

Social Inclusion of Performers with Disabilities in The Performing Arts:

A Case from Turkiye

Abstract

Purpose

The purpose is to develop a critical lens for understanding the social inclusion of performing artists with disabilities in a developing country to create awareness and improve policies and practice to improve social inclusion and address the inequalities experienced by people with disabilities.

Design/methodology/approach

For this qualitative study, data was collected from multiple sources: semi structured interviews, site visits and observations, and secondary data.

Findings

Respondents revealed three main themes around the state's, society's and individual's approaches to people with disabilities in performing arts. The approaches seemed to be very similar. The observations and review of existing policies revealed the neglect of the State regarding people with disabilities in general and even more so in performing arts due to the lack of implementation of agreed UN disability priorities. Turkish society, it appears, feels that people with disabilities participating in performing arts as performers is a minor issue, especially in a country where people with disabilities have limited access to basic human rights and needs. Turkish people tend to believe that performing arts is not a priority on the list of needs for people with disabilities. These approaches lead to the identified three themes : the state level, the societal level and the individual level approaches to the social inclusion of performers with disabilities in performing arts, revealing reasons for the lack of social inclusion.

Research limitations/implications

Limitations include the lack of performers with disabilities who could be identified and who were willing to participate in the study. Those working in venues and public offices were also reluctant to participate. The greatest limitation was the lack of interest more broadly in people with disabilities and performing arts.

Originality/value

In Turkiye, there are very few studies on people with disabilities and they only focus on basic needs like education, health and employment, with none on people with disabilities as performers in performing arts. This is an original study because it collects and discusses primary data on this topic, revealing the negligence of the State, the apathy of society and the degree to which an individual with disabilities must struggle to attend any performing arts event.

Consequently, this study shows how difficult a feat social inclusion is in such a developing country and how superficial terms like equality and diversity are for the people there while raising awareness on the topic and presenting a grounds for legislative development.

Keywords: Social inclusion, disability, performing arts, performers with disability

Introduction

The impact of everyday inequality is becoming more and more visible across developed and developing countries. inequality is also played out in inclusion within economic and social activities, for example, from the perspective of participant disability (Geddes, 2000; Norwich, 2007; Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall; Gould et al., 2021). According to the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020), there are more than one billion people (15% of the overall population) who manifest a disability. Fujimoto et al. (2014) investigate inclusion issues of people with disabilities in community arts and sports organisations, noting that the arts and sports are capable of creating inclusion. They utilise the social model of disability to explain how, in addition to medical reasons, disability is also shaped socially, impacted upon politically and affected by organisational attitudes (Barnes, Oliver and Barton, 2002). Consequently, urgent attention should be given to inequality and its cultural aspects (Lamont et al., 2014). Inequality is a broad term and various authors have attempted to generate definitions (e.g., Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Stiglitz et al., 2009; Dorling, 2010; Piketty, 2014; Savage, 2014; Perrons, 2014; Shandra 2018; Jajtner et al., 2020) which relate to a range of inequalities in income, individuals' access to resources, family or friendship connections, ethnicity and gender (Granovetter, 1995).

This paper focuses on identifying a critical lens for understanding the the issues and dynamics involved in the social inclusion of performing artists with disabilities in a developing country. Social inclusion is the process of improving the terms on which individuals and groups take

part in society improving the ability, opportunity, and dignity of those disadvantaged on the basis of their identity (World Bank Group 2022). Performers with disabilities need to be provided with the opportunity and means by which they can participate in the performing arts with equal dignity to those without disabilities.

There is evidence of growing interest in research on inclusion and diversity in the arts, stemming from wider recognition of the importance of welcoming workplaces and audiences across cultures (e.g. Azmat, Rentschler and Fujimoto, 2014; Parkinson and Buttrick, 2014; Alexander, 2021), but this is not always the case in practice. Tatli and Ozbiglin (2012) examine inequality and privilege in the United Kingdom arts and cultural sector , focusing on higher education institutions' involvement with student placements, using intersectionality to position their findings on discrimination. This cross-category approach avoids the narrowness and simplification of other approaches which only focus on one specific aspect of inequality (Acker 2006).

There is a strong sociological connection to inequality regimes elsewhere (Acker,2006) in society, its politics, history and culture. Ozkaleli (2018) focuses on the situation in Turkiye, describing it as rich with intersecting identities. However, many of these identities are suppressed, with the individuals concerned not being able to enjoy their full democratic rights.

Tatli and Ozbiglin (2012) question whether the cultural sector is really diverse in terms of gender, sexuality and ethnicity:

Unfortunately, the issue of disability remains invisible in the arts and cultural sector, which in turn means that the organizations are ill prepared to offer reasonable accommodation (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012:255).

There are several studies on social inclusion in terms of audience diversity in the context of museums and art galleries, in developed countries (Gidley et al, 2010, Kupperts, 2005; Lindelof,

2015). They identify social inclusion from four angles: access, participation, representation and empowerment (Gidley et al, 2010). Among these, “access” has attracted attention since the 1970s and 1980s, like museum policy at state level in developed countries, to now include wider and more diverse audiences (e.g., Ames, 1985; Moore, 1998; Sonke and Lee, 2015). A decade later, “participation” emerged, linking social justice to equitable participation in the arts (e.g., Putnam, 2000; Sandell, 1998, 2003).

