

The unavailability of employment opportunities for young women with disabilities: A case of Mashonaland Region, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

Although policies have been introduced and awareness campaigns to promote gender equality it should be noted that previous research has not looked into the challenges faced by young women with disabilities in securing employment in most countries. This is because most of the young women with disabilities can be seen on the streets of the Mashonaland Region towns begging or illegally vending their goods. There have been a number of incidents whereby the young women whom are illegal vendors fall prey on the police and the municipal councils. Therefore, the main objective of the study was to explore the well-being of the unemployed young women with disabilities in Harare, Zimbabwe. The researcher used a qualitative method with a descriptive multiple case study design to examine the well-being of the women. Ten in-depth interviews with the participants were conducted. Three key informant interviews were also carried out in Sign Language (since some of the participants had hearing impairment) during data collection. The data were transcribed, translated and thematically analyzed. The experiences of the young women with disabilities differ because of their different disabilities. The unavailability of employment opportunities show discrimination against young women with disabilities as prospective employers do not employ them.

Key words

young women with disabilities, employment opportunities, Sign Language, Mashonaland Region, Zimbabwe

Key points

1. In most parts of the developing regions of the world, relevant information and training about the disability issues and Sign Language is scarce.
2. In this publication we provide key considerations and recommendations when providing education and employment opportunities for young women with disabilities.
3. We also provide a self-reassuring scale and research assessment tool.
4. The information in the article is useful for training prospective employers, policy makers and for creating primary, secondary and tertiary level educational material such as posters, fliers, videos, fact sheets and cartoons.

Introduction

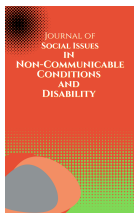
The study investigated the welfare of young women with disabilities in Mashonaland Region, Zimbabwe. The objective of the study was to explore domains of the well-being of unemployed women who have disabilities. An investigation of the economic, psychological and social impacts of unemployment and the community's perception of disability were made in order to achieve the outcomes of the study. Young women with disabilities' concerns in their families, communities as well as their abilities to cope in difficult situations were also discussed. With regards to the study methodology, the researcher employed the qualitative approach, adopting a cross-sectional multiple case study design with basic data collection, management and analysis procedures. The article provides the background to the study, an outline of the methodology, a discussion of the +study findings, conclusions and then implications.

Background

Disability is a holistic term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, (World Health Organization, 2012). In Zimbabwe the number of unemployed young women with disabilities has escalated over time. This can be attributed to the fact that it is very much difficult for persons with disabilities to get employed especially women. It is difficult for persons with disabilities to participate in the labor market (Mtetwa, 2018). Women with disabilities are viewed to be more incompetent than their male counterparts. Regardless of the existence of the national Constitution and many other policies in place such as the National Disability Policy (2021) women with disabilities continue to be discriminated against and deprived of getting an education and employment. Young women with disabilities are part of the most impoverished people in Zimbabwe. Most of them are dependent on family and community members for survival. Some of the women rely on begging, illegal vending and even sex work. These women are subjected to multiple forms of atrocities against human nature because of lack of financial empowerment which can only be achieved through employment.

Theoretical framework

The study is hinged on the Ubuntu theory and social model of disability. The concept of ubuntu on societal level is at the core and the heart of African life, (Shutte, 2001:2). The concept of ubuntu involves the comprehension of what it is exactly to be human and the need for humans to grow and find fulfillment, (Shutte, 2001:2). Ubuntu is humanness and this humanness is revealed when a person is welcoming, respectful of the dignity of others, compassionate, caring and empathetic towards others, (Manyonganise, 2015). The idea of ubuntu was obtained from the Nguni dictum, *Umntu ngumuntu ngabantu* that translates as, "A person is a person through other persons." Dolamo (2013) explains that in African communities the most important value observed is that no person should exist in isolation or be excluded from the web of life. Ubuntu promotes equality in that people are not defined by their differences in race, abilities, gender or any dichotomy. It should be noted that the concept of ubuntu values dignity, equality and existence whereas dichotomies invoke fear within members of the society which often results in the marginalization, discrimination, stigmatization and isolation of those who fail to conform to the normative or are different, (Kasomo and Maseno, 2011). Fear of the differences encourages the development of defensive strategies within some other people such as avoidance, running away, isolation and exclusion of persons with disabilities in particular. This



