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Changing the Stigma of Women's Beauty Through an International Contest for People with Disabilities

Gita Priyanka^{1*}, Uni W. Sagena²

^{1,2} International Relations Program, Universitas Mulawarman, Samarinda, Indonesia

* Corresponding author: Gita Priyanka (unisku@unmul.ac.id)

Abstract

Miss Wheelchair World is a very different international competition and raises the theme of equality for people with physical disabilities, especially women. This pageant provides an opportunity for women with disabilities from various countries to participate and inspire the world. This research method uses descriptive research methods, namely explaining how people with disabilities struggle to change the stigma of beauty through the Miss Wheelchair World international beauty contest, using secondary data in the form of books, journals, theses, research results and articles published via the internet. The Miss Wheelchair World pageant has a theme of equality for people with physical disabilities and aims to change the stigma of beauty in the world. This contest is an effort for people with disabilities to fight the problems they often face, such as discrimination, lack of accessibility, and stigma created by media and technology. With the aim of reducing common problems, the pageant has made various efforts to change the stigma associated with disabilities, such as empowerment and representation, sharing experiences, concrete actions, and connecting communities.

Keywords

Beauty, Disability, Discrimination, Miss Wheelchair World, Equality

1. Introduction

Women's beauty has been one of the benchmarks for a person's physical standards. Women are considered beautiful if they have a beautiful face, white, smooth and firm skin, and a body with perfect curves. Women must also have sensual lips and a body shape that is considered perfect (Tipgomut & McNaught, 2022; Gan, 2023). Those who are deemed not to meet these beauty standards often experience discrimination in various aspects of their lives, such as at work, in social relationships, or even in health services. People with different physical appearances or people with disabilities are often targets of teasing, harassment, or verbal abuse because certain standards deem them not beautiful (Suggs & Guthrie, 2017).

World Health Organization (WHO) uses the term disability to describe someone who has limitations in activities, has limitations in participating in activities, or has certain physical weaknesses related to health and environmental problems (Widhawati et al., 2020; Luna et al., 2022). There are 3 categories of disability, namely physical disability, mental disability and multiple disabilities. WHO estimates that there are more than one billion people with disabilities worldwide or around 16% of the world's population? It is projected that at least 785 million of them will be of working age in 2021. A total of 51 countries were analyzed and provided employment with 52.8% of disabled men and 19.6% of disabled women, compared to 64.9% of non-disabled, disabled men and 29.9% of non-disabled women.

Table 1. Employment Level, Proportion of Disabled and Non-Disabled Respondents

Individualist	Low Income Countries		High-Income Countries		All Countries	
	Not disabled	Disabled	Not disabled	Disabled	Not disabled	Disabled
Male	71.2	58.6*	53.7	36.4*	64.9	52.88
Female	31.5	20.1*	28.4	19.6*	29.9	19.6*
18-49	58.8	42.9*	54.7	35.2*	57.6	41.2*
50-59	62.9	43.5*	57.0	32.7*	60.9	40.2*
60 and over	38.1	15.1*	11.2	3.9*	26.8	10.4*

People with disabilities often receive a negative stigma in society. For years, people with disabilities have experienced negative stigma. They also often experience discrimination in society. Discrimination arising from disability refers to situations where a person faces unfavorable treatment due to factors directly related to their disability (Mueller, 2019; Rai et al., 2020). Persons with disabilities face various forms of discrimination such as violence and gender discrimination, lack of jobs for persons with disabilities, discrimination in the work environment and the presence of architectural barriers. One of the international competitions that is very different, Miss Wheelchair World raises the theme of equality for people with physical disabilities, especially women. This contest gives women with disabilities from various countries the opportunity to participate and inspire the world with their stories. By carrying the slogan "beauty has no limits", this contest aims to eliminate the negative stigma towards people with disabilities and promote equal rights.