However, scholars and state policy makers have started talking about “representation” and “empowerment” in society, which will help uncover the richness of human capabilities in terms of social contribution (Kuppers, 2005; Lindelof, 2015). Improvements have been tied to state policies and practices from the perspective of “institutionalized patterns of cultural value expressing equal respect for all participants” (Fraser and Honneth 2003,36). Moreover, stakeholders should understand disability and its relation to law, policy, institutions and practices within the dynamics of culture and legality (Goggin, Steele and Cadwallader, 2017). However, most studies view disability as “something that should be overcome instead of accommodated” and consider people with disabilities to be “the passive recipient” of policies (Knight, 2015). On the other hand, ableism, which is concerned with stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities, (Bogart and Dunn, 2019) believes that disability itself can be viewed as a social, cultural, or political phenomenon. Ableism refers to a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produce a particular kind of self and body that is held up as the perfect human. Disability, however, is seen as a diminished state of being human (Campbell 2001). Meanwhile, ableism refers to social-level oppression, while disablism refers to individual-level discrimination (Jun, 2018),. There is always need for more research to explore art and cultural equality among people with different disabilities, ethnic groups and ages (Parkinson and Buttrick, 2014).

Disability theory

We interrogate existing disability theory to identify a critical lens for understanding the social inclusion of performing artists with disabilities in a developing country. By adopting this lens, these performers can be viewed as part of a suppressed, political category. Priestley (1998) distinguishes between individual (physical and psychological aspects of impairment) and social approaches to understanding disability (structural and material conditions, as well as culture and representation).

Tremain (2005) uses the work of Foucault to help distinguish between physical impairment and disability, with the latter being a type of disadvantage in addition to the impairment. This disadvantage is imposed by contemporary social organisation, which fails to account for those with impairments, and therefore excludes them from social activities. Securing equality for people with disabilities does not just relate to medicine or health solutions, or sensitivity or compassion, but is more to do with politics, power and powerlessness (Devlin and Pothier, 2006). Hosking (2008) positions disability theory as part of the wider critical discourse (critical disability theory, CDT) to help raise the level of discussion and theoretical development surrounding disability itself, including the need to value diversity, recognise rights and listen to the voices of people with disabilities, consequently enabling political change.

Assessing the Turkish context illustrates the dilemma of difference (Minnow, 1990) relating to predicaments around deciding to deal with difference or ignore it. Multidimensional perspectives may not always be intersectional, but at other times they may reveal intersectional aspects. Thus, there is a need to identify a critical lens through which the issue may be viewed.

Understanding Turkish culture and disability policies

Türkiye has culturally and historically been defined societally, transitioning from a collectivist position with high levels of power distance and uncertainty avoidance to a more individualistic society (Kağıtçıbaşı 1983; Hofstede, 2001), but this transition is still to be completed. A paternalistic approach to management is still evident (Aycan et al., 2001). Collectivist cultures reinforce social support so that the need for individual access is overlooked (Bozo et. al., 2009). The state may not feel obliged to provide access for individuals with disabilities because their families and communities will help them. However, issues arise when these individuals want their independence in carrying out everyday tasks, accessing the arts or pursuing a career as a performer with disabilities in the performing arts.

In Türkiye, 12.6 % of the population have at least one disability (TURKSTAT, 2011). No further statistical research has been conducted on disabilities or people with disabilities since 2011, reflecting the lack of importance given to people with disabilities or their social inclusion by the state. The ‘Law on People with disabilities and on Making Amendments in Some Laws and Decree Laws’ (the Turkish Disability Act) was enacted in 2005 and amended in 2012 and 2014. The Law aims to *“encourage...people with disabilities to facilitate their fundamental rights and freedoms, provide full and active participation ... to ensure to take steps for necessary arrangement to avoid disability* (MoFSP, 2014). Unfortunately, the implementation of the Law was postponed a third time on December 3rd 2020, revealing just how little urgency has been given to accessibility for people with disabilities. This legislation notes that public buildings, spaces and transportation vehicles need to address the needs of people with special needs (DG of Cultural Properties and Museums, 2014). Due to this legislation, disability friendly restrooms, separate entry turnstiles and access ramps have been built. However, most of the attention has been on museums, public buildings and transportation; however, the government run theatres, concert halls, etc. are still inaccessible.

Furthermore, according to a report by The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), only one in two children with disabilities enjoy inclusive education in Türkiye.¹ There are very few Turkish disability studies and they emphasize only basic needs of everyday life, such as employment (Bengisu & Balta, 2011), education (Ari & Inan, 2010; Girli, Sari, Kirkim, & Narin, 2016; Koca-Atabey, 2016; Meral, 2015), accessibility to health care and accessible tourism (Akgul & Vatansever, 2016; Nazli & Mutlu, 2018; Sakız et al., 2015).

