1992) have also examined the satisfaction of disabled persons with the accessibility of urban redevelopment efforts, and

the broad issues pertaining to the transportation needs of disabled persons.

### **Materials and Method**

Phenomenology, as a qualitative, inductive research method, is a descriptive process that was used to investigate accessibility through systematic, in-depth interviews. This approach was taken to understand the participants' interpretation of experiences rather than predetermined hypotheses of theoretical cause-effect relationships. The aim of the researcher, as the data-gathering instrument, was to elicit a rich description of the accessibility phenomena that reflects the experiences as perceived by the participant. The researcher attempts to understand both the cognitive and subjective perspective of the person who has had the experience and the resultant effect of that experience on the individual. The central focus of phenomenological inquiry was to describe the "lived experience of the world of everyday life of the physically disabled people who participated in this study". The research question for this study was the following: How do you experience accessibility of public facilities and transportation? Phenomenology was used to analyze the responses, as the method enabled the exploration of subjective understanding of the phenomena as understood by the physically disabled people, themselves. The statements from the participants were treated as data, and an iterative process was used to reveal the meanings of the experience. The resultant exhaustive statement of these themes represents the essential structure of the phenomenon under study. The specific method used for guiding data analysis was that of Colaizzi's method, which includes: (1) researchers reviewed the collected data and become familiar with it. Through this process they gained a feeling for the subject's inherent meanings, (2) researchers returned to the data and focused on those aspects that were seen as most important to the phenomena being studied. From the data they extract significant statements, (3) researchers took each significant statement and formulated meaning in the context of the subject's own

terms, (4) the meanings from a number of interviews were grouped or organized in a cluster of themes. This step revealed common patterns or trends in the data, (5) a detailed, analytic description was compiled of the subject's feelings and ideas on each theme. This was called an exhaustive description, (6) researchers identified the fundamental structure for each exhaustive description, (7) the findings were taken back to the subjects who check to see if the researcher has omitted anything. This is called a member check, (9) distributing the findings to the community. Credibility in achieving accuracy of the data was enhanced by providing extensive interview excerpts and detailed analysis of the data. The final analysis in the form of the exhaustive description was returned to the participants for review. Their feedback was treated as new data. Confirmability and dependability were addressed by keeping detailed notes about the iterative process of data manipulation and by maintaining a journal on the study's process and the personal biases of the researcher. A purposive sample of 11 physically disabled people was selected from the Iranian Association of Disability Rights, Behzisti Organization and by searching the personal websites and weblogs of the people with disabilities. One of the members was PhD, two of them were MSc, three were BSc, three of them were diploma and two were high school educated. Seven were male and four were female. The age range was 25 to 48. Seven were married and four were not married. Three of four women were unmarried. The participants volunteered to be interviewed and recommended other physically disabled people to be interviewed. The interviews took place during the fall, winter and spring of 2008 in office settings or in the disabled peoples' homes.

**Results:**

A total of 655 descriptive expressions were categorized in to twenty five preliminary structural elements (sub themes). Seven essential structural elements (themes) emerged from an analysis of the sub themes. The seven essential structural themes which were categorized in to three fields;

are: living as a human being, Individual Rights, Social rights, Right to access, Right to receive support from the society, Right to receive support from government, Right of peaceful assembly and association. The essential and preliminary structural elements finally were categorized in three fields: Human Rights, civil rights and special rights of people with physical disability. One of the themes which were emerged from the data in this study was right to access. Secondary analysis of in-depth transcribed interview data leded us to sub themes which reflected the concept of accessibility. These sub themes are: Right to Access to Housing, Right to Access to Education and Information, Right to Access to Job facilities, Right to Access to Medical care and Rehabilitation, Right to Access to Rest, leisure and Sport, Right to Access to Places and Transportation system. A listing of 6 preliminary structural elements (sub themes) and the right to access theme is found in Table 1.

**Table 1:** The Sub Themes and Their Related Theme

Sub Themes	Theme
Right to Access to Housing	Right to Access
Right to Access to Education and Information	
Right to Access to Job facilities	
Right to Access to Medical care and Rehabilitation	
Right to Access to Rest, leisure and Sport	
Right to Access to Places and Transportation system	

**Right to Access to Housing**

The first sub theme; right to access to housing, was revealed via the participants' description of their current struggle to have a place to live in with their family members. Actually we can categorize the participants in to four groups: mar-

ried men, married women, single men, and single women. Some of the married men were experiencing situations in which they can't buy a house so they should rent one. One of them even had problems with rent prices and he said that he can't pay for it.

