Role of Civil Society Organizations in Empowering PWDs: A Case Study of Disability Rights Action Group

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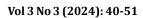[4]*Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

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This article explores the role of CSOs and examines how Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) play a key role in empowering Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). It focuses on the Disability Rights Action Group (DRAG). The article further examines the plans and actions DRAG uses to stand up for disability rights, make things more accessible, and help PWDs to be more inclusive in society. By looking at DRAG's programs, advocacy, and efforts to change policies, the research shows how CSOs help connect PWDs with the rest of society. The results prove that when communities speak up and work together, it helps create a world where PWDs can join in all parts of life. This case study gives useful lessons to people who make rules, those who work in this field, and other CSOs who want to copy good ways to empower PWDs.

1. Introduction

The Struggle of Persons with Disabilities for their rights in Pakistan has been a challenging journey. The models and approaches of Pakistan towards disability rights evolved from a charity and medical model towards a right-based model that advocates for social inclusion, equality, and dignity of Persons with Disabilities (Bably, 2022). Persons with disabilities are one of the marginalized sections of societies that are neglected in every aspect because of societal behavior (Gappmayer, 2021). According to the internationally recognized definition of 'CRPD' [Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities] "Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which when interacting with various barriers, may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Aneja, 2022)." PWDs face challenges in mobility to public spaces, due to inaccessible transportation and lack of universally designed infrastructure (British Council, 2014).

Another factor that contributes to the isolation of this section is misconceptions about disabilities, what we need to understand is the issue is not the disabilities of people but the problem is in our environment in which they feel they are disabled which contributes to the social marginalization of people with disabilities (Kotera et al., 2021). Public transportation is not designed to meet the needs of Persons with disabilities. Insufficient accommodations, such as wheelchair ramps and audible announcements, create barriers to independent mobility (Bęczkowska et al., 2021). If we look at the educational sector despite legislative efforts to promote inclusive education, barriers persist within institutions to provide an inclusive environment (Spandagou, 2021). Inaccessible facilities, a lack of appropriate accommodations, and a shortage of trained educators contribute to the academic challenges faced by students with disabilities. The job market is also a particular challenge for Persons with disabilities. Discrimination, inaccessible workplaces, and lack of accommodations often limit their employment opportunities. Addressing these issues requires a concerted effort from both employers and policymakers (Hussain et al., 2022).

Access to quality healthcare can be compromised for people with disabilities. Barriers may include physical inaccessibility of healthcare facilities, lack of accessible information, and the neglect of specific healthcare needs. Bridging this gap is essential for ensuring the overall well-being of individuals with disabilities. Book an appointment with the best orthopedic hospital in Coimbatore if you are looking for advanced care and treatment for any motor disabilities (Singalet al., 2018).

While technology has the potential to empower individuals with disabilities, there is a significant gap in access. Not all assistive technologies are affordable or readily available, limiting the ability of people with disabilities to leverage the full range of technological advancements (Razzaq & Rathore , 2020).

This article uses both data primary and secondary data sources, using a qualitative case study approach to look into how the Disability Rights Action Group (DRAG) helps

empower people with disabilities (PWDs). Several data collection methods were used for the article. The author has conducted one-on-one interviews with key people involved, reviewed DRAG's documents and publications, and experienced DRAG's activities firsthand. This article included studies by CSOs, journal articles, interviews, official notices, and other supportive actions. They compared these to spot the role of DRAG 'A civil Society Organization. This article is not just a case study of Civil Society Organizations but also about ensuring the environment is friendly to people with disabilities, with buildings and spaces they can use.

2. Research Methodology

This article uses both data primary and secondary data sources, using a qualitative case study approach to look into how the Disability Rights Action Group (DRAG) helps empower people with disabilities (PWDs). Several data collection methods were used for the article. The author has conducted one-on-one interviews with key people involved, reviewed DRAG's documents and publications, and experienced DRAG's activities firsthand. This article included studies by CSOs, journal articles, interviews, official notices, and other supportive actions. They compared these to spot the role of DRAG 'A civil Society Organization. This article is not just a case study of Civil Society Organizations but also about ensuring the environment is friendly to people with disabilities, with buildings and spaces they can use.