is most of what is experienced by the women under study. They are segregated because of their physical and emotional differences. Fear can be healthy and unhealthy depending on where it is directed and how it is exhibited. Fear that is directed towards disability is unhealthy as it negatively impacts the wellbeing of persons with disabilities especially women. This fear of the unknown is linked to the supernatural world in traditional African communities where people are afraid of death, witchcraft and sickness, (Kasomo and Maseno, 2011). In Zimbabwe some communities view disability as punishment from God, gods and ancestral spirits. Disability is viewed as a result of wrong doing by the parents or relatives of the person with the disability. Some communities view it as a curse hence the avoidance by community members to associate with persons with disabilities and their families. Disability can be said to contradict a normative body and the fear and belief is that it is linked to evil and supernatural ancestral powers, (Dolamo, 2013). The adoption of the ubuntu ideology in politics can improve and accelerate service delivery and also promote good governance, (Nzimakwe). Ubuntu at political level can be described as a call to service and participation as it involves serving humanity in a practical way, (Nzimakwe). When applied in politics the ubuntu ideology encourages political leaders and government officials to put people first and not exploit the nation's resources for their selfish gain. The ubuntu theory ensures that policies are formulated and implemented in a manner that includes everyone and expels exclusion and marginalization.

The social model of disability is a crucial way in which through which inequality can be perceived because it views disability as stemming from communities, spaces and services that are not accessible or inclusive, (Australian Federation of Disability Organizations, 2021). According to this model of disability society is responsible for placing limits on a person not their disability, (Australian Federation of Disability Organizations, 2021). The social model of disability has immensely influenced the way in which disability is understood, (Giddens, 2006:282). The social model of disability emerged as a reaction towards other models of disability such as the religious, charity, medical and traditional models of disability. The above-mentioned models were centered upon the functional analysis of the body in that persons with disabilities are seen as machines which need to be fixed in order for them to conform to the normative values rather than exploiting the physical environment so that it addresses the needs of persons with disabilities, (Oliver, 2004). Disability is often imposed on people through discriminations, prejudices, stereotypes and inaccessibility, (Barnes, 1991). Shakespeare cited in Davis (2006:199) observes that the social model of disability generates a refined agenda for social change.

Methodology

The paper employed the qualitative data collection method. Ten participants and three key informants were interviewed. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed by the researcher to identify and select those with the capacity of providing relevant information with regards to the research question the researcher seeks to address. The research considered the views of four young women with hearing impairments, three with visual impairments, two with albinism and one with cerebral palsy. Three key informants who included a Professor from a State University and two directors of Non-Governmental Organizations which cater persons with disabilities were also interviewed by the researcher. These are the people who in one way or the other have interacted with young women with disabilities on multiple occasions and so

they happen to have knowledge that can assist with achieving the research objectives. Data collection instruments such as audio recordings as well as sign language data were transcribed, translated, coded and thematized. Themes were identified, cross-checked with original data and data was discussed according to the notes and memos that were gathered during the interviews.

Study area

Mashonaland is a region in the northern part of Zimbabwe. The Mashonaland region is divided into four provinces namely Mashonaland West, Mashonaland Central, Mashonaland East and Harare Metropolitan province. Harare is the capital city of Zimbabwe and a province unto itself and is located in the Mashonaland region. Persons with Disabilities make up a part of the minority and unemployed population in the Mashonaland region. Some of the persons with disabilities especially migrate from other provinces in the Mashonaland region to Harare Metropolitan province in search of greener pastures. These women's search of employment is usually futile and so they resort to illegal vending and begging in the streets.