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities of the United Nations (CRPD) Article 30 pays attention to inclusion of people with disabilities in cultural life, and points out that states should provide participation of people with disabilities in cultural activities and easy access and transportation to television programs, movies and other cultural events (CRPD, 2006). Türkiye still appears far from fully appreciating its cultural value and facilitating social cohesion through cultural diversity. The State mentions groups such as youth, and people with disabilities in cultural policy. Compared to Europe, where explicit studies and policies have been developed for these groups, in Türkiye there is no research, defined policies or appropriate strategies.

In 2017, Türkiye began to prepare its own National Disability Rights Strategy Document and Action Plan, following the implementation of the UN Convention, to protect and enhance the rights of people with disabilities, focusing on legal, institutional and implementation issues.² A workshop was conducted in June 2020 to develop an action plan, but nothing has been done since. Action therefore needs to be taken to improve the creative and artistic-intellectual capacity of people with disabilities (Benzer, 2018).

¹ <https://Türkiye.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/Engelli%20kadinlar%20ve%20kiz%20cocuklari-Haklar-TAPV-UNFPA-BA.pdf>

² <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/statcom/49th-session/documents/CN-3n-Türkiye-17-Disability-E.pdf>

There is only one Turkish study related to people with disabilities as audiences in performing arts events. This revealed that even their attendance in performing arts as audience members is not something that is expected or considered important, let alone accommodated. People with disabilities, who do attend performing arts events do so through their own motivation and enthusiasm, and often face serious extra financial consequences and/or humiliation (Collins, 2021).

Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to identify a critical lens for understanding the social inclusion of performing artists with disabilities in Türkiye to help amplify their under-represented voices and influence policy makers and implementors (Allan, 2005).. The specific research questions are:

1. How are cultural policy and social inclusion perceived by members of society (audiences with disabilities, audiences without disabilities, members of staff, carers and performers with disabilities and performers without disabilities)?
2. How are people with disabilities included in performing arts as performers?
3. What can be done for a more inclusive society regarding performers with disabilities in performing arts?
4. How does the accessibility of performing arts venues reflect cultural value in terms of the social inclusion of people with disabilities?

Method

This qualitative study secured ethics approval from the Ethics Committee of a University in Türkiye. The research design involved triangulation from 3 different data sources a) semi-structured interviews b) site visits and observations across five sites (venues, offices, performance spaces); c) reviews of secondary data such as websites, policies, legislation, promotional materials, annual reports, internal documents. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants (n=40) including a) audiences with disabilities (n=8), b) audiences without disabilities (n=13), c) staff members working at performing arts venues (n=5), d) carers

(n=3), e) performers with disabilities (n=6) and f) performers without disabilities (n=5). Table 1 shows the data sources and demographic characteristics such as gender and types of participant disability. Participants were drawn from performing arts organizations on a publicly available list, which we choose not to identify for anonymity purposes, using snowball sampling (Noy 2008). Participation was voluntary and each participant's disability was taken into consideration when conducting the interviews to ensure a safe environment. For example, the interview with the participants with hearing impairments was conducted with the assistance of a sign language interpreter.

5 sites (3 privately owned and 2 state owned) were visited to make first hand observations of the different performing arts venues. The accessibility of the venue was observed, and the staff were interviewed. Site visits and observations enabled first-hand experience to compare the alignment with legislation regarding the engagement of people with disabilities in performing arts. The websites of the venues were also examined for accessibility information of any kind. A common semi-structured interview protocol was prepared for each participant group for consistency, to explore and compare their experiences regarding social inclusion of performers with disability. However, the participants were encouraged to respond to prompts and probes if required to obtain richer data (McGrath et al., 2019). Interviews lasted approximately 40-50 minutes and were digitally recorded when agreed by participants and transcribed. Data collection continued until data saturation was achieved (Boddy 2016).

Each interview started with a brief discussion of demographic background information relevant to the study (e.g. career history, education, ability or disability, gender and age). Table 1 presents the data sources and demography of participants.

Table 1: Participants and demographic characteristics

Process	N=40	Profile
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(Semi – structured interviews)		
Audiences without disabilities who attended performing arts events	N =13	9 Females 4 Males
Audiences with disabilities who attended performing arts events	N=8	3 Females 5 Males Impairments: Mobility :1 Female , 2 Males Visual: 1 Female, 2 Males Hearing: 1 Female, 1 Male
Carers of people with disabilities who attended performing arts events	N=3	2 Females, 1 Male
Performers with disabilities who performed in performing arts events	N=6	2 Females, 4 Males, Impairment: Physical: 1 Female, 1 Male Visual: 3 Males Hearing: 1 Female
Performers without disabilities who performed in performing arts events	N=5	3 Females, 2 Males
Staff of performing arts venues	N=5	2 Females, 3 Males

The main interview questions regarding social inclusion of people with disabilities emerged from related literature, including Bang and Kim (2015); Bolt and Penketh (2016); Naraine and Lindsay (2011); Lindelof (2015) and Woods (2017) (See Table 2 for interview questions)

Table 2: Interview Questions

Groups	Common questions	Specific questions
Audiences with disabilities	1. What do the terms cultural policy and social inclusion mean to you?	

