



BOOK REVIEW:

“GIFTED: INSPIRING STORIES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES”

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BOOK REVIEW



Author Details:

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Book Details:

Book Name: Gifted: Inspiring Stories of People with Disabilities
Authors: Sudha Menon & V. R. Feroze
ISBN: 9788184005455
Publisher: Penguin, Haryana, India
Total Page: 260 pages
Price: INR 350 (Paperback)
Year of Publishing: 2014

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.70096/tssr.250306005>

The book, “Gifted: Inspiring Stories of Persons with Disabilities” is written by two authors, Sudha Menon and V.R. Feroze, who both hailed from India. Sudha Menon is an Indian writer and a columnist who has authored two books. She is also a TEDx speaker who advocated for women’s leadership and to promote the inclusion of marginalized sections of the community. V.R. Feroze is a Senior Vice President and Head of Globalization Service for SAP AG and also a former Managing Director of SAP labs, India, who also founded “India Inclusion Summit.” His works mainly focused on shining light on marginalized communities like persons with disabilities and work towards their inclusion in society. Both the authors strive for inclusion in society and had maintained academic integrity and ethics throughout the writing process of this book. Hence, readers should not expect any biases whilst reading this book.

The book is intended for the general public to demystify their views on disability as the theme aims to transcend beyond the stigma and stereotypes directed against persons with disabilities.

Based in India, the topic of this book is about the inspiring stories of 15 successful persons with disabilities hailing from backgrounds as diverse as stand-up comedy, engineering, athletics and journalism. It dives into the stories of their struggles to achieve the success that they had in recent years. The book begins with an introductory remark from the two authors and the content started by individual focus on the stories of the 15 persons with disabilities that were alphabetically arranged.

Driven by the desire to increase awareness on inclusion, the authors wrote this book from their interactions with persons with disabilities, whose stories are bound to uplift others who are currently being shunned shut by society. The narratives around this book stemmed from the interview sessions conducted by the authors to these inspiring persons whose stories and struggles highlighted the need for rights-based approach instead of charity-based approach towards disability. Instead of relying on the sole authorship of the authors, this book stands out by writing narratives from the point of view of the persons with disabilities. Every chapter begins with an illustration which best describes the person with disability and the illustration is followed by a short description of their backgrounds. Every case being presented occupied around 10 to 15 pages each. The common theme which arises from each case is the hardships associated with their disabilities and how their courage and resilience persisted even amidst their daily struggles. All the persons from this book have expressed that they are not used to the act of “pity” displayed by others around them. “(...) Everyone stares at me and pities me, and that’s not what a teenager wants (page 14),” as expressed by Aisha, one of the persons being interviewed for this book. From the perspective of sociological “social model of disability,” individuals are disabled not by their impairments but by the barriers exerted upon them by society (Lawson & Beckett, 2020). Hence, in this book, many of them experienced “disability” not from their impairments but by society’s incapability to include them. Ankit, a proud recipient of NCPEDP’s Helen Keller Awards faced an experience in which he stated “(...) It was only because I was aware of my rights as a person with disabilities that I finally managed to get a more qualified scribe for myself (page 30).” In another instance, Girisha, a Paralympics silver medalist was also told “no” multiple times before he bravely ventured into the field of athletics, “(...) At just 1.68 meters, I am told I am short for a high jumper but that means nothing to me because my ambition touches the sky (page 74).” Dr. Advani had also narrated her experiences of rejection from authorities by stating, “(...) Not one of the six departments in the college wanted a handicapped person working with them. They neither

believed I could cope with the rigorous work on hand... (page 245)." The field of sociology of disability has blamed society's ignorance and barriers as factors which further disabled persons with disabilities but all the 15 persons with disabilities have risen above society's barriers and give meaningful actions to turn their dreams into realities (Carey & Souza, 2020). So, the relevance of social model of disability is observed among all the persons included in this book. The interview method used by the authors is relevant to obtain all the necessary information on the life and stories of the persons with disabilities in this book. The method goes well with the authors' intentions to convey real accounts of disability stories and experiences which are aimed to motivate and inspire the readers. This book also highlights the importance of support from families and general public. This statement from Ashwin, an engineer, clarifies the important role of caregivers "(...) If it were not for my mother and Bharat, and their belief in me, I would not be where I am today (page 47)." Being a banker from Chennai and a TEDx speaker, Siddharth has also expressed that the support of his parents and teachers build him to be a better person, "(...) And when I started doing well in my class, it was a vindication of their effort and their steadfast belief in my abilities (page 195)." Besides the role of caregivers, this book has also highlighted the importance of acceptance and inclusion as a way to counter the hardships associated with disability. This book aligns with Goal 10 of Sustainable Development Goals which aims to reduce inequalities in all sections of life. One of the incredible people from the book, Malathi Holla has said, "(...) I think I have benefitted hugely in this journey because of my positivity (page 143)." Malvika, a young scholar has also narrated that, "(...) If I were to identify the one thing that has changed the course of my life... that factor would have to be "inclusion" (page 157). Overall, the authors' uses of simple English make the contents easy to understand even for someone whose first language is not English. The book contains basic English words and the transcriptions of the interviews are done in such a manner that the reviewer does not feel a sense of boredom throughout the reviewing process. The authors are clear with the themes portrayed in their writings and this book serves as one of the key instruments to educate the public about the importance of including and caring for persons with disabilities. The intentions of the authors to motivate the readers, particularly persons with disabilities seem successful as all the life stories of the inspiring people in this book end with positive affirmations and their positive outlook in life. This statement from Dr. Advani "(...) it is best to look at things differently, focus on our strengths rather than our weaknesses (page 250)," sums up the importance of acceptance of disability and the importance to shift the focus to the strengths and talents instead.

The book confirmed the social model of disability's assumption that it is society that restricts and disabled a person rather than the impairments of persons with disabilities as most of the 15 inspiring persons faced this issue. These experiences narrated by them confirmed the social model of disability theory (Carey & Souza, 2020). However, the book has also shown that these barriers and restrictions can be solved by accepting disability and persons with disabilities. In this way, their talents and strengths needed to be discovered which, if nurtured, can bring them sustainable livelihoods in the long run. One criticism that arises from this book is the focus of each person with disabilities is less and does not mention the in-depth struggles and only mentioned their applied solutions to counter their problems in a limited way. The suggestive measure lies in reducing the number of stories to 10 and increasing each of their stories extensively so that the book can offer more insights on the problems encountered in their daily lives and the step-by-step focus on how they overcome them. This book has also confirmed the importance of caregiving and support to persons with disabilities as that can help them climb the social ladder to help them reach their full potential. Highlighting the various struggles and problems of persons with disabilities while also highlighting their own solutions to tackle problems aligns with the directions of clinical sociologists and will be a great point of reference for future academicians in clinical sociology.

Acknowledgment: No

Funding: No

Declaration: Not Applicable

Competing Interest: No

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