Dr. Philip K. Wood of Colimbus, wanting to give more space to disability groups, started Miss Wheelchair for the first time in the United States. This initiative grew, until the world's first Miss Wheelchair World was held in Warsaw, Poland in 2017. This pageant was organized by the Only One Foundation, a non-profit organization that aims to remove barriers that hinder people with disabilities and provide greater opportunities for them to shine. So far, similar beauty pageant contests have been criticized because beauty contests treat women as objects that are judged based on the physical appearance of the contestants (Kumara & Jayawardhana, 2018). In

contrast, the Miss Wheelchair World pageant was created to expand opportunities to raise awareness about various disabilities and the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. This research examines identifying discrimination against people with disabilities, especially women, and look at the efforts of people with disabilities to change the stigma of beauty.

2. Literature Review

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by countries worldwide in 1948, plays a central role in affirming fundamental principles of human rights. Since the end of World War II, awareness of the importance of human rights has significantly increased. This guideline asserts that every individual possesses rights that cannot be violated, including the rights to life, liberty, and personal dignity (Pawestri, 2017). The supremacy of law and democracy is recognized as a cornerstone in societies that respect human rights. The implementation of human rights at national, regional, and global levels is always a complex challenge, influenced by various interests and political dynamics (Mégret, 2017).

According to Forsythe (2012), policy responses based on human rights are becoming increasingly important in the context of conflicts and widespread human rights violations. States are expected to uphold their obligations in accordance with international human rights treaties they have ratified. This underscores the importance of enforcing international rules and protecting individual rights, even in the most difficult situations.

In social justice theory, the principles of equality and fairness in social interactions among individuals are foundational. According to John Rawls, the approach to human rights differs significantly from international human rights documents such as the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Rawls emphasizes principles that support social justice, such as redistributing resources to reduce economic inequality, rather than focusing on individual rights such as the right to free and universal elections, freedom of speech and assembly, and the prohibition of discrimination (Montero, 2017). According to Rawls, human rights should be understood as part of a broader framework of social justice, which includes protecting basic individual freedoms as well as ensuring fair distribution of resources. This reflects the view that social justice and equal access to economic opportunities are prerequisites for a just society (Adlhiyati & Achmad, 2019).

For women, looking beautiful is a need that must be fulfilled. However, women always try hard to be beautiful, and sometimes even have to be willing to feel pain to be beautiful (Ariani, 2015). These beauty standards refer to a woman's body shape and physical proportions. It is not surprising that women today compete to beautify themselves by taking care of their bodies from the outside but ignoring their inner qualities, such as intelligence and personality. This beauty standard cannot be separated from the role of mass media. Mass media creates definitions of beauty, which in turn creates beauty standards in society. In this case, someone, especially women, must have an ideal body if they want to be said to be beautiful. with a small body, tall, straight hair, and light skin. Finally, the general assumption that a beautiful woman is a woman who is tall, straight, white, with a sharp nose, large eyelids, and a thin face developed into a world beauty myth (Ariani, 2015).

3. Method

This research uses a descriptive research method, namely explaining how disabled people are fighting for the right to change the stigma of beauty through the Miss Wheelchair World international beauty contest, using secondary data in the form of books, journals, theses, research results and articles published via the internet. The data collection technique used in this research is the library research

method. Library Research is a data collection method used to obtain data from scientific works, mass media, textbooks, work reports, journals or online news sites (Nugroho & Sapto, 2014). Qualitative data analysis techniques are the data analysis methods used in this research (Mezmir, 2020). After providing an explanation of the ongoing problem, the author will collect various data about the problem from various sources. Then, the author will examine the problem using theories and concepts relevant to the problem, and then make conclusions that are easy to understand.