Audiences without disabilities	2. Have you encountered any artists with disabilities? Could you please explain? 3. Why don't we see any artist with disabilities?	
Carers		
Performers with disabilities	4. What do you think should be done so that people with disabilities could become artists? 5. What would you suggest for event organisers? Could you give an example? 6. What would you suggest for those in decision making positions in the government? Could you give an example?	1. How did you decide to become an artist? When? How? Could you elaborate on the process you went through? 2. What were the challenges you faced? Could you give an example?
Staff		1. Do you think there is discrimination against performers with disabilities? Why? How? Could you give an example? 2. Are there any artists with disabilities in your company? Could you elaborate? How? If not, why? What are the problems? 3. Does the government provide any assistance to performers with disabilities? Could you give an example?

A holistic approach was applied, devising first order and second order analysis through coding of key themes (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton 2012), where “first-order” analysis, used respondent-centric terms and codes, and “second-order” analysis used researcher-centric concepts, themes, and dimensions. In the first-order analysis, the researchers reviewed the transcripts and categorized the raw data into themes. Then, the researchers worked together to determine the themes. Next, based on Strauss and Corbin (1998), the researchers identified similarities and differences among first-order themes to develop higher-level conceptual categories while continually comparing first-order themes with each other and emerging conceptual categories. The transcripts and field notes were also reviewed to ensure the coded passages fit the second-order categories. The ‘tandem reporting of both voices – informant and researcher’ – allowed for rigorous demonstration of links between data and induction of new concepts, confirming rigor of concept development and theory building (Gioia, et al, 2012: 18).

Interview data was further triangulated with observations through site visits and secondary data sources (Krippendorff, 1980) which provided a clear multidimensional understanding of inclusion. The study utilized several researchers which enabled both the data collection and analysis stages to be rigorous, thorough and reliable.

Findings

Discussion of the findings are structured around the research questions. The themes identified from the interviews are discussed using representative quotes from participants.

Research Question 1. How are cultural policy and social inclusion perceived by members of society?

The participants' views on the State's cultural policy vary from how the State perceive cultural policy to what cultural policy should entail. Most participants were not sure if the Turkish State had a cultural policy:

I am not sure, does the State have a culture policy? The interpretation seems to change with the political scene....We do have laws but the problem is in the implementation of these laws. When it comes to enforcing them, nobody wants to bother with it. This is a social perception thing I'm not sure but the word is "pragmatic", if someone asks for something we deal with it, otherwise we don't. Why should we waste our energy on this. (Performer with disabilities - 3)

Furthermore, those that believed there was some form of cultural policy were not clear about implications or sustainability of policy, because it seemed to change depending on incumbent government priorities:

The State actually has cultural policy. Museums have recently improved incredibly...new museums are partly disabled friendly. Some even have description but I haven't seen anything for hearing impaired. Which shows it can be done, if there is intention. (Audience without disabilities - 13)

Policies which are acceptable to all seem to be the preferred choice for many respondents as an indicator of an advanced society, which they do believe exists in Türkiye:

...There should be a country policy which is accepted, embraced...supported by all. It is actually an indicator of civilization...value given to disabled performers,...facilities provided for them are indicators of civilization. (Audience without disabilities - 1)

...a person needs to be able to live his life....the buildings should be built taking physically people with disabilities into consideration....a blind person should not have to ask where the bus is going at the bus stop. (Performer with disabilities - 2)

Research Question 2: How are people with disabilities included in performing arts as performers?

Although audiences attend performances with performers with disabilities, these artists are limited in number and they find it difficult to advance their careers due to cultural barriers:

There are disabled performers. I have a few friends...but there are very few...the whole process is very difficult, schools, opportunities, standards. If you do manage to get into the schools, the expectations are lower for disabled students, so you don't get the most out of it. (Performer with disabilities - 1)

Despite the status of performers with disabilities elsewhere , this recognition has not been achieved in Turkiye:

There are many disabled performers in the world, but I haven't seen any performing in Turkiye. There are very famous artists, but I believe they are famous because they are disabled. (Audience without disabilities - 2)

I have not seen anyone with a disability in the State Theatre. I am the only one. There are two people I know of in the ballet but they are not really performing. (Performer with disabilities - 4)

Next, the participants were asked why they did not see performers with disabilities in performing arts events. The analysis revealed several different perspectives. One was that social inclusion of performers with disabilities varies depending on genre. Some like ballet or theatre are seen as impossible for people with disabilities while others like musical performances are seen as possible, provided they can endure the struggle. For example, a performer without disabilities discussed the situation relating to the State Opera and Ballet where degree of disability was an issue:

We ask for a health report from people who apply for the ballet. We don't accept people with disabilities. The only disability we tolerate is like we have a friend with a slight hearing impairment. One of his ears doesn't hear, but he is a lead actor in the opera. (Performer without disabilities - 2)

Another perspective was related to the reasons for not seeing performers with disabilities, which were grouped in three levels: state, societal and individual.