3. Literature Review & Analysis

"Disability, Self-Image, and Modern Political Theory" (2008) by Barbara Arneil which was published by SAGE Publications. The author opines that the subject of self-recognition is purely linked with politics and "self-image" is the first step in this regard. The writer defines 'Self-image' as groups represented in ancient times by others who damaged their identity and are now replaced with positive ones due to their struggle and efforts. The book ensured the centrality of "self-image" to define the 'politics of recognition'. (Arneil, 2008).

In the article "Perspectives on Barriers to Social Inclusion (SI) for disabled individuals in the Performing Arts" by Kajal Chheda which was published by Multidisciplinary Reviews, the article author wrote about, how there has been growing recognition of the importance of social inclusion (SI) for individuals with disabilities. Social Inclusion involves the active participation of all people in the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects of society. This includes ensuring equal rights, opportunities, and access to resources, as well as removing barriers that hinder full participation (Chheda, et al., 2024).

The article 'Effectiveness of Local Government Systems, Pro-Poor Budgeting, and Policies for Marginalized Communities" was written by Dr. Ghulam Mustafa, Naseem Anthony, and Muhammad Arslan and was published by Pakistan Social Sciences Review.

The authors talk about Empowerment through local self-government has long been a goal for the citizens of Pakistan. Considering the country's mix of cultures, a single approach to decentralization won't work to empower overlooked communities or boost national growth. They discussed how the local government setup plays a key role to bolster democracy and tackle issues at the ground level. This study carried out by the International Relations Department at 'Government College University Faisalabad' (GCUF) backed by the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Pakistan, looks at how well local government, budgets for the poor, and policies for sidelined groups are working (Mustafa et al., 2020)

The article "The social and human rights models of disability: towards a complementarity thesis" by Anna Lawson published in the International Journal of Human Rights seeks to reshape the understanding of the relationship between the long-established social model of disability and the rapidly emerging human rights model. It also provides examples of how both models operate, which inform the subsequent discussion. The article then critiques the comparisons between the models that support the improvement thesis. Using Foucault's technologies of power and Beckett and Campbell's 'oppositional device' methodology, it deepens and develops this comparative analysis. The research gap in this literature review is that it only focuses on the issue but does not give the solution while this article will talk about the social inclusion issues will give recommendations. The conclusion is that the two models address different subjects and serve different functions. In the context of human rights, their roles are complementary and mutually supportive (Lawson & Beckett, 2021).

3.1 Accessibility in Pakistan

The urban population of the world has been increasing at a very fast rate. In the context of Pakistan, the urban population increased from 32.52% to 36.38% in the period from 1998 to 2017. The major cities of Pakistan include Karachi, Lahore, Faisalabad, Rawalpindi, Gujranwala, Peshawar, Multan, Hyderabad, Islamabad and Quetta.

The population in these cities has increased tremendously In Table 01, it can be seen that the population of Karachi exploded from 9.33 million in mid-1998 to presently touching almost fifteen million or the growth rate during these past nineteen years is recorded as +63 %. Similarly, the population of Lahore city has increased by 46%, Faisalabad city by 63%, and Rawalpindi and Gujranwala cities have grown up to 67% in terms of numbers as compared with the day before yesterday situation. Peshawar (50%), Multan(56%), and Hyderabad also increased by nearly 70 percent whereas Islamabad after scoring nationwide other sectors are becoming uncontrollable and gigantically peaked that counts elasticity among overpopulation, surely need planning which we didn't practice due to our priorities but worse one was Quetta where there's placed lowest-highest13 districts from January 2021 till now their growth rate according to an annual report subjected whopping almost equal half more per year countrified same traditional! The total population in these cities has witnessed an increase of 57% from the period, 1998 to 2017 (Iqbal & Sajid, 2019).

With the significant increase in population in these cities, the existing services and infrastructure, such as roads, parks, hospitals, schools, colleges, and universities also need to increase to accommodate and cater to the movement and well-being of the growing population. The increasing population growth of these major cities, however, has created numerous issues including youth violence, theft, burglary, traffic problems, pollution, and above all, accessibility to numerous city services and facilities. It is against this backdrop, that the accessibility issues of persons with disabilities (PWDs) can be seen (Gul, 2020).

