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Unheard Burdens: Parental Trauma, Disability, and Caregiving in an Unequal World

Dr. Geeta Monga, Department of English, Principal Shah Satnam ji Girls college sirsa,
Haryana, India

Abstract

Parenting a child with a disability involves a profound emotional, physical, and psychological journey shaped by resilience, advocacy, and structural barriers. This study employs an autoethnographic approach to examine how caregivers navigate the intersection of disability, stigma, emotional labor, and institutional neglect. Through reflective narrative and theoretical grounding, the paper highlights the persistent trauma faced by parents rooted not merely in disability itself but in the systemic failures and societal attitudes that complicate caregiving. The analysis underscores three core dimensions: amplified emotional labor, institutional ableism, and chronic sorrow. The findings emphasize the urgent need for inclusive policy reforms and a paradigm shift that acknowledges parental trauma as a public concern rather than a private struggle.

Introduction:

Rethinking Caregiving in a Structural Context

Parenting is often celebrated as a rewarding and transformative experience. However, when a child has a disability, the caregiving landscape acquires layers of complexity that extend far beyond conventional parenting. The journey becomes a negotiation between love, responsibility, and persistent systemic barriers. It demands heightened emotional resilience, adaptability, and critical awareness.

Disability, too often framed as an individual tragedy, must instead be understood as a form of human diversity shaped by societal constructs. The challenges parents face stem not from their children's impairments but from a social environment that remains largely inaccessible, excluding, and ill-equipped to support disability. This study situates parental trauma within such structural realities, focusing on how caregivers absorb the emotional and material consequences of systemic neglect.

Emotional Labor: The Hidden Currency of Caregiving

Arlie Hochschild's framework of emotional labor provides a powerful lens to understand the psychological demands placed on caregivers. Parents of children with disabilities continuously navigate emotional complexities, balancing their personal distress with the responsibility to maintain stability for their child.

Key dimensions of this amplified emotional labor include:

Continuous Advocacy: Parents must persistently negotiate with institutions—schools, hospitals, and government agencies to secure basic services.

Emotional Regulation: Caregivers often suppress their own fear, grief, or anger to remain emotionally available to their child.

Stigma Management: They navigate public judgment, stereotypes, and unsolicited advice, often masking their struggles to appear “capable” or “strong.”

Gendered Expectations:

Mothers disproportionately bear caregiving responsibilities, intensifying emotional burnout and reinforcing traditional gender norms.

Personal narratives reflect these pressures vividly public meltdowns mistaken for poor parenting, stares in public spaces, and the guilt of never feeling “enough.” The emotional labor of caregiving becomes a silent, invisible burden.

Parental Trauma and Cycles of Ambiguous Grief

Parents of children with disabilities often experience a form of grief that does not align with traditional psychological models, as it is not tied to a single loss or moment in time but instead resurfaces throughout the caregiving journey. This grief is frequently ambiguous, emerging from the tension between mourning unmet expectations and deeply loving their child, creating an emotional landscape with no clear closure. Many parents also endure chronic sorrow, a recurring emotional response triggered by missed developmental milestones, social exclusion, or ongoing medical uncertainties that continually reshape their hopes and fears. These experiences are further complicated by societal pressures to remain positive, which silence legitimate emotional struggles and contribute to feelings of isolation. Research consistently shows that caregivers of disabled children are at increased risk for depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms, often living in a heightened state of vigilance as they navigate the constant possibility of medical crises alongside the daily emotional and physical demands of caregiving. The burden is intensified not only by the caregiving responsibilities themselves but also by pervasive institutional ableism and systemic barriers that create obstacles at every stage, compounding trauma and limiting access to the support families need.

Educational Barriers:

schools often resist providing accommodations, leading to prolonged negotiations or legal battles. Inclusive education, despite existing laws, often remains theoretical rather than practical.

Healthcare Disparities:

long diagnostic delays, inaccessible facilities, high treatment costs, and dismissive attitudes of professionals force parents to become their own child’s experts and advocates.

Economic and Workplace Inequities:

Caregiving demands often push parents especially mothers—out of the workforce. Government financial support is insufficient, failing to match the economic reality of disability-related expenses.

Societal Stigma and Parental Blame:

Parents are frequently faulted for their child’s behaviors, with assumptions such as: poor parenting causes meltdowns.

Nonverbal children are not being trained properly.

seeking support means being ungrateful or weak.

These judgments intensify emotional distress and undermine social support networks.

Resistance, Advocacy, and Emergent Hope

Despite overwhelming obstacles, caregivers cultivate resilience through strategies grounded in advocacy, community, and emotional adaptation.

Forms of caregiver resilience include:

Policy-based advocacy to secure educational rights and medical support.

Peer support communities that validate experiences and reduce isolation.

Reframing expectations to create meaningful goals aligned with their child’s unique abilities.

Self-care practices that sustain mental and physical well-being.

Moments of joy, growth, and connection fuel hope, demonstrating that disability is not a story of tragedy but of perseverance and redefined strength.

Discussion: Key Themes Emerging from the Study

Heightened Emotional Labor

Parents navigate intense, layered emotional burdens that exceed typical parenting expectations.

Institutional Ableism

Systemic failures create structural trauma that families must continually confront and resist.

Resilience and Resistance

Despite the cumulative burden, caregivers develop strategies of strength, advocacy, and meaning-making.

Towards Inclusive Policy and Social Transformation

Conclusion

The lived experiences of parents raising children with disabilities reveal a deeply complex emotional landscape shaped by love, resilience, systemic barriers, and ongoing trauma. This study highlights the profound need to recognize parental trauma not as a private burden but as a societal responsibility. By centering caregiver narratives, confronting systemic failures, and advocating for inclusive policy frameworks, society can move toward a future where families are supported, valued, and empowered rather than silenced or overwhelmed.

References

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