"... I am an employee and my salary is very low, I should buy food, pay for my children's school, and pay for medical care and assistive devices, also I should rent a house to live in. Sum of these items are much more than my salary in a month. I always have this stress: what if I can't pay the rent price?" (48 y/o man)

Poor economical conditions due to lack of access to the job facilities and education makes the situation even worse. But those of them who were educated and talented didn't mention any problems with the access to housing.

"... Thanks God I didn't have any problem in housing issue. I and my family are living in rented house and we have a plan to buy a small house in future. Of course it wasn't possible if I didn't have a job!" (35 y/o man)

A single young man was worried about the problem and he mentioned that he can't get married because he can't rent a house. But he still dreamed about a happy family of his own. He was excited when he talked about his rights. He believed that no one care about his rights.

"... Do you know any one who can help me find a place to live in? Which organization is responsible? How should I advocate my rights? Even who cares?! Where should I go to claim my right to access to housing?! Of course no where! I should stay cool and try my best and keep hope that I will do it my self in future and I would have a happy family one day..." (28 y/o man)

In contrast, the young single women thought that they can't get married any time in future because no man wants to marry a disabled woman. So, one of them who was not educated said that she and other girls like her, need places to live together because as soon as they loose their parental support, because of their death or other situations, no one will take care of the disabled member of the family, so they will be homeless. May be they can

live with the siblings but that is because of the charity based attitudes.

"... If a girl or boy who has a sever disability poses a house; the siblings and other members of the family accept him/her, because they need him/her. So they can stay with the family after the parents' death. But if he/she has nothing they would send him/her to institutes or even she/ he would be homeless. The situation is even worst for the girls and women. There is two problems: being a female and disability..." (45 y/o woman)

But the educated girl said that she won't be homeless because she has a family support, education and a job. Although she was wheelchair bounded with sever disabling condition, she believes she won't be home less any time and any where.

"... I have a good family that supports me, I am educated and I am working as a lawyer. My mind is intact and I try to be successful. Today every member of the society in a developing country may experience difficult situations. I also experience the same situation as the other members of the society. I am not worry about myself; I am worry about the girls and boys with disabilities, who has poor family supports, no access to education and no access to the job facilities..." (25 y/o woman)

Married women felt more comfort about the issue; because they thought the husband is responsible for housing issues.

"... at last we should live some where, with some one. Even with parents, siblings or other family members. But a married woman has the chance to live with her husband in his house. But when you marry; you are not alone any more. Now you have to be worry about the whole family. You have to be worry if you live in a poor culture area it will hurt your children and so on..." (47 y/o woman)

Another factor that may influence the right to housing is accessibility of buildings and places. Disabled people might not live in their favorite house because it is not accessible for them so they can't choose it. This makes them feel disappointed.

"... I want to buy a new apartment on the fifth



floor, which has a good view of the city, but I can't do it. Because there is no lifts in the buildings or if there is one, some thing is wrong with it all the time. I can't go to my work because the electricity is off and so I can't use the lifts. So I should stay home. Because of these issues I have to buy an apartment on the first floor, although it is not my favorite choice...."

### **Right to Access to Education and Information**

The second sub theme which was revealed from data analysis was right to access to education and information. The participants experienced different situations to have access to education and information. Most of them had studied in mainstream schools which were not adjusted to the needs of a student with disabilities. Some of them was disappointed and gave up their education but the others tried their best to be successful without receiving any special support from the government. Two important factors in their success were the support they receive from their family members and their own self confidence.

