



The sweeping storm that is COVID-19 will hopefully be over soon, and you will once again see your privileges and respect restored. This will not be true for the millions of people out there suffering from prejudices and stigma every day of their lives.

© UNDP, 2020

Is there a vaccine against stigma?

I'm being rhetorical, of course. Here's why.

Amidst the #COVID19 outbreak, and countries closing off borders, we've been hearing stories of stigma against foreigners in many parts of the world: from suspicious looks in public places to difficulties in hailing taxis or rides. Asia is generally welcoming, respectful and hospitable to tourists and foreigners so this is new territory for visitors and citizens alike. And it needs to be said that this is certainly unacceptable, unforgiveable, and intolerable. As a warrior against discrimination and stigma against people with disabilities, I clearly see how the Coronavirus – even as it claims lives and inflicts hardship - is dividing our flat world into ugly pieces with its by-product: stigma.

However, as a self-proclaimed super-optimistic person, I strongly believe that these experiences can also help us gain empathy and understanding about those who don't fit the narrow definitions we apply to notions of 'normal'.

When you first experience stigma, you will definitely feel hurt and wonder: 'What I have done to deserve this harsh treatment?'

Let me assure you: You are not the only person facing stigma. I thoroughly understand and empathize with your suffering. Please allow me to stand firmly by you in this situation. We are in the same boat... this sweeping storm that is Covid-19 will hopefully be over soon, and you will once again see your privileges and respect restored.

This will not be true for the millions of people out there suffering from prejudices and stigma every day of their lives.

They are the immigrants and foreign students, people with disabilities, sexual minorities and so on. They are not given the same opportunities as those who belong in the majority. They are not welcomed in the same classroom or workplace with 'normal' people. And, they are usually abused in many ways simply because they do not look like the majority.

Being deprived from education, employment, and social life opportunities, the stigmatized individuals will internalize the stigma, perceive themselves as worthless and inferior, shrink themselves in their isolated shells, and entirely depend on others for their living.

Society is then split into the better-off and the disadvantaged with hostility towards each other. So, instead of having part of our income and resources cut off to cover for those left behind, why don't we simply slow down a little to empower them to walk with us and together share the sweet fruits? For decades, our battle against gender inequality have attained certain achievements. Why don't we leverage those victories to claim equal rights for all minorities?

Stigma is a social malaise. Unfortunately, it can't be detected with a medical kit as Coronavirus, but it does exist and can destroy peace and healthy relationships in a community. More dangerously, people carrying this disease often deny that there's anything wrong with them. Medically, we need a tiny amount of virus injected into our body to strengthen our immune system against a certain disease. Likewise, socially, I suppose, temporary stigma might be a vaccine against enduring stigma. Being stigmatized for a short period of time could help us better feel for someone who is less privileged, stigmatized for their entire life and negligently left behind...

I hope those of us facing these discomforts today will be willing to stand by those who face discrimination daily, to build a more equal, loving and caring society for all.

The author, Dao Thu Huong, serves as a UN Volunteer Disability Rights Officer with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Viet Nam. Her [blog](#) was first published by UNDP in Asia and the Pacific.

 **Asia and the Pacific**

• COVID-19 • Persons with disabilities • UNDP/UNV Talent Programme for Young Professionals with Disabilities

Sustainable Development Goal: [SDG 10: Reduced inequalities](#) [SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals](#)