Mapping the Disability Rights Movement: Transnational Activism, Policy Regimes, and Intersectional Struggles

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Abstract:

The Disability Rights Movement (DRM) has emerged as a transformative socio-political force that has redefined disability from a medicalized condition to a rights-based category grounded in citizenship, inclusion, and social justice. While the movement has achieved significant legislative and institutional recognition globally, existing scholarship remains disproportionately centred on Euro-American histories and theoretical frameworks, resulting in limited engagement with transnational trajectories and Global South disability politics. Addressing this gap, the present review paper critically examines the historical evolution and contemporary dynamics of the Disability Rights Movement through a transnational and interdisciplinary analytical framework. The study adopts a qualitative narrative review design, synthesizing multidisciplinary scholarship, international policy documents, legislative frameworks, and activist discourse. The analysis integrates genealogical inquiry, transnational comparison, and critical policy discourse interpretation to examine how disability rights have been conceptualized, institutionalized, and mobilized across diverse geopolitical contexts.

The review highlights that the movement's transition from charity and medical paradigms toward rights-based frameworks has been historically uneven, shaped by regional socio-political conditions, governance structures, and cultural perceptions of disability. It further identifies tensions between juridical recognition and lived accessibility, particularly within resource-constrained contexts. The study foregrounds the central role of grassroots mobilization and Disabled People's Organizations in translating institutional rights discourse into localized advocacy practices. Additionally, it examines the expanding influence of digital platforms in reshaping disability activism, visibility, and transnational solidarity, while also reflecting persistent technological access inequalities. By synthesizing historical, policy, and activist perspectives, the paper advances a multidimensional understanding of the Disability Rights Movement as a contested and evolving field of global social justice. It calls for culturally responsive governance frameworks and intersectionally informed advocacy to strengthen the future trajectory of disability rights mobilization.

Introduction

The Disability Rights Movement (DRM) constitutes one of the most significant civil rights formations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, fundamentally transforming the social, political, and legal positioning of persons with disabilities Emerging in opposition to entrenched systems of institutionalization, medical paternalism, and charitable dependency, the movement reconfigured disability from an individualized pathology into a socio-political category shaped by structural exclusion. Activist mobilizations, scholarly interventions, and cross-disability coalitions collectively advanced a rights-based framework grounded in accessibility, autonomy, and full citizenship participation (Kaldik, 2022).

Historically, organized disability activism gained visibility in the Global North through landmark struggles such as the Independent Living Movement and legislative victories including the Americans with Disabilities Act. These developments were instrumental in institutionalizing anti-discrimination protections and influenced

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international legal instruments, most notably the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). The convention marked a paradigmatic shift in global disability governance, repositioning disabled persons as rights-bearing citizens rather than passive welfare recipients (Williams, 2022).

However, the global diffusion of disability rights discourse has unfolded unevenly across geopolitical contexts. Comparative scholarship demonstrates that Western disability frameworks often function as normative templates within international policy regimes, shaping institutional priorities and evaluative benchmarks (Rirattanapong, 2022). Such epistemic dominance risks obscuring alternative histories of resistance emerging from the Global South, where disability mobilization frequently intersects with poverty, postcolonial governance structures, and socio-cultural stigma (Anand, 2017).

Existing academic literature on disability rights movements remains marked by significant geographic and theoretical imbalances. Scholarly attention has disproportionately focused on Euro-American activism, resulting in limited transnational perspectives and inadequate engagement with cross-cultural movement trajectories (Агафоненко, 2022). Research further indicates that community-based organizing, grassroots resistance strategies, and localized advocacy formations remain under examined despite their centrality to disability mobilization outside Western institutional frameworks (Dodd, 2014).

In addition, the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has generated new terrains of disability activism. Online campaigns, virtual protests, and networked advocacy platforms have reconfigured participation and visibility for disabled communities. Yet academic coverage of digital disability activism remains comparatively sparse, reflecting a lag between activist practice and scholarly engagement (Wolbring et al., 2024).

Scholars have also called attention to methodological and epistemological limitations in disability research, particularly the uncritical transplantation of Western analytical frameworks onto culturally distinct contexts. Studies emphasize the need for culturally responsive, transnational, and intersectionally grounded research designs capable of capturing diverse disability experiences (Grischow et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2023).

Responding to these lacunae, the present study re-examines the Disability Rights Movement through a transnational, comparative, and critically grounded analytical framework. By integrating historical evolution, policy discourse, grassroots activism, and digital advocacy, the research seeks to decenter Western disability epistemologies and foreground the heterogeneous trajectories shaping global disability rights mobilization. In doing so, the paper advances a multidimensional understanding of disability activism as a contested and evolving field of socio-political struggle rather than a universally linear progression toward inclusion.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with the Disability Rights Movement (DRM) has expanded significantly over the past four decades, paralleling the political consolidation of disability activism across national and transnational contexts. Early disability scholarship emerged largely from Western civil rights struggles and focused on dismantling medicalized and charity-oriented constructions of disability. Foundational theoretical interventions such as the Social Model of Disability repositioned disability as a socially produced condition shaped by environmental barriers and exclusionary institutional structures rather than individual impairment (Oliver, 1990). This reconceptualization catalyzed a paradigmatic shift in disability studies, influencing both activist mobilization and policy advocacy.