"... I was tired of the challenge of going to school every day. Every morning I woke up to go to school. I should go to school by taxi or by bus but most of the taxis didn't stop to pick me up. Any way I went there somehow and now I should sat on the floor and climb the stairs one by one. When I reached upstairs I was tired and dirty and my peers laughed at me and they didn't like to sit near a boy with dirty hands and cloths. No one cared about changing my classroom so that I can enter a classroom on the first floor with my wheelchair ...." (37 y/o man)

"... If I could do it, others can do it as well. I am a 25 year old severely disabled girl who is not able to write or even pick up a pen. I have studied in the present condition of schools, universities and collages. Now I am a good lawyer! So it is very hard but it is not impossible. I know many other people with disabilities who are successful members of our society. Do you think it wasn't hard for me or for them? Were the facilities accessible for us? Did the government support us? No! There wasn't any help or any laws that ad-

vocate our rights. But it was a good family support and I did my best. I was angry, disappointed, tired, feared but I continued. One day a school manager told my parents why you waste your and my time arguing about something that is not actually a girl. We can't accept her in our school; it is a big responsibility that we can't afford. My parents didn't tell me anything. They just find another school and support their girl till now...." (25 y/o woman)

The participants were unhappy because of the attitudes toward the people with disabilities. They believe that these attitudes marginalized the people with disabilities. One of the participants said: "... He said: oh son! When you come here with your wheelchair, other students feel depressed. We are sorry but we can't accept you in this institute. Although you may find some where else to learn computer skills, but you'd better stay home with your family. It is safer for you. Why do you come to the streets with these wheels?" (32 y/o man)

### **Right to Access to the Job Facilities**

The third sub theme which was revealed in this study was Right to access to job facilities. The participants believed that accessibility of the environment is a critical link that is needed to achieve the rights to access to education and job facilities. They said that they can have a good job and they could be well educated in an accessible environment, but in an environment that is not accessible the probability of education or finding a good job would decrease considerably and the people with disabilities won't have equal access to the opportunities in the society. One of the participants pointed out:

"... This is just like a cycle. It repeats again and again. No access to public transportation, no access to education, no access to buildings, no access to the job facilities, no money, poverty, segregation, marginalization of the people with disabilities, no laws, no advocates, poor policies and the tragedy would be repeated again and again. It is necessary to manage the situation to break this cycle..." (38 y/o man)

There are negative attitudes about the abilities

and capacities of the disabled people. Although it is said by law that three percent of the employees should be chosen from the people with disabilities, but in the real world, employers prefer not to employ a disabled person. One of the participants said:

“... When I call a company to apply for a job, and they hear my C.V. they say wow! Yes you come here as soon as possible. And when I go there and they see my crutches they would say: oh! We are absolutely sorry but we can't employ you here, we can't support your special needs at all. I would say I don't need any special thing just let me start then I will show you I am a talented man although I am disabled. And they would say: of course you are talented, but we are sorry we can't accept you here...” (28 y/o man)

#### **Right to Access to Medical Care and Rehabilitation**

The fourth sub theme which was revealed in this study was right to access to medical care and rehabilitation. The participants believed that it is very good that they are insured but the insurance system can't cover all their needs. There are some problems. One participant said:

“... I can't use my free insurance any more because I get married and they said my husband should pay for my insurance. My husband is not insured and he can't pay for the insurance and I need some medical care services. I don't know what to do!” (30 y/o woman)

One participant complained about the way that the medical staff make their interventions. He believed that they don't consider disabled people as a whole person. They just perform the treatment. They treat the disabled people as if they are broken arms or deformed legs.

“... I remember that I fell down and my arm was broken. I went to the doctor and he fixed the problem. Then I told him I have kind of disability. And I can't use my auxiliary crutch right now because of the broken arm. May I use a wheelchair? He said: I should fix your arm's problem. You can use a wheelchair if you want but first you should find a way to go home!” (37 y/o man)

“... I am not sick! Don't call me “the patient”! I

am a man with disability. Let me live my life as I wish. I don't like to see a professional staff that thinks I am sick again!” (37 y/o man)

#### **Right to Access to Rest, leisure and Sport**

The fifth sub theme which was revealed was right to access to rest, leisure and sport. The participants believed that they should have access to rest, leisure and sport just like the other members of the society. But there are just a few accessible gyms. Especially for the women there is even less facilities. Most of the historical places are not accessible for the people with disabilities. One of the participants said:

“... I have not visited the perspolice yet; because this place is not accessible for the wheelchair bounded people. I can't go to the parks or gardens because they put some obstacles so that the motor cycles can not enter parks or gardens. But these obstacles limit my access to the places as well...” (39 y/o woman)