Table No 1: Increase in Population

Major Cities	Census 1998 (million)	Census 2017 (million)	%age growth
Karachi City	9.33	14.91	63
Lahore City	5.14	11.12	46
Faisalabad M. Crop	2.00	3.20	63
Rawalpindi City	1.40	2.09	67
Gujranwala M. Corp	1.13	2.02	56
Peshawar City	0.98	1.97	50
Multan City M. Corp	1.10	1.97	56
Hyderabad City	1.16	1.73	67
Islamabad M. Corp	0.52	1.01	51
Quetta City	0.56	1.00	56
TOTAL	23.41	40.92	57

Source: Government of Pakistan. (2018). Economic Survey of Pakistan 2017-18. Chapter 12. (p.18641). Islamabad: Ministry of Finance. Retrieved February 23, 2019 from http://www.finance.gov.pk/survey/chapters_18/12-Population.pdf

3.2 Evolution of Disability Rights in Pakistan

In past decades PWDs faced significant hurdles including social stigma, social exclusion being referred to as medically ill, and being treated as patients. The first-ever legal document for Persons with Disabilities in Pakistan 'The Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981' was completely based on the medical model. Pakistan observed 1981 as an international year of Disabled persons. In 2002

national policy for Persons with Disabilities was articulated. The job quota was increased from 2% to 3% as in 2002 the persons with disabilities were 15% of the bulk of the population. The 'Balochistan Persons with Disabilities Act 2017', 'The Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018', and the Punjab Disabled Persons' (Employment and Rehabilitation) Amendment Act, 2015 later on in 2022, the first-ever act in Punjab 'The Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2022' was introduced, and implemented. This act is based on a right-based approach that exclusively deals with the rights of PWDs.

In the late 90s and early 2000s, various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) emerged advocating for disability Rights. These organizations started to raise voices for the rights of persons with disabilities and the social inclusion of PWDs. Through these efforts, Pakistan signed an international document on the rights of PWDs "UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" (CPRD), and ratified this convention in 2011.

3.3 Role of Civil Society Organizations in Empowerment of PWDs

CSOs have gained significant attention as a tool to sensitize the public and participate in developing states like Pakistan (Jahan, 2020). However, the efficacy of CSOs was in question whether they were realizing their objectives or not. The core responsibility of the CSOs is to consider the public's needs and preferences (Habib & Rafique, 2019). To raise voices for those who are not in a position to raise their voices to promote the demands of citizens and influence the decision-makers to promote equal opportunities

3.4 Disability Right Action Group (Drag) role in Educating Masses.

In a society, the organization is a pattern of relationships between and among individuals and social groups. Owing to these attributes, people engage in activities and actions that increase their intra and inter-group interactions and strong cohesive bonds, paving the way toward an inclusive society (Karim, 2019). The Disability Rights Action Group (DRAG) a voluntary forum emerged in 2018 with the support of the Association of Women for Awareness and Motivation (AWAM) to dispel the stereotypes and myths associated with disability and persons with disabilities that exclude them from the mainstream of society. The DRAG consists of Business communities, Journalists, Academia, Medical Practitioners, and Civil Society Representatives who have been leading the DRAG as an independent forum since March 2020. Primarily, the DRAG envisioned establishing an inclusive society where people with disabilities are treated as a diverse group with certain rights and obligations.

The primary motives behind establishing the DRAG include the empowerment of persons with disabilities, Increasing the visibility of PWDs in social actions, Influencing the social behaviors towards the disabilities and persons having disabilities, and Increasing the level of social acceptance of persons with disabilities. DRAG is playing an important role in educating the masses about the rights of this diverse group

3.4.1   Interventions of DRAG in Sensitizing Authorities

Over the 7 years, DRAG has become an established and respected disability rights organization in Faisalabad. The group has worked with a wide range of stakeholders, including government officials, educators, healthcare providers, and employers, to promote disability rights and improve the lives of people with disabilities in the community. All the DRAG's effort was to make everything socially acceptable for persons with disabilities. (Gill, 2023)

DRAG mostly targets the PWDs that are lower than the age of 18 because children with disabilities face unique challenges in accessing education and other opportunities, which may require specific attention and support. However, DRAG's work is not limited to children and encompasses all people with disabilities in the Faisalabad district.