Subsequent scholars expanded this structural critique by interrogating the cultural production of normalcy and deviance. Davis (1995) examined how modern societies construct bodily norms through statistical, biomedical,

and cultural regimes, thereby producing disability as a category of exclusion. Garland-Thomson (2002) further advanced feminist disability theory by foregrounding visuality, representation, and embodiment, arguing that disabled bodies are socially interpreted through gendered and aesthetic frameworks. Shakespeare (2013), while acknowledging the contributions of the social model, called for a more nuanced approach incorporating biological realities alongside social disablement, thus advancing critical disability theory.

While these theoretical developments provided robust conceptual tools, early DRM historiography remained heavily concentrated on Euro-American activism. Historical analyses documented landmark struggles such as the Independent Living Movement, disability civil rights protests, and legislative achievements including the Americans with Disabilities Act (Shapiro, 1993). These narratives positioned Western disability rights mobilization as the vanguard of global inclusion politics. However, later scholars critiqued this historiographic dominance for marginalizing alternative disability resistance traditions.

Postcolonial disability scholars began interrogating the epistemic centrality of Western frameworks within global disability discourse. Grech (2015) argued that disability in the Global South is inextricably linked with poverty, development inequalities, and colonial governance legacies, necessitating contextually grounded analytical models. Meekosha (2011) similarly critiqued the Global North dominance of disability studies, calling for the recognition of Southern disability epistemologies and activist practices. These interventions collectively provincialized Western disability theory and foregrounded the need for transnational analytical frameworks.

Research examining disability rights mobilization across Asia, Africa, and Latin America highlights the hybrid nature of rights adoption. Soldatic and Grech (2014) demonstrated that neoliberal development agendas often shape disability policy implementation, producing inclusion rhetoric without structural transformation. Comparative studies of disability governance further reveal that while international conventions promote legislative harmonization, national implementation remains uneven due to resource constraints and socio-cultural stigma (Rirattanapong, 2022).

Policy scholarship has also examined the transformative role of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in institutionalizing global disability rights norms. Kayess and French (2008) conceptualized the convention as a normative shift from welfare paternalism to human rights citizenship. Nevertheless, empirical studies caution that juridical recognition does not automatically translate into material accessibility, highlighting persistent implementation gaps across national contexts (Degener, 2016).

Beyond institutional frameworks, scholars have foregrounded the centrality of grassroots activism in sustaining disability rights struggles. Charlton (1998) emphasized that disability oppression must be understood through lived experience and political consciousness emerging from marginalized communities. Grassroots Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) have been identified as critical actors mediating between policy frameworks and local advocacy realities (Dodd, 2014). Community-based mobilization often extends beyond legislative reform to encompass livelihood access, stigma reduction, and social participation initiatives.

Intersectional disability scholarship has further expanded movement analysis by examining how disability interacts with gender, race, class, and other identity formations. Erevelles (2011) explored the intersections of disability, race, and global capitalism, arguing that disability marginalization cannot be separated from broader political economies of exclusion. Feminist disability theorists have also highlighted the invisibilization of disabled women within both feminist and disability movements, calling for more inclusive advocacy frameworks (Garland-Thomson, 2002).

More recently, digital media scholars have turned attention toward the transformation of disability activism within networked communication environments. Ellis and Goggin (2018) documented the rise of media activism as a critical site of disability representation and resistance. Pearson and Trevisan (2015) analyzed how digital campaigning strategies have reshaped disability advocacy in the contemporary media ecology. Studies of online protest formations further suggest that digital platforms facilitate transnational solidarity while also reproducing technological access inequalities (Wolbring et al., 2024).

Despite these expanding scholarly terrains, significant gaps persist. Transnational comparative research remains limited, with disability historiography continuing to privilege national case studies over cross-border activist exchanges (Агафоненко, 2022). Similarly, methodological scholarship emphasizes the need for culturally responsive research frameworks capable of capturing diverse disability experiences without reproducing ethnocentric analytical models (Grischow et al., 2021; Richardson et al., 2023).

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the historical evolution and transnational trajectories of the Disability Rights Movement across Western and Global South contexts.
- To critically analyze disability rights policies, legislative frameworks, and governance discourses shaping inclusion and citizenship.
- To investigate the role of grassroots mobilization and digital activism in advancing contemporary disability rights advocacy.