4. Result

Education, health care, mobility, decent work and legal protection are the basic rights of people with disabilities (Newman, 2017; Putra et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the problems that people with disabilities often face are discrimination, lack of accessibility in fulfilling their rights such as employment opportunities, health and adequate public facilities as well as the image of media and technology towards people with disabilities. Discrimination against people with disabilities often occurs in the work environment (Lindsay et al., 2018). Apart from that, the lack of accessibility in fulfilling the rights of persons with disabilities is also a problem that is attracting quite a lot of attention. The basic rules discussing accessibility already exist in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which was ratified on October 18 2011, Article 9 Paragraph 1 (Harpur & Stein, 2017). The existing regulations regarding accessibility are intended to prevent people with disabilities from actively participating in enjoying various public services. There are several forms of discrimination and lack of accessibility experienced by people with disabilities.

According to data collected by the Danish National Center for Social Studies in 2012/2013 from 18,019 citizens, around 4,159 people had physical disabilities and 1,398 people had mental disabilities. Individuals with disabilities report significantly higher levels of violence and discrimination than those without disabilities (Kattari et al., 2017). Compared with women without disabilities, women with physical and mental disabilities were significantly more likely to report all types of violence. 0.8% of women without disabilities reported serious sexual violence, while 1.7% of women with physical disabilities and 5.0% of women with mental disabilities reported the same.

Based on the law which regulates the rights of persons with disabilities, the government, regional governments, regionally owned enterprises and state-owned enterprises are required to employ a minimum of 2% of the number of employees with disabilities (Jackson, 2018). Meanwhile, private companies are required to employ a minimum of 1% of people with disabilities from their total number of employees. However, until now the fulfillment of the rights of people with disabilities has not been realized. Data from 2012 at the Social Welfare Data and Information Center of the Ministry of Social Affairs explained that there were 1,250,780 people with disabilities in Indonesia, and data from the Directorate General of Development and Development in 2014 saw the number of people with disabilities who were not working as many as 1.5 million people (Smith et al., 2024).

Based on data from the Experience of Discrimination and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), employment is one of the areas most researched by the ADA and disability-based discrimination. Nearly 1-10 workers with disabilities experience discrimination in the workplace. In one study, 39% of disabled respondents reported it to their managers and some even told their colleagues, but only 4% of respondents told clients because they were afraid of being harassed and bullied (Bell, 2019; Fuentes, 2024). The majority of respondents in South Korea reported that their workplace does not provide disability facilities. Only 30% of them said their workplaces had adequate entrances and wheelchair accessibility, while 32% said their

workplaces had handicap bathrooms. Around 41% of respondents reported that their workplace provides special parking spaces for employees with disabilities. This highlights the lack of physical accommodations for people with disabilities in the workplace. Adequate accommodation in the workplace is very important because it will make employees with disabilities feel safe and satisfied with their jobs, and this tends to make them want to remain working there for a longer period of time (Padkapayeva et al., 2017; Telwatte et al., 2017).

For wheelchair users, they experience difficulties due to designs that include changes in the height of surfaces such as stairs, no floor connection between the road and the sidewalk, rocky road surfaces that hinder the movement of wheelchairs, and buttons that are difficult to reach. Accessibility to public services is also still the focus of fulfilling the rights of people with disabilities. For example, in health facilities, at the registration counter for calling the queue via speaker, there is no information screen for calling the queue number. Guiding block is also not installed. Apart from that, accessibility for blind people also needs to be considered, for example, inside or outside the elevator, there are no tactual signs that can be read to differentiate between various buttons or sound instructions to indicate floor numbers.

Apart from that, the image created through social media and technology for people with disabilities. Basically, society assesses and knows that people with disabilities are people who are retarded, which causes people with disabilities to be looked down upon and often ignored. Information regarding the rights of people with disabilities is still not the focus of the media in reporting. According to Komnas HAM data taken from Kompas.com, from 2011 to 2016 there were only 89 news stories that reported on people with disabilities. In detail, in 2011 there were 6 news stories, in 2012 there were 4 news stories, in 2013 there were 7 news stories, in 2014 there were 11 news stories, in 2015 there were 40 news stories and in 2016 there were 20 news stories. The fact that discrimination and lack of accessibility for people with disabilities still often occurs throughout the world, this can reduce their self-confidence in their physical attributes. The internationally recognized Miss Wheelchair World beauty pageant is one international effort to reduce this.