State level

The primary responsibility of developing and implementing policy belongs to the State; however, researcher observation and feedback from participants indicate that because the State has a general attitude problem regarding implementation of policy and a serious lack of awareness, policies are not implemented sufficiently. Furthermore, the notion of developing policies to prioritize the needs of people with disabilities is considered to be a burden to be addressed at another time or by individuals or volunteer organizations rather than the State. Participants indicated a variety of barriers regarding lack of policy accessible facilities. Although these issues have been recognized by authorities, many changes do not improve the holistic experience:

...consider that people in wheelchairs or orthopedically-impaired people can come...in the buildings...or that in public transportation when a blind person comes to the bus stop they have to ask someone where the bus is going... (Audience with disabilities - 4)

A government official told me "We can't even provide normal kids with an education, how can we make special schools for disabled kids" (Carer - 1)

Although international conventions and alliances dictate the requirements of social inclusion, the Turkish State perceives it to be limited to physical accessibility, which is vaguely implemented, while continuously postponing national implementation deadlines. The notion of people with disabilities participating in any cultural activity has never been prioritised. Parallel to this discriminative perception of disability, the State has no written rule related to

how people with disabilities might be given the opportunity of performing arts education and/or become performers. This is considered an unrealistic utopian notion and therefore not taken seriously. One retired performer without disabilities explains how this may be resolved:

It is possible, if the extent of the disability is not too bad, we could use these people. For example, a person may not be able to work but s/he may have an incredible voice, we could train him/her as opera singers....this is not easy but it can be done with support of state and larger organizations. There has to be a certain plan and they have to reach out to these people. This is not something that can be done by individuals it requires state policy. (Performer without disabilities - 2)

In the Turkish education system, it is difficult for people with disabilities to enter exams for performing arts schools unless they have a relatively extreme talent and someone close to motivate and support them like a teacher or family member. Moreover, even if they enter the exams, it is difficult for them to study in art schools because most of the teachers do not know how to teach people with disabilities. The State needs to develop a policy related to people with disabilities having access to performing arts schools, including training of teachers for people with disabilities. Three performers with disabilities explained their experiences. There was often an imbalance between student and institution in terms of required competencies. The former has the necessary entry qualifications, but the latter is often reluctant to engage with these students:

I had a music teacher in the primary school for visually impaired. He encouraged me. He said, "Son you have a gift and you must study at music school." I could see but I couldn't read....My first exam went well but I almost fell on the step. They asked me what I wanted to study and I told them that I wanted to study piano. They argued about how this could be, how I could study in their school. The teachers said it wasn't possible although I had passed the exam. Then a week later, we went to the principal and he said he was working on it. The art council convened and to my surprise, they accepted me....Now, years later, I am training teachers to teach vision impaired children. (Performer with disabilities - 2)

We don't see many disabled performers because the training process is difficult. It's not really difficult but the teachers don't know how to train people with disabilities. They don't know how to overcome the problems or difficulties. I was lucky none of my teachers said that they couldn't do it....Some people do discriminate. They shouldn't but they do. As a matter of fact, the Turkish State even received a penalty for this. (Performer with disabilities - 3)

An interviewee with mobility disability who was not a performer illustrated her perspective based on her experiences:

The exams are not conducted considering the needs of people with disabilities. When they see that you are disabled, it is a reason for being eliminated. Especially in the arts schools, they usually look for a certain physical typology. You have to look good on stage. If you are physically disabled, it is out of the question. (Audience with disabilities - 3)

Societal level

At the societal level, the situation is similar to the state level. Society lacks general awareness regarding people with disabilities, impacting the way they perceive probable capabilities of people with disabilities. Thus, the prospect of people with disabilities participating in performing arts, especially as performers, is something that most interviewees had not even considered. Consequently, when asked about seeing performers with disabilities in performing arts events, their reactions were generally negative, pointing out issues related to parents' and teachers' perceptions, education, transportation and accessibility. Furthermore, some were under the impression that people with disabilities who were able to become successful performers only succeeded because they had disabilities, not because they were talented. Some are also under the impression that teachers are more tolerant towards people with disabilities, believing they are not trained sufficiently and become less qualified artists, being forced to work in low pay work:

...when families discover a disabled person...their own child or afterwards, they give up on life and retreat. Intervention should be at the beginning...this is your child, husband, mother, they may be helpless...health has priority because they deal with health first. There isn't a system directing people to education after health. (Audience with disabilities - 4)

According to two performers with disabilities:

Teachers don't have a standard of what to expect from a disabled performer so they tend to lower their standards. They think they are doing them a favour, but they aren't. (Performer with disabilities - 1)

People don't like seeing too many disabled performers on stage. This is why my first play was not a success. They don't want see agitation on stage. The second play was a one man play and it was booked out for four years. The character in the second play was not actually disabled, but they came to see the play because I was good not because I was disabled. (Performer with disabilities - 4)

Conversely, there is a dilemma regarding performers with disabilities, in some cases, they are only considered for playing people with disabilities in a particular scenario while in other cases, performers with disabilities with the required qualifications are not even considered for roles as people with disabilities. Either way, there is discrimination towards the performers with disabilities derived from mis-informed societal perception, preventing performers with disabilities achieving their goals, as expressed by a physically impaired interviewee:

For example, it seems probable to me that they can say that a disabled performer can't perform in the theatre or cinema. Only maybe if the role requires a person with disabilities, but that shouldn't be the case either. disabled performer could play people without disabilities. But even people with disabilities are played by performers without disabilities like Eddie Redmayne, who played Stephen Hawking. That role could have been played by a disabled performer. I mean he did a great job, but a disabled performer could have done a great job as well and won an Oscar. (Audience with disabilities - 7)

Another miss-informed societal perception is that people with disabilities would be unhappy when they work with performers without disabilities, especially in the arts.