3.4.2   DRAG in Compliance with ARTICLE 8 of CRPD

In compliance with Article 8 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2022, DRAG is contributing to public education and awareness, a civil society group dedicated to providing health facilities and Awareness to PWDs, DRAG held 144 Screening camps in the City of Faisalabad, 15 outside the city, and 1 outside the Punjab province in the KPK. And to create Awareness about the PWDs, and how should we behave towards the PWDs- our duties and their rights, to answer this DRAG organized 10 Awareness Camps and Seminars in the City of Faisalabad, and 4 outdoor camps outside the city, every 2 months since 2022. They carried out this campaign in the 8 Governmental schools and 5 private schools of the Faisalabad district for Youth education and motivation and visited the Deaf and blind schools also. They visited the old age center because it encompasses not only the youth but all ages of Persons with disabilities

DRAG paid a door-to-door visit to the 82 Union Councils of the Faisalabad district (Out of 156), not only for awareness but for their legal and medical facilitation. Through these visits and camps, they identified approximately 7500 PWDs since 2020,750 intellectually impaired others are physically and mentally impaired. Every month **DRAG** handled more than 500 cases of PWDs.

7337 PWDs are served with the certificate of disability and through this certificate, 5000 PWDs are given relief through Bait ul Maal and Govt. schemes, and approximately 200 CWDs are given B forms and certificates of disability with the help of the DRAG. Some PWDs died in between the 2 months when their certificates were proceeding because of the lack of management of the Governmental institutions.

The DRAG has a marvelous system of service delivery mechanism they first go for Screening then apply the Governmental disability certificates, board, and then issue certificates although this process is slow from the Govt. side, DRAG successfully registered 7000 PWDs in the Faisalabad district in Govt. record previously it was only 2% but now

due to DRAG, it is 15%. DRAG successfully distributed 250 assistive devices like Braces, hearing devices, and different devices for PWDs owing to these devices 3080 PWDs got the job from the private as well as public sectors. Some PWDs are equipped with stitching and cooking skills different from the government's. Institutions referred by DRAG to independently run their businesses. CWDs- are supported by the DRAG so they can continue their education and be the better version of themselves because the ratio of CWDs to PWDs is 65 to 35 percent in the DRAG forum.

3.4.3 Connectivity with Service Delivery State institutions

DRAG submitted the 3000 applications in the Bait ul Maal for the PWDs who are not fit to work for their scholarships as they don't want PWDs to be dependent on others. The 250 PWDs are equipped with the skills of NASH E MAN and TEVTA and are now working independently and contributing to the success of the DRAG. For health measures, DRAG meets the Governmental Department (Dolphin Force) and strives collectively for education and awareness.
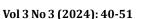
DRAG is not only active in the public but also in the private sector for the PWD's health and measures. They also contacted 280 people in the private sector for assistive devices for PWDs.

Facilitated generating of a disability certificate i.e., a PWD certificate is very important for persons with disabilities. The card is valid for a lifetime and helps PWDs to avail of benefits such as concessions in various existing government schemes. This document is generally issued by the medical authorities that certify what type of disability and how many percent disability a person has.

With the aid of the certificate PWD gained the following services

- Scholarship opportunities that are available for students with disabilities

- less in income tax

- Discount on railway tickets

- Reserved seats in government jobs

- Loan facilities for starting a new business

- Free travel facility in state transportation

- Access to assistive devices and prosthetic aids at subsidized rates

- Unemployment allowance (applicable for educated disabled persons)

- Group insurance (applicable for government employees with disabilities)

- Subsidy to buy adapted vehicles and many others

Door to Door campaign and Awareness creates empathy; so, when you try to understand one another, it will stop that stereotyping mindset and create an inclusive and safe environment. By self-educating, you can find ways to create change and spread the word to others. DRAG actively indulges in Raising awareness through campaigns and Seminars because, through disability awareness, the misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding those with disabilities can be brought to the forefront. When these are gone, attitudes and behaviors become more positive and impactful.

3.4.4   DRAG Contributing in Networking and Alliances

To thrive, everyone in the world requires partners or networks, and the Disability Rights Action Group (DRAG) is no exception. DRAG has forged collaborations with various organizations and individuals to advance the rights of persons with disabilities. Notably, DRAG partnered with the esteemed right-based NGO, AWAM (Association for Women Motivation and Awareness), which focuses on empowering persons with disabilities. Additionally, DRAG collaborated with numerous healthcare workers, journalists, and lawmakers to amplify their efforts. These associations were responsible for not only spreading awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities but also bringing a ray of sunshine into the lives of thousands. Moreover, the PAK STAR WELFARE CELL is affiliated with DRAG since it believes in synergy between organizations that share its ideology of working together for a common cause since a very long time.