Apart from Miss Wheelchair World, there are also other similar organizations such as Miss Wheelchair USA. Miss Wheelchair USA provides a national platform for women with disabilities to express their own style and personality. The competition is open to women with mobility impairments and titles are awarded at the state, regional and national levels. The winners of Miss Wheelchair USA have a role in community service, and the program has four national service platforms that the organization considers important for improving the quality of life for women with disabilities. Aleksandra Chichikova's victory as the first Miss Wheelchair World was a historic event. She is the representative of Belarus who won the first international beauty competition for wheelchair users. Her achievements show that a person's passion, strength and resilience are part of true beauty. Aleksandra is an inspiration to many people around the world with disabilities, proving that there are no insurmountable barriers if we have strong determination and the right support.

In her profile, Aleksandra Chichikova expressed her belief that a person's success, strength, purpose, beauty and attractiveness do not depend on physical condition, and she hopes to inspire others to see people with disabilities as equal individuals (Ryabov, 2019). Contestants in Miss Wheelchair World appear in a variety of outfits, including national costumes, cocktail dresses, and evening gowns. They also show their talents and abilities in other activities. The emphasis in the contest is not only on physical appearance, but also on the personalities and daily activities of the participants, as emphasized by Katarzyna Wojtaszek-Ginalska, head of the Only One Foundation. Contests like this can help people understand the lives of people with disabilities and increase their understanding. This contest has the potential to drive greater social change by helping change the way people view disability. This can

encourage organizations and governments to improve accessibility and fight discrimination.

Many women face difficulties accepting and showing self-confidence and love for themselves because society's beauty standards make them look boxed in. Miss Wheelchair World, as a beauty competition involving women who use wheelchairs, has made various efforts to change the stigma related to disability. Miss Wheelchair World provides an opportunity for women with disabilities who use wheelchairs to feel appreciated and represented in the world of beauty. This sends a strong message that beauty is not limited to the physical, and people with disabilities can also serve as positive role models (Richardson, 2017; Kalargyrou, 2018).



Figure 1. First Aleksandra Chichikova Miss Wheelchair World victory in 2017

Aleksandra Chichikova (center) is the first Miss Wheelchair World 2017 and a passionate advocate for the health and rights of women with disabilities, having been appointed as a member of the newly created High-Level Commission dedicated to monitoring and advancing women's health and rights. The commission, consisting of advocates, experts and activists, was created to ensure that commitments made during the November 2019 Nairobi Summit on ICPD25 continue to make progress. During the competition, participants share their experiences and stories about the daily challenges they face as individuals with disabilities. This helps inspire empathy and understanding from others who may not fully understand their lives. For example, Melissa Exton spending more than a week in Tijuana, traveling, interacting, and talking with other women who also use wheelchairs, is strong evidence of the valuable experiences and relationships made during the trip.

One of the participants, Melissa Exton, was recognized as Miss Kindness because of her efforts to help other participants who were facing difficulties, such as providing support to buy a new wheelchair for a participant from Guatemala. Actions like this encourage participants to take real action and help those in need. One of her most visible actions was that as Melissa continued to volunteer regularly with children, her passion for making a positive impact in the lives of those facing unique challenges grew. This experience not only strengthened her relationships with children but also deepened her interest in events and initiatives aimed at supporting individuals who rely on wheelchairs for mobility. Her dedication to her goals and commitment to fostering inclusivity and empowerment becomes increasingly clear as she dedicates more of her time and energy to these causes.