Like there is ... [a ballet dancer who was injured and now uses a wheelchair] he is a friend of ours. I think to myself, you know, "Does this make him, or does it make him even more unhappy." You know he isn't his old self. It's a very sensitive issue. To be among us. But it's not the same. (Performer without disabilities - 3)

I don't like working on stages where there are a lot of people with disabilities in a single play, like the associations do. I want people to watch me because I am a good actor, not because I am disabled. (Performer with disabilities - 4)

Meanwhile, there are some private businesses, non-governmental organizations, voluntary groups and/or individuals who work with people with disabilities to ensure their social inclusion. However, according to the results, these projects are not sustainable without the support of the State..

I have a friend in İzmir who runs a Project called “the Wheelchair Dance Project”. They have a group, they work together, put on shows... (Performer without disabilities - 3)

A famous actress, who worked with hearing impaired people, in theatre explained her experience:

I started off with 9 people and the number went up to 35. We put on several plays, which were very successful. Successful enough to get invites from overseas theatres, but we couldn't get any support from the government. Not even the Disabled Association was aware of the impact of the work we were doing. (Performer without disabilities - 1)

Individual level

Contrary to the state and societal levels, at the individual level, the interviewees seemed to agree that the social inclusion of performers with disabilities mostly depends on self-motivation and self-awareness of people with disabilities. If one has a talent and is motivated to be included in performing arts as a performer s/he will be included despite barriers:

Nobody has ever approached me through pity. I was very lucky. I never hid behind this and my teachers never treated me with pity. I learned at a very young age that “knowledge is power”. (Performer with disabilities - 1)

There are two criteria for getting into art school, you have to be talented and you have to want it. If you meet these criteria, they have to accept you. (Performer with disabilities - 3)

I became disabled when I was in high school. I studied management. They wouldn't let me study art but I needed to make money. Then when I made enough money, I continued to study arts through private lessons and any other way I could. This was my passion. I loved being on stage. And I did it. I am the only disabled performer on the pay role of the State Theatre. (Performer with disabilities - 5)

However, the opportunities available for people with disabilities are so scarce that it can inhibit their developing any form of self-motivation towards achieving difficult goals like becoming performers. Getting basic education can often be challenging for people with disabilities, so finding motivation to obtain something much greater within the performing arts is often impossible.

Social inclusion is such a difficult task for a people with disabilities. Even if you have the talent, you are faced with so much discrimination that you are forced to give up. It requires so much energy to fight the discrimination that you have no energy left to

concentrate on developing your talent or taking exams. It is so demotivating. (Audience with disabilities - 3)

The findings revealed that there is a general lack of accommodation for performers with disabilities at the State, societal and individual levels.

Research Question 3: What can be done for a more inclusive society regarding performers with disabilities in performing arts?

Most interviewees agreed that the State needs to take action at all levels.. The State's approach to people with disabilities needs to change completely for them to be seen as equals in society. The notion of "performers with disabilities" needs to be accepted as a norm, not an anomaly. Policies need to be developed regarding training of performers with disabilities. Teachers in arts schools need to be trained to teach people with disabilities. Mentalities of society and State need to completely change regarding people with disabilities, so that the notion of people with disabilities in performing arts can become a norm and equality and social inclusion can be achieved. Meanwhile, people with disabilities need to join forces, get organized and demand more equality and social inclusion. However, evidence of continued discrimination still prevails:


People with disabilities need to get organized and demand social inclusion at the cultural level. They need to stop making do with what they get and demand more. They need to demand to be included in performing arts. (Audience with disabilities - 3)

The State needs to gather people with disabilities from all sorts of disabilities and ask them what they want, what they need, how they should be included in society. Then it should set new rules that cater for these and support them and open their way to be performers, who can earn money from that, professional performers. They can look at what's done in other countries. They can send the teachers abroad for training on how to teach people with disabilities... (Performer with disabilities - 4)

This evidence is a call to action for change among people with disabilities and their supporters, with or without government assistance. Although a limited amount of progress

has been made, sustained attitudinal and practical changes are required to increase the likelihood of meaningful change.

Research Question 4: How does the accessibility of performing arts venues reflect cultural value in terms of the social inclusion of people with disabilities?

To answer the final question, a web search was conducted for the web pages of the performing arts venues, the actual venues were visited and the observations were noted. The web search showed that only two of the five venues had web pages; however, neither had any information related to accessibility for any type of disability. One of the web pages visited had a disability icon  [5], which when clicked, the font of the web page became larger so that people with partial visual impairment could read the web page. There was no other information or reference regarding any form of disability throughout the web page. These findings showed that these venues, two of which were government run, ignored the fact that people with disabilities have the right to access information related to accessibility of performing arts venues on the web pages.

