

# Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 32: Disabled Refugees

Guest: Dr. Mansha Mirza

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

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## Introduction

[hip-hop]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey hey! It's me Alice Wong! Welcome to the Disability Visibility Podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. Today's episode is about disabled refugees with Dr. Mansha Mirza. Mansha is an Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Along with Dr. Rooshey Hasnain, Mansha is co-Principal Investigator for a project called [PRIDE: Partners of Refugees in Illinois Disability Employment](#). PRIDE aims to support Illinois-based job-seeking refugees with disabilities in accessing employment and career opportunities. Mansha will talk about this project and describe the needs of refugees with disabilities in Illinois, and also what we can all do to help welcome refugees in our community.

Are you ready? Away we go!!! [electronic beeping, computerized voice counting down to 5, 4, 3, 2, 1]

So Masha, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast today. Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself.

MANSHA MIRZA: I am an Assistant Professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and I have been working with refugee communities for more than 10 years at this time. And that's what brings me to this project and this collaboration with Rooshey. Rooshey and I are both at the same institution, and when we both realized our shared interest in working with refugee communities around disability and service access issues, we got together and developed this project. And we submitted it for funding to multiple funders. We were rejected the first couple of times; we did not get the funding we had asked for. And the third time, we were lucky, and that's where we are right now with [the PRIDE project](#).

## The PRIDE project

ALICE: And as I read about it, it's the first of its kind in the nation, and it's funded by a three-year grant through the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research. So tell me about where you are right now in the project.

MANSHA: We are in year two right now. It's a development project, so we have proposed the development of several activities in order to support employment pathways for refugees in Illinois with disabilities. And so we are right now in year two, and we have completed developing trainings, curricula, as well as a web-based tool to support our goals. And the next step now is to implement these with refugee participants as well as with refugee service providers.

ALICE: I'm curious about the challenges because clearly, refugees come from so many different countries. How do you prepare curricula and training and information that's you know, linguistically accessible to the refugees that you're working with?

MANSCHA: So we have multiple community partners. Most of our community partners are refugee resettlement agencies, and these are organizations that receive federal funding to support refugees once they come into the country and their first few months that they are here. So we are partnering with multiple refugee resettlement agencies in the Chicago area and in the surrounding suburbs. We are also partnering with what are called Mutual Aid Associations or MAAs. And MAAs are ethnicity-specific community organization.

So for example, we are working closely with the Syrian community network. We're working with Arab-American family services. We hope to work with pan-African associations. So there's several Mutual Aid Associations that we hope to work with as well, and these are the organizations that are helping us with our outreach, with getting the word out about PRIDE, and finding us participants. We are also hoping to translate all of our materials to several target languages. Because funding is restricted, we can't possibly cover all the various languages that are spoken with refugee communities in the state of Illinois. But we do hope to serve at least four or five different language groups.

Some of the languages that we're going to target are Arabic, French, most likely Burmese, and Nepali. And so, as we start delivering our services and activities, we will do it by cohorts. And cohorts will most likely be language-specific. So we might begin with a cohort of Arabic-speaking refugees and move on to a cohort of French-speaking refugees and so on and so forth. So as we implement the training for every cohort, we are then going to translate all of our materials into that target language in order for it to be accessible. So that's how we are addressing the different languages of our target population.

### Establishing relationships with community partners and agencies

ALICE: That's really exciting. And obviously, working with a lot of community partners is really important in terms of recruitment and making sure that everything is culturally and linguistically competent. So tell me about how you kind of establish these relationships with other refugee organizations and other non-profits and agencies.

MANSCHA: So like I mentioned, I've been working with refugee communities for a very long time now, as has Rooshey. So over the course of several different projects, we already had existing relationships with many of the area organizations that serve these communities. So we didn't have to start from scratch with a lot of the organizations that we're working with right now. But there are some new contacts that we have developed. So we typically reach out to these organizations. We tell them a little bit about ourselves, we tell them a little bit about our project, and we ask if there is any shared interest. And that's how we kind of start to build the relationship.

We typically go out and make a site visit at the organization, share with them more detailed information about the project, and then we ask. We formally invite them to be a part of PRIDE, and if they agree and if we have their permission, we will list them as a partner on PRIDE's website and formalize the agreement, sometimes in the form of a service contract where we identify mutual goals and responsibilities of the partnership. So that's how we've gone about building our relationships.

Also, I should let you know that we have other key partners as well. So we are working closely with Asian Human Services. We are also working closely with the state Department of Rehab Services as well as with the Chicago area Mayor's Office for Persons with Disabilities. And there's an assistive technology unit at the University of Illinois at Chicago that is also a close partner. We also have a few business partners, and these are organizations that provide training or business-related supports to individuals with disabilities or other under-served communities that are interested in entrepreneurship. So we have multiple partners representing multiple sectors that are relevant to the goals of PRIDE.