Through these competitions, relationships and friendships are built between participants from different countries, creating strong networks and communities among people with disabilities. This helps them feel supported and included in the larger community. With the Miss Wheelchair World contest, the disabled community has experienced significant expansion (Beadle-Brown et al., 2021). The pageant not only provides an opportunity for participants to demonstrate strength,

resilience, and beauty in a variety of ways, but also serves as a platform that encourages the inclusion of more individuals with disabilities. This contest gives them a platform to talk about the issues they face every day, as well as inspire others to better understand the challenges faced by this community.

Table 2. Changes in general beauty stigma after the Miss Wheelchair World contest

Aspects of Beauty	Beauty Stigma According to Experts	Beauty Stigma According to Miss Wheelchair World
Definition	Concerned with proportion, harmony and symmetry. Defined by elements such as order, proportion, and clarity.	Seen as the result of courage, self-acceptance, and the ability to overcome obstacles. Beauty is seen as an expression of internal strength and independence.
Main Focus	It is based on physical beauty and external aesthetics.	Prioritizes internal strength, courage, and the ability to overcome obstacles. Emphasizes self-acceptance and independence.
Outside Influence	Influenced by traditional views of beauty, often concerned with ideal physical proportions.	Not too influenced by conventional beauty norms. Focus more on how to overcome obstacles and realize personal potential.
Objective	Sometimes it focuses on achieving beauty standards set by a particular society or culture.	Aims to support women with disabilities in achieving independence, self-esteem, and professional and social activities. Wants to overcome stereotypes and mental barriers towards women with disabilities.

Looking at these efforts through the lens of human rights, Forsthye's book argues that human rights are widely considered to be the fundamental moral rights of people that are necessary for a life with human dignity. Human rights thus serve a larger social purpose, and it is a legal system that tells us at a particular point in time which rights are considered the most basic in society. Even if human rights are considered inalienable, moral attributes of people that must not be violated by public authorities, rights must still be identified by humans and codified in legal systems. Therefore, the Miss Wheelchair World contest is in line with the concept of human rights which has a big social goal which wants to eliminate existing beauty boundaries. The Miss Wheelchair World contest has a very noble goal, namely providing space and opportunities for special women with disabilities to show that beauty knows no boundaries.

This is a concrete step in fighting stigma and discrimination against women with disabilities. This concept is also in line with human rights principles, which recognize that every individual has fundamental moral rights that must not be violated by public authorities. As human rights are considered as basic moral rights necessary to maintain human dignity. This includes the right to live with human dignity, without discrimination, and without unjust restrictions. In the context of this event, removing existing beauty barriers is a very important step in supporting the rights of women with disabilities. Through the Miss Wheelchair World event, people can better understand that true beauty comes from within, and does not have to be related to physical ability alone. It also contributes to awareness of the importance of equality and inclusion for all individuals, regardless of their physical condition. Thus, this event makes a positive contribution in promoting human rights principles and fighting for the rights of women with disabilities. Apart from that, the Miss Wheelchair World event can also be a means to inspire women with disabilities

and motivate them to reach their maximum potential without feeling limited by their physical condition.

5. Conclusion

Miss Wheelchair World contest uplifts the theme of equality for individuals with physical disabilities and aims to challenge beauty standards worldwide. Miss Wheelchair represents one form of effort by people with disabilities to combat the issues they often face. Common challenges include discrimination, lack of accessibility, and the stigma perpetuated by media and technology. Beauty stigma entrenched in society poses a significant challenge for this contest in reshaping perceptions of people with disabilities. With the goal of mitigating these common issues, the contest has undertaken various efforts to change disability-related stigmas. Empowerment and Representation, Sharing Experiences, Taking Action, and Connecting Communities are some strategies employed. By providing a platform for individuals with disabilities to showcase their talents, intelligence, and beauty, the contest challenges societal norms and fosters inclusivity. Through these initiatives, Miss Wheelchair World strives to not only celebrate the achievements of contestants but also to promote a more equitable and accepting society where individuals of all abilities are valued and respected.

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