Ethical considerations

Ethics are values, principles, rules and norms that provide guidance to people so that they act in a way that does not expose other people to harm. The consent of the participants was required to carry out the research. The objectives and the significance of the research were discussed with the FGD participants and key informants. In addition, pseudo names were used in place of the participants' real names with such symbols DF1 to refer to a young woman with a hearing impairment, BF1 was used for a woman with visual impairment, AF for women with albinism and CPF for the one with cerebral palsy. The pseudo names helped to hide and keep private the participants' identity.

Findings

Demographic profile

The participants enrolled in the study were ten young women with disabilities between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old. There were four young women with hearing impairments and it should be noted that these participants differed in their levels of hearing loss as some were profound and others hard of hearing. Three of the participants were visually impaired, two others had albinism and the other female participant had four percent cerebral palsy. All the participants shared different backgrounds. The participants' levels of education ranged from grade seven to year six of secondary education.

Themes

- Discrimination and marginalization of young women with disabilities.
- Lack of adequate education among young women with disabilities to compete with counterparts without disabilities for employment opportunities.
- Communication barriers.
- Lack of capital and knowledge to start their own businesses.
- Lack of understanding of disability issues by employers and prospective employers.
- Exclusion from policy making of persons with disabilities.

Discrimination and marginalization of young women with disabilities

Often women with disabilities are viewed as incapable of carrying out tasks and responsibilities by themselves. The barriers experienced by girls and women with disabilities are a result of the discrimination they face during school days, vocational training sessions and during their search for formal employment. The discrimination has had negative social, economic and psychological impacts on the clients. The young women never get the opportunity to upgrade and improve their social statuses like their counterparts who have no disabilities because of lack of high esteemed employment opportunities in the formal sector. Begging and vending already diminishes their self-esteem and self-worth as it compromises their position in society. It should be noted that begging and illegal vending also exposes the young women with disabilities to anxiety, stress and depression as they are prone maltreatment and insults from passers-by. Young women involved in asking for money from passers-by and illegal vending are prone to sexual harassment and assault as perpetrators may pass sexually offensive comments towards them or even offensively touch them. The perpetrators may even involve touts and illegal change moneys crowding bus terminuses and the streets. The discrimination towards them makes people view them as people without a voice to speak out against violations.

Most people do not know and understand cerebral palsy. I started suffering discrimination and marginalization at Primary School. My condition was worse during that time because I could not walk properly and I could not control the saliva from my mouth. People would call me names and maltreat me whenever the teacher was not watching. Right now, the discrimination seems to have diminished a bit but it is still there because no one wants to employ me. I have tried to apply for general hand jobs since I did not complete my O' level but most of the employers' fear that I am very slow and might be incompetent. Rutendo (not her real name).

As a young woman with albinism, I do face a lot of discrimination. First and foremost, I do not know my father. My mother told me that he left us after I was born because he was disappointed that I have albinism. Growing up I had a dream of becoming a model but I struggled to be accepted in many pageants because of my lack of skin pigmentation as it always made me look different from the rest of the girls. Chipo (not her real name).

Lack of adequate education to compete with counterparts without disabilities

Illiteracy is very much common among persons with disabilities in Zimbabwe in that 36% attained primary education and 32% managed to attain education above primary level. Low levels of education highly contribute to the inaccessibility and unavailability of employment opportunities for the young women with disabilities. There reason why the rate of illiteracy is high among young women with disabilities can be attributed to the fact that most parents view sending such children to school as a waste of resources. In many African communities, young women with disabilities are viewed as worthless in that they are seen as incapable of going to school, getting employed and suitable for marriage.

Personally, going to school was a struggle for me as I am the only girl and the only one with a disability in my family. My parents managed to support me until I completed my O' level but I could not progress to A level and University as most educational institutions do not provide sign language facilities for us Deaf people. If I were to progress to A level and then University then I had to hire a sign language interpreter of which my family and I cannot afford one as they are very expensive. I had a dream of becoming a teacher as there were Deaf teachers at my school but then I could not attend school anymore because of these challenges. Danai (not her real name).

As for me I only went to primary school. I did not even write my grade seven because my parents told me that they had no money. For my parents sending me to school was a waste of resources as I was a female child with a visual impairment. I was not worth investing into as they believed that no one would employ me nor marry me. So, I am uneducated as it is and cannot get a job. Yanano (not her real name).