[mellow acoustic guitar]

### Developing the idea for the PRIDE project

ALICE: Yeah, just to back up a little bit, I guess I am curious about the origins of this project. Because it is true that I don't think enough is known about the needs of refugees with disabilities and especially in relation to employment. So how did you and Rooshey develop the idea for the PRIDE project?

MANSHA: You know, we've been talking for a long time about refugees with disabilities, different unmet needs in these communities, and employment has always come up. A lot of our work is also based on preliminary research and projects that Rooshey and I have done with refugee communities. One thing that we had observed was that within the refugee resettlement program in the US, early employment and economic self-sufficiency are important goals. And so the federal government has set up processes and programs in place in order to help refugees find and retain employment. However, because the job market can sometimes be really tricky, and also because refugees a lot of times are coming in with limited English-speaking skills or skills that might not easily be translated into the US employment sector, oftentimes, refugee service providers struggle to find individuals the right kind of employment.

Also in general—and this is not just for refugees—but generally in the US, people with disabilities have struggled to find employment because of the existence of employment-related discrimination and attitudinal barriers. So all those factors combined together tend to work against refugees with disabilities. So they're individuals with disabilities, plus they're newcomers to the country, and they're not aware of opportunities and laws that are in place to prevent employment-related discrimination. At the same time, they struggle with language and cultural barriers as well. And so knowing all of this, we decided that it would be a great idea to have a project that addresses each of those barriers but in a more cohesive way.

### Cultural differences around disability and disability identity

ALICE: I think the idea of disability itself is very culturally-specific. So there are a lot of people all over the world that definitely do have a disability, but they don't use the word "disabled"; that word may not exist in their language. So how do you bridge the gap to help refugees who clearly do have disabilities understand that they have this new identity that is part of their experience?

MANSHA: That's a great question, actually. And we struggle with that quite a bit because we do realize that some individuals might not have the same broad category or concept of disability in the same way that is used in North America. As well as in some cases, there might be the broad category, but there might be stigma associated with it. So individuals might be hesitant to identify or self-identify as having a disability. Keeping that in mind, all our recruitment processes and materials have tried, we've tried to be sensitive. So for example, our recruitment flyer does

say that we're working on a project for refugees with disabilities, and of course, the word "disability" is in the title of PRIDE.

But also, during the first intake interview, if an individual expresses interest in the project, we will share with them our definition of disability within PRIDE, which is of course based on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And we have a little script that our research assistants can use to explain that concept as well as be able to communicate that: "You know, at this time, it's not how you might have thought of yourself, but within the US, this is the concept of disability. This is how it's understood, and this is how it is incorporated in legislation that can provide you with opportunities as well as protect you from discrimination." And so we are hoping that that will, on the one hand, sensitize individuals and make them more aware of the US definition of disability, and on the other hand, encourage them to self-identify if they're interested in pursuing opportunities that PRIDE is able to offer.

The other thing we're doing is we're also training refugee service providers, and that training also includes information about disability, disability-related stigma, disability as it's defined in the United States and within the ADA and within the UN Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities. And so these service providers are the individuals who are going to eventually connect us with refugee participants. So we're hoping that if they're sensitized, then they can pass it on to the refugees they work with, and it will have a ripple effect of sorts. So that's how we are addressing that challenge.

[peaceful acoustic guitar]

### Research on refugees with disabilities

ALICE: Yeah, I'm guessing it must be very overwhelming to be a refugee and coming from another country and just so much information to process. And I'm guessing for refugees with disabilities as well, there's just like really a huge kind of adjustment period to new ways of talking and thinking about disability or thinking about how they wanna identify to the world. What else have you learned in your research? What did you learn in terms of, in your own background research, about refugees with disabilities?

MANSHA: So there have been research articles and other scholarly materials that have been written about refugees with disabilities in the US. Rooshey has written some about that. I have written a few articles about that as have a few other scholars. So there is some information, not a whole lot. There's also more information coming from the United Nation's High Commissioner's Office for Refugees, the UNHCR, about refugees with disabilities. There was a book that recently came out about the legal rights of refugees with disabilities. And so we've used all of that material and all of that information to inform our work.

A few years ago, I believe in 2010, a special issue of *Forced Migration Review* focused on refugees with disabilities. So there was a really broad set of articles published in that special issue that addressed the challenges that refugees with disabilities might face at different stages of their displacement: so when they're fleeing their country of origin, in resettlement camps, as well as once they become resettled in developed countries like the US and New Zealand. So there's all that information out there that Rooshey and I have been contributed to as well as learned from that has informed our work with PRIDE.

### The Illinois-based disability community's response to PRIDE

ALICE: Great. And I guess I'm curious about the response to this project with the Illinois-based kind of disability community.