Research Questions

- How has the Disability Rights Movement evolved historically across transnational contexts, particularly between Western and Global South regions?
- In what ways do disability policies and legislative frameworks construct and regulate rights, inclusion, and citizenship?
- What roles do grassroots mobilization and digital activism play in shaping contemporary disability rights advocacy?

Taken together, existing literature reveals a field in transition — one moving from Western-centric historiography toward transnational, intersectional, and critically reflexive disability scholarship. However, the integration of policy discourse, grassroots mobilization, digital activism, and postcolonial critique within a single analytical framework remains underdeveloped. The present study builds upon these scholarly trajectories by advancing a multidimensional examination of the Disability Rights Movement that bridges historical, institutional, and activist domains across geopolitical contexts.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative review-based research design situated within the interdisciplinary field of Critical Disability Studies. As a conceptual and analytical inquiry, the paper does not rely on primary field investigation; rather, it undertakes a critical synthesis of existing scholarship, policy frameworks, and activist discourse to examine the historical evolution and contemporary trajectories of the Disability Rights Movement (DRM) across transnational contexts.

The research is positioned as a critical narrative review with a comparative orientation. This approach enables interpretive engagement with diverse bodies of literature rather than statistical aggregation of findings. Given the

socio-political nature of disability rights mobilization, the narrative review method is particularly suited to tracing ideological shifts, activist strategies, and governance transformations across historical and geographical locations.

To ensure analytical breadth, the study draws upon multidisciplinary secondary sources spanning disability studies, sociology, political science, development studies, and human rights scholarship. Data were collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, edited volumes, policy documents, and organizational publications. International disability conventions, national legislative frameworks, and advocacy reports were also examined to contextualize rights discourse within institutional governance structures. Sources were accessed through major academic databases, including Scopus-indexed journals, Web of Science, JSTOR, Taylor & Francis, Sage Publications, and Google Scholar.

The review prioritized literature engaging substantively with disability rights mobilization, policy discourse, and activist formations. Particular emphasis was placed on scholarship addressing transnational perspectives, Global South disability politics, grassroots advocacy, and digital activism. Sources limited exclusively to clinical or biomedical dimensions of disability were excluded, as the study is grounded in socio-political and rights-based analytical frameworks.

Analytically, the study employs a multi-layered interpretive framework. Genealogical analysis is used to trace the historical shift from charity-based and medicalized understandings of disability toward rights-centered citizenship paradigms. This historical mapping situates disability activism within broader civil rights and social justice movements. A transnational comparative lens is applied to examine divergences and convergences between Western and Global South disability rights trajectories, particularly in relation to policy adoption, activist mobilization, and socio-cultural constructions of disability.

The research further incorporates Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to interpret the language and ideological positioning of disability within legislative and institutional texts. Policy frameworks are examined to identify constructions of inclusion, empowerment, productivity, and participation. Movement narrative analysis is employed to foreground grassroots activism, coalition-building practices, and advocacy strategies articulated through Disabled People's Organizations and community mobilizations.

Recognizing the growing significance of virtual advocacy, the methodology also integrates digital discourse analysis. Online campaigns, social media activism, and networked protest formations are examined as contemporary extensions of disability rights mobilization operating within technologically mediated public spheres.

The study is theoretically anchored in the Social Model of Disability and the Rights-Based Approach, while also drawing upon Postcolonial Disability Studies and Intersectionality. These frameworks enable critical interrogation of structural disablement, epistemic hierarchies, and layered marginalities shaping disability rights discourse across geopolitical contexts.

Data synthesis followed a thematic categorization process. Literature and policy materials were organized into analytical domains including historical evolution, governance frameworks, grassroots activism, intersectional marginalities, and digital advocacy. Comparative interpretation across these domains enabled the development of a multidimensional understanding of the Disability Rights Movement as a transnational, contested, and evolving socio-political formation.

Results

1. Genealogical Transformation: From Charity to Rights:

Genealogical analysis indicates that the Disability Rights Movement has undergone a profound epistemic transformation, shifting from charity-based rehabilitation paradigms to rights-centered citizenship frameworks. Early disability governance across national contexts was embedded within religious philanthropy, custodial care, and medical institutionalization, positioning disabled persons as passive recipients of welfare. Disability was framed as an individual deficit requiring treatment, supervision, or correction.

The emergence of organized activism in the late twentieth century catalyzed a reconceptualization of disability as a socio-political identity shaped by environmental and structural barriers. Civil rights–inspired protests, independent living advocacy, and cross-movement solidarities repositioned accessibility, autonomy, and anti-discrimination as core political demands (Kaldik, 2022). This transition marked the politicization of disability and its incorporation into broader social justice frameworks.