#### **Another participant believed:**

“... they offer the worst and hottest hours of the day to the disabled women's sport time. Why? Because it is free and no one pays money for that so other hours of the day are for those who pay for the services. The disabled people are considered as second class people of the society...” (39 y/o woman)

#### **Some one else said:**

“... It is necessary to have money so that you can travel or you can spend your leisure time as you wish. When there is no money there would be no travel no rest, no leisure time...” (37 y/o man)

#### **Right to Access to Places and Transportation system**

The sixth sub theme which was revealed from data analysis was right to access to places and transportations. As it was mentioned before accessibility of the places such as schools, universities, collages, banks, work places and even the

houses can deeply affect the experiences of the people with disabilities in their lives. The participants believed that this is very important because the environment should be accessible for the disabled people so that they can integrate to the community and advocate their rights. And also the transportation system and its accessibility has a similar effect. One of the participants said:

“... when I wanted to go to school, I was waiting for my school bus. There was stairs and the bus driver and other students helped me to get in to the bus. I heard that they complain and I was ashamed but I don't have any other way I had to be cool. Some times I stayed at school till the afternoon because I was sorry and I was ashamed of my self causing back pain to the bus drivers...” (25 y/o woman)

“... I want to go to banks and it is impossible. Shopping is also impossible. Going to schools and universities, going to the cinema, to the parks, to the mosques, hospitals are impossible too. We are in a jail in our city...” (39 y/o woman)

“... This is just like a cycle. It repeats again and again. No access to public transportation, no access to education, no access to buildings, no access to the job facilities, no money, poverty, segregation, marginalization of the people with disabilities, no laws, no advocates, poor policies and the tragedy would be repeated again and again. It is necessary to manage the situation to break this cycle...” (38 y/o man)

“... (He was shouting) we don't want your charity; you just let us have access to education, let us have a job and to make money and we would live just like the other citizens. We don't beg for charity, we try to advocate our rights as equal citizens of this society...” (32 y/o man)

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The participants' reflections have revealed six sub themes that describe the essential structure right to access by physically disabled people in Iran, Tehran. The six sub themes are Right to Access to Housing, Right to Access to Education and Information, Right to Access to Job facilities,

Right to Access to Medical care and Rehabilitation, Right to Access to Rest, leisure and Sport, Right to Access to Places and Transportation system. The participants described the nature of the theme by revealing sub themes as specific items. The elements are affected by identified influences which was unique to every participant.

The research findings revealed aspects of the theme that are of particular interest. Participants pointed out the importance of the accessibility of the buildings and places. Kamali (2004) also emphasized on the importance of accessibility of the places and the transportation system. The participants described the role of employment in the disabled people's lives and they also pointed to the attitudes toward the employment of the disabled people and Alsan (2004) also pointed to the negative attitudes toward the disability and the employment of the disabled people. The participants said that the right to access is a key link which works as a process. They think if there is no accessible environment, there would be no education, no employment, and no money, so poverty would happen and it leads to more disabling conditions. This cycle that the participants pointed to it is one of the unique findings in this study. A multidimensional approach is needed to cover all aspects of the problem. As Imrie and Wells (1993; 1993) offered their opinion no accessible environment would marginalize the disabled citizens.

And also the participants pointed to the marginalization and segregation due to the environment which is not accessible to them. According to the participants' opinions; if the policies and plans could cover the need to accommodate the environment with the needs of the all members; then the participation of the disabled people in our society would be more probable. The people with disabilities can empower themselves if they have equal access to the public facilities and public transportation. Educated disabled people and those of them who are employees can participate in society. They can help to improve development in the country. If the society would be accessible to all then we would have less under graduated



disabled people and less disabled people with no jobs. This will help us fulfill our goals in rehabilitation and implement disability policies in an effective way. The linkage between poverty and disability is strong and goes in both directions. Poverty causes disability through malnutrition, poor health care and dangerous living conditions. Disability can cause poverty by preventing the full participation of disabled people in the economic and social life of their communities, especially if the proper supports and accommodations are not available. In fact, the qualitative evident suggests that disabled people are significantly poor in developing countries, and more so than

non-disabled counterpart. The participants believed that adjustment of the environment in the way that it would be accessible to all will break such cycles and will improve the civil rights of the disabled citizens.

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