Some of the interviews were conducted at performing arts venues, which were also observed in terms of accessibility for audiences' disabilities and performers with disabilities. The venues that were visited were both State and private owned. None of the 5 venues were fully accessible. Some of the venues had ramps at the entrances but it was impossible for people with disabilities to move past the entrance as they could not use the stairs. Moreover, the ramps were below standard with an angle of more than 12%; whereas, the regulation states that they should be no more than 8% (T.C. Aile ve Sosyal Politikalar Bakanlığı [Ministry of Family and Social Services], 2021). There were several staircases

throughout the venues. They were not accessible for audiences with disabilities, much less performers. The backstage areas were totally inaccessible.

The buildings were old with little room for technology to improve accessibility for the hearing and visually impaired. When asked how people with disabilities access these venues, examples of responses were:

If there is a disabled person in the audience, the employees or other people from the audience, carry them. (Staff – 3)

Deaf people come but they can't hear anything, they just enjoy the visual performance. (Staff – 5)

The buildings also lacked the necessary facilities such as accessible toilets, parking, lifts, etc. as the participants mentioned:

The building is too old for renovations such as putting in a lift. All the wiring needs to be changed. It's impossible. (Staff – 1)

We have disabled parking but we don't have a toilet. We need technical support personnel to help them access the show. (Staff – 2)

Our budget is very limited. We can't spend money on these things. (Staff – 4)

The attitudes of the staff members also reflected the cultural policy of the State. They seemed to see the need for accessibility for people with disabilities as a luxury, not a necessity, making excuses for the lack of accessibility. Whereas, when one visits the museums around the country, one sees how accessibility solutions can be produced even for the oldest buildings. However, nobody seems to think that such renovations are necessary for the performing arts venues because they cannot imagine people with disabilities attending performing arts events, let alone performing at them.

Our research data provides extensive evidence in addressing our research questions. We now critically reflect on our findings in terms of supporting the existing literature, in addition to addressing existing knowledge gaps.

Discussion

Our observations and review of existing policies in Türkiye uncovered the continuing neglect by the State of people with disabilities in general and within the performing arts in particular, due to the lack of implementation of agreed UN disability priorities. Even though Türkiye is classified as a developed economy it still acts in the same manner as less developed economies with other priorities. Its lack of engagement in progressing the people with disabilities agenda has impacted on, for example, the progression, accreditation and training available (Charnley, 2011; Verrent, 2003). In Türkiye, it seems that political rather than social barriers is the real issue here (Barnes, Oliver and Barton, 2002).

The terms “performers”, “disabilities” and “performing arts” are seldom used together. This study, the first of its type in Türkiye, has endeavoured to not only investigate the dynamics related to these concepts and present a critical disability theory lens through which this may be viewed (e.g. Priestley 1998; Tremain 2005; Azmat, Rentschler and Fujimoto, 2014; Parkinson and Buttrick, 2014; Alexander, 2021), but also to highlight how performers with disabilities can be more visible in the performing arts. Making them visible will contribute to increasing their numbers through heightened awareness (Tatli and Ozbilgin, 2012).

The perceptions of a variety of actors, together with the researchers’ observations and analysis of policies and related documents, were analysed to reveal a general overview of

how people with disabilities and the performing arts are perceived. In less developed economies, access to the required support may not be a priority, or even available (Sochor, 2014; Eide et al., 2015). Türkiye has the economic means but is not actioning this.

The thought of having performers with disabilities in the performing arts is a concept that seems very distant to Turkish society and even “humiliating” (Gordon and Tavera-Salyutov (2017:506). Throughout the history of their journey to find equal opportunities in society, people with disabilities have travelled a path involving social exclusion, rejection, separation, integration and full social-political inclusion (CRPD, 2006), which needs to be evaluated on an ongoing basis by interested stakeholders and policymakers.

The perceptions of the participants interviewed revealed three main themes structured around the State, societal and individual approaches to the social inclusion of people with disabilities and their integration with the performing arts as performers. The perceptions related to the three groups seemed to be very similar. The State is negligent in its policies towards people with disabilities in general, let alone performers with disabilities. Although The Disability Act was passed in 2005, there are very few examples of implementation of the Law over the past 17 years. The fact that there is no evident punishment related to non-conformance with the Law is evidence of the State’s neglect of people with disabilities.

Meanwhile, wider Turkish society appears to feel that people with disabilities participating in performing arts as performers is a minor issue not worth addressing, especially in a country, where people with disabilities have limited access to basic human rights and needs like education, health and employment, which are taken care of through collectivism rather than policy or legislation. Society in general believes that there is no need for people with disabilities to become performers or even attend performing arts events. It is seen as a luxury not worth dealing with.

At the individual level, on the other hand, the picture is not much different. People with disabilities are still trying to attain their basic human rights, so being included in the performing arts or becoming performers is not a priority for them, either, which also makes it difficult to find performers with disabilities to participate in studies because there are so few of them.