However, comparative findings reveal that this shift has not occurred uniformly. While Western activism institutionalized rights discourse through legislative consolidation, many Global South contexts continue to operate within hybrid governance models where welfare provisioning coexists with emerging rights frameworks (Anand, 2017).

2. Transnational Diffusion and Policy Asymmetries

Transnational analysis demonstrates that disability rights discourse has circulated globally through international conventions, advocacy networks, and intergovernmental institutions. Instruments such as the UNCRPD have played a catalytic role in encouraging legislative reform and policy standardization across nation-states (Williams, 2022).

Yet the findings reveal structural asymmetries in rights diffusion. Western disability frameworks frequently function as exportable governance models, shaping funding priorities, institutional benchmarks, and policy evaluation mechanisms (Rirattanapong, 2022). In contrast, Global South disability movements often engage in adaptive translation rather than direct adoption, reinterpreting rights discourse within contexts shaped by infrastructural limitations, poverty, and socio-cultural stigma.

This produces hybridized policy formations wherein legal recognition of rights exists alongside implementation constraints, revealing a persistent gap between juridical frameworks and lived accessibility realities (Агафоненко, 2022).

3. Policy Discourse: Empowerment versus Regulation

Critical discourse analysis of disability legislation and policy frameworks reveals a dual discursive structure. On the one hand, contemporary policy language increasingly deploys terms such as "empowerment," "participation," and "inclusion," signaling alignment with global rights rhetoric. On the other hand, regulatory mechanisms embedded within these frameworks continue to reflect medicalized and productivity-oriented assumptions.

Certification regimes, impairment quantification systems, and eligibility assessments function as bureaucratic gatekeeping technologies regulating access to welfare and rights. Such administrative practices reinscribe state surveillance within rights governance, producing what may be conceptualized as conditional inclusion (Richardson et al., 2023).

4. Grassroots Mobilization and Community Activism

Movement narrative analysis underscores the centrality of grassroots activism, particularly in Global South disability politics. Community-based Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) play a pivotal role in translating abstract rights discourse into localized advocacy practices. Their work extends beyond legislative lobbying to include livelihood access, educational inclusion, assistive technology distribution, and stigma reduction initiatives.

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Grassroots mobilization frequently operates through coalition-building with feminist movements, labor unions, and human rights organizations, reflecting the intersectional positioning of disability within broader marginalization structures (Dodd, 2014). Such alliances expand the scope of disability activism beyond impairment-specific concerns toward structural justice frameworks.

5. **Intersectional Marginalities within the Movement:**

Intersectional analysis reveals that representational inequalities persist within disability rights mobilization itself. Disabled women, economically marginalized populations, and culturally stigmatized communities often remain underrepresented in leadership and advocacy spaces. These layered exclusions complicate universalist rights claims and underscore the necessity of intersectionally grounded disability politics (Grischow et al., 2021).

6. **Digital Activism and Networked Advocacy**

Digital discourse analysis highlights the growing significance of online platforms in disability rights advocacy. Social media campaigns, virtual protests, and digital storytelling initiatives have expanded visibility, facilitated transnational solidarity, and enabled new forms of participatory activism.

However, scholarly evidence indicates that digital disability activism remains under-researched despite its rapid expansion. Online mobilization has become particularly significant for individuals facing mobility barriers, yet digital divides continue to shape participation access (Wolbring et al., 2024).

Conclusion:

This study has critically examined the Disability Rights Movement through a transnational and interdisciplinary analytical framework, foregrounding its historical evolution, governance structures, and activist formations. The analysis demonstrates that disability rights mobilization cannot be reduced to a singular or universally linear narrative of progress. Rather, it unfolds through historically contingent and regionally embedded trajectories shaped by institutional capacities, socio-political contexts, and activist interventions.

The movement's transition from charity-based and medicalized paradigms toward rights-oriented frameworks represents a significant epistemic shift in the conceptualization of disability. However, this transformation remains uneven across geopolitical contexts, where welfare, rehabilitation, and rights discourses frequently coexist within layered governance structures. Legislative advancements and international conventions have undoubtedly strengthened juridical recognition, yet the realization of substantive inclusion continues to be mediated by infrastructural limitations, administrative mechanisms, and socio-cultural barriers.

Equally significant is the role of grassroots activism in sustaining rights advocacy beyond formal policy arenas. Community-based organizations and localized mobilizations function as critical sites of political negotiation, translating institutional rights discourse into lived struggles for accessibility, dignity, and participation. In recent decades, digital platforms have further expanded the terrain of disability activism, enabling new forms of visibility, solidarity, and networked resistance, while also reflecting ongoing inequalities in technological access. Taken together, the study underscores the necessity of approaching disability rights as a dynamic and multi-sited field operating across legislative, social, and digital domains. A transnational and critically reflexive perspective remains essential for understanding the complexities shaping contemporary disability justice and for advancing more inclusive and contextually responsive rights frameworks

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