MANSHA: We've had a really good, very enthusiastic response from the broader disability community in Chicago and in Illinois as well as from refugee communities in this city and the surrounding suburbs. We are partnering with Access Living, which is the largest Center for Independent Living in the country and right here in Chicago, and we've always had great support from our collaborators at Access Living. Our work has been featured in UIC's news bulletin as well as in our respective departments. So we've been garnering a lot of attention, a lot of positive attention, a lot of support.

Also, right around the time when PRIDE was launched was also the time when the new administration was elected, and the new president signed executive orders for the temporary moratorium on refugee resettlement in this country as well as placed bans on resettlement of refugees from certain countries which are predominantly Muslim. And those events had a pretty significant negative impact on refugee service providers in the area because if they are resettling fewer refugees, then funding for these providers is definitely going to reduce. Because funding is typically associated with the number of refugees they are helping resettle. And so the providers in the areas, as well as refugee and immigrant communities in general, were really reeling under that flurry of executive orders and the general negative tone of discourse around refugee resettlement and immigration in general within the US.

So PRIDE was launched in the midst of all of that. And oftentimes, we would hear from our community partners that PRIDE was the one positive thing in a sea of negativity. We felt like it happened both at the right time as well as at a very, very wrong time. So we were happy to be able to offer this one source of support and this one beacon of hope, but at the same time, it's been very difficult because a lot of our community partners have been struggling financially as well as emotionally given recent events. That said, though, you know, it has made PRIDE a really important project and something that is bringing refugee and disability communities together. And so the response has been overwhelmingly positive from those communities.

ALICE: That's wonderful.

### Goals and outcomes for PRIDE

ALICE: So now you're in year two, and I am curious about what are your hopes for the final year. What do you want to see by the end of this project and your hopes for what the outcomes will be?

MANSHA: Some outcomes that we had promised at the outset of the project were that we would create an employment orientation curriculum for refugees with disabilities; we would create a disability awareness curriculum for refugee service providers; that we would create a web-based information technology tool that would help service providers connect refugees with disabilities with specific resources that could help them in their pathway to employment. So we hope to have all those products ready by the end of the grant. We hope to have delivered those products to at least 50 refugees with disabilities as well as approximately 25, 30 service providers.

The other goal that I hope to achieve by the end of PRIDE is to be able to get the word out about refugees with disabilities and the skills that they have to offer to the US, and that if they choose to and they want to and if they're supported, they can also contribute to the country, this country that has now become their home. And then the third thing is sustainability. So we work really hard within PRIDE to put all these products together, but we know that our funding is time-limited. And the sense, we'll see as in when all these processes and products that we will have developed should naturally die when the funding is over. So we're trying really hard to build

sustainability into the project so that we can leave our service providers with tools that they can continue to use to support refugees with disabilities through the future.

ALICE: Thank you for that.

### What can all communities do to welcome and support refugees with disabilities?

ALICE: I guess my final question is, what can all communities do to really welcome and support refugees who are coming into the US, and in particular, refugees with disabilities?

MANSHA: I think the first step really is listening and getting to know the experiences of refugees and refugees with disabilities. getting a sense of where they're coming from, what life was like for them as someone with a disability in their country of origin. Because their narratives can oftentimes be quite different from Americans with disabilities'. So just listening and getting an understanding of how they perceive themselves and the world around themselves. And then gradually introducing them to the disability community within the US, with Centers for Independent Living, with Vocational Rehabilitation services, and with other community services that they can take advantage of and that they can use to become more integrated within US society.

The other thing that I would say is you know, within the US disability rights community in particular, there's a strong sense of self-determination and self-advocacy. And maybe those concepts and those processes might be very new to newly-arrived refugees with disabilities, the self-determination and self-advocacy. And so perhaps introducing those ideas gradually and recognizing that, in their early few months and perhaps even their first few years within the US, they might need a little bit more hand holding and a little bit more support. And they might not be ready to self advocate right off the bat. Just allowing them to time to acquire that sense of self and self-advocacy before necessarily expecting them to be self-advocates, and helping them a little bit along the way I personally think would be really useful and really beneficial.

ALICE: Yeah. I think sometimes we have a very narrow idea of what it means to be disabled, and so much of that is informed by our American values. And I think it's really important for all of us to be cognizant that there are more than one ways to be disabled; there are more than one ways to advocate. It's not everybody should be an activist who's gonna be protesting, but there's a lot of different ways to contribute to our society.

### Wrap-up

ALICE: Well, Mansha, thank you so much for talking with me.

MANSHA: Thank you. Thanks for this opportunity.

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ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture.

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You can also find links about Mansha and the PRIDE project on our website.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byyyeeeeee!

♪ How far will they go?

Oh yeah yeah

How far will they go?

Oh yeah yeah

How far will they go?

Oh yeah yeah

How far will they go? ♪