The results of this study also revealed many aspects related to why there are very few performers with disabilities in Türkiye, and gave insight into how this situation may be improved for a more inclusive society in terms of people with disabilities. The analysis showed that while it only takes the awareness and support of one individual in the life of a person with disabilities to carry her/him to success, it is the responsibility of the State to ensure that people with disabilities are given the opportunity to enhance their talents and become performers. However, society and individuals also need to demand social inclusion for the State to take action (Geddes, 2000; Norwich, 2007; Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Gould et al., 2021). Fujimoto et al. (2014).

The web search, review of policy documents and observations also supported the general attitudes related to people with disabilities and the performing arts.

Our results are different to the contexts in other developed economies, though perhaps not unexpected, given Türkiye's current political priorities.

People with disabilities seem to be neglected in the performing arts, not only as performers but also as audiences.

Our analysis of the findings shows that the social inclusion of people with disabilities is so much more dependent on the individual and family or close circles than it is on society or the

State; whereas, the greater part of the responsibility regarding ensuring the social inclusion of people with disabilities should be on the State in particular and to some extent on society.

Conclusions

This study set out to identify a critical lens for understanding the social inclusion of performing artists with disabilities in a developing country. The structure of the study revealed a range of perspectives related to the issue and an overall wider perspective of the situation in Türkiye.

The current policy in Türkiye related to people with disabilities is not only shallow, but also not even being implemented as it should be according to both the Disability Act of Türkiye and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In order for people with disabilities to fully enjoy their basic human rights in all aspects and be fully included in society as equal human beings and citizens, the State needs to take determined action and develop serious policies related to the social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Standards regarding accessibility, including technological approaches, need to be implemented for all State-owned buildings and penalties must be introduced for non-conformance. The State-owned performing arts venues and museums are run by the Ministry for Culture and Tourism; however, although all of the museums have been renovated for accessibility, none of the performing arts venues are yet accessible. Implementation of the Law, in turn has the potential to change the general outlook of society regarding people with disabilities, to see them as equal individuals. This in turn will give people with disabilities self-confidence, providing them with the encouragement they need to demand more out of life as independent individuals. Our findings align in part to support the social model of disability, but with a caveat concerning its related, contextual political dimensions (Fujimoto et al. (2014; Barnes, Oliver and Barton, 2002).

Perhaps, aside from the disregard by government, other institutions and society more generally, it is the lack of an agreed position on what actually constitutes inequality and disability which is causing this continued uncertainty (Shandrea 2018; Jajter et al. 2020). If access and participation can be achieved more widely, then representation and empowerment will follow (Gidley et al. 2010), along with a higher probability of social justice being achieved (Putnam 2000). As the evidence from this study shows, in Türkiye, there is a similar negative attitude towards the social inclusion of people with disabilities in the performing arts as performers or even as audiences, at all levels, state, society and individual, which limits the probability of wider access or participation.

Consequently, in Türkiye, this will entail more input from government (the State) in formulating more inclusive policies, for example, in employment, leisure and social terms to ensure wider access and participation. As more recognition of disability is achieved in society, its reporting will increase and therefore more pressure will be exerted on key decision makers to fully implement the actions called for by UNESCO and the European Union. We have shown that there is an urgent need in Türkiye to plan for a future society that is more inclusive. Without such a plan and its successful implementation, society in general will suffer, not just those with disabilities. To improve the situation, best practices in other countries need to be examined. While there are many worthwhile Turkish projects that bear fruitful results, knowledge transfer does not always happen within government or EU-funded projects.

Meanwhile, it is essential that commercial organizations bear some of this responsibility and look to solve access issues themselves in accordance with their own equal employment opportunity and accessibility policies. It is also essential to consult with disability groups within Türkiye that offer help and guidance. Consulting a diverse range of disability groups will provide useful information on how they perceive their current environments and what

they believe is hindering them. A clear direction is needed from government if laws are to be implemented. Each organization, each company, each municipality, and each citizen must also play a role in enabling Turkish society to actively change how disability and social inclusion are perceived to the extent that being a performer with disabilities in the performing arts becomes a socially accepted norm.

Finally, the critical lens identified through this study included adopting multidimensional perspectives for understanding the social inclusion of performing artists with disabilities, taking into consideration the approaches of individuals, society as a whole and the state, reviewing the laws, asking a variety of relevant actors and visiting performing arts venues to understand why there is such a lack of awareness and an abundance of neglect on the subject.

Implications for future research

In Türkiye, this study is pioneering in examining people with disabilities from a very different social inclusion lens, their participation in the performing arts as performers. It is believed that it will encourage researchers to examine other diverse aspects of social inclusion such as different disability types (e.g. Asperger's Syndrome) or people with disabilities in different areas of art (e.g. visual arts) or wider creative industries that have not yet been investigated. There is potential for further qualitative research in Türkiye and other less developed economies to explore the issues behind barriers to social inclusion in the arts and culture, and elsewhere in society. Moreover, this study was a qualitative study with a limited number of participants. Quantitative studies with large scale surveys and statistical testing would also strengthen the case for further measures of social inclusion.

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