One of the most spectacular achievements of DRAG was the screening camp, in collaboration with AWAM, which generated 50 minority PWD women's certificates. This indeed opened the gateway for the recognition and inclusiveness of those women. Moreover, the joint campaign drastically increased awareness regarding the rights of persons with disabilities. The impact was great, and DRAG worked together with AWAM to affect society towards persons with disabilities by creating a more inclusive and understanding environment. DRAG has involved collaborations and collective efforts with AWAM, healthcare workers, journalists, lawmakers, and other entities, which strengthened its advocacy and changed lives for the better regarding persons with disabilities. The performances are most inspiring, serving as motivation to continue working for the rights and welfare of persons with disabilities within the community at large.

3.4.5 Major Achievement in Mobilizing Political Stakeholders

- Facilitated getting a Disability Certificate, the prime document one needs to claim or access reserved facilities and services especially inscribed for persons with disabilities. The DRAG has facilitated around 5000 persons with disabilities in procuring disability certificates [from January 1, 2021, to December 31, 2022].
- Convince Govt. to give a 50% discount on all kinds of traveling to PWDs
- Reservation in government jobs for PWDs.
- Convince the Govt. to make accessible ramps for PWDs in the Govt. buildings.

- Provide Loan facilities for starting a new business for PWDs.

- Provides assistive devices and prosthetic aids free or at subsidized rates.

- Provide Subsidies to buy adapted vehicles and many others

- Facilitated the PWDs to make the certificates in Tehsils also- decentralized from districts to tehsils.

- Under Section 27 of the 'Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2022' has established Districts/Tehsils Assessment Boards in all districts of Punjab to assess the nature and extent of disability and to issue disability certificates. These boards are working in all District Headquarter (DHQ) Hospitals and Tehsil Headquarter Hospitals of Punjab. The Assessment Boards were held once a month but now with the efforts of DRAG, the assessment board is held twice a week now

3.5 DRAG Utilizing of Article 19-A

It is quite commendable that the Disability Rights Action Group wrote 21 letters using the Right to Information to various government institutions. The RTI is a very important tool for facilitating transparency and accountability and ensuring that persons with disabilities have their rights well protected. By so doing, the organization proves its commitment to continued advocacy for the rights of PWDs and seeking access to information of interest from the government.

The RTI letters could be targeted at:

- **Seeking Information-** The group may have requested information about government policies, programs, and initiatives related to disability rights and services. This will enable them to learn about the rights of disabled people and areas that require adjustments.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation**- It will help in monitoring the state of implementation and effectiveness of various projects on disabilities with the data and reports from government institutions. This information is also important for the government to be held liable for its actions and ensure that it is committed to its obligations set by the laws and conventions for disability rights.
- **Budget and Spending-** The information the group could have obtained was how much money was allocated and spent on programs relating to disability. This helps to ensure adequate resources for the support of PWDs and efficient spending of funds.
- **Access to Services-** The RTI letters could have been used to question the extent to which public government services and facilities are accessible to PWDs and bring out what gaps or barriers exist that need to be addressed toward including and ensuring PWDs' participation in society.

- **Awareness and Advocacy-** Through the RTI process, the Disability Right Action Group could raise awareness about issues of rights of people with disabilities and advocate for positive changes in government policies and practices.

These RTI letters shall depend upon how responsive and cooperative government institutions are to send the sought information. There are times when government institutions may respond promptly with the required information, or sometimes they delay or even deny access to information. If the latter occurs, then the Disability Rights Action Group may have to resort to courts for the upholding of their right to information.

The overall significance of using the RTI process in advancing disability rights and creating a more inclusive society for PWDs cannot be overemphasized. It is at this point that such information will aid the group in making very informed decisions, advocating change, and monitoring what the government is doing on matters concerning disability.

4. Conclusion

In summary, DRAG has been very instrumental in pointing out the crucial work being undertaken by this organization in advocating for the rights of Persons with Disabilities. Obviously, through tireless efforts and persistent commitment, DRAG continues creating awareness, promoting the inclusion of, and fighting for equal opportunities for PWDs in society. This has been very instrumental in highlighting the difficulties PWDs face, and the enormous achievements attained toward the expansion of disability rights. DRAG reminds us that individual acts count in making an inclusive and accessible world—one in which everyone's contributions are needed.

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