Communication barrier

The study revealed that communication plays a pivotal role in the formal employment of young women with disabilities in Mashonaland region. However, women with hearing impairments usually struggle with communication as they make use of the sign language that is rarely used by most of the hearing employers. Women with hearing impairments are often viewed as incapable of using English language as the sign language appears to be broken English when written down. Sign language is a peculiar language as it has its own vocabulary, grammar, literature and poetry to mention but just a few but then the employers and mainstream society are ignorant of its uniqueness. The variations between English and sign language prove writing to be a complicated and difficult mode of communication for women with hearing impairments in a job setting.

Women with visual impairments also struggle with communicating in English language which is not their mother's tongue. Some of them have not been privileged enough to attend High School and proceed to universities. The rate of illiteracy is very high among women with disabilities as they fail to read, write and communicate in English language

Very few people and organizations know how to use sign language. I as a profoundly Deaf woman have struggled to communicate with my prospective employers as they do not know how to sign. Most of them would suggest writing as a means of communication but again they do not understand written sign language as they call it broken English. Chioniso (not her real name).

As for me I am hard of hearing. This means that I am deaf but I can hear little sound and if I wear a hearing aid I can actually communicate in spoken language as I can lip read too. But then the problem is I cannot afford to buy a hearing aid as it is expensive and most employers complain that my lip-reading technique is time consuming. Tererai (not her real name).

Lack of capital and knowledge to start their own businesses

Most platforms provided by the government for youths to start businesses are not disability friendly in that they do not include young people with disabilities. When the government disseminates information about the funds to sponsor youth projects the information is usually unavailable and inaccessible to sign language and braille users. Same applies to information on how young people can start and improve their businesses. Young women with disabilities are viewed as incapable people in that most people find it very hard to believe that persons with disabilities can work and generate income to sustain their livelihoods. Persons with disabilities are often viewed as objects for charity in that their abilities are limited to begging. Such wrongful perceptions often result in their exclusion from getting employed in the formal sector.

Usually when business workshops are held, we young women with disabilities we are rarely invited regardless of the fact that we also want to be educated on how we can make money. NGOs and other governmental organizations need to be reminded about us and our rights. We did not choose to be in wheel chairs, to be blind and deaf. The government donates money to start businesses to many young people without disabilities but we are never advised to participate. This just shows how much we are sidelined. Tarisai (not her real name).

A lack of understanding of disability issues by employers

Most people are ignorant about disability. People have a primitive idea of what disability is and this degrades persons with disabilities. Disability is viewed as a curse and punishment from the gods and ancestral spirits hence people without disabilities often refrain from associating with those who have disabilities. Young women with disabilities are viewed as less competent. Employers refrain from employing them as they believe they will incur more losses than profits from their poor performance.

Disability comes in various forms and some employers do not seem to understand that. I remember when I had found a job as a maid and had to explain what exactly was cerebral palsy and why I could not use other parts of my body such as my left hand properly. -Rutendo (not her real name).

Some people do not understand Deaf Culture and sign language at all. It hurts that we are left behind in everything. Tererai.

Exclusion from policy making of persons with disabilities

Young people with disabilities especially women are usually excluded from policy formulation and implementation. Most policies are usually formulated under the adoption of the top-down approach rather than the bottom-up approach which may encourage the young people to give their input. For instance, the National Development Strategy is a Zimbabwean economic blueprint which aims at addressing the needs of the people including the needs of persons with disabilities. However, it adopted the top-down approach. This as a matter of fact implies that the young women with disabilities who are struggling today because of the nation's dilapidated economy were deprived the opportunity to make the grievances that they wish addressed known by the President's office. In the month of June year 2021 the National Disability Policy came into place. It aims at addressing and acknowledging the rights of persons with disabilities at the same time promoting their welfare. It should be noted that very few people with

disabilities know about it as it turns out that the information in the policy is readily available to persons without disabilities. The societies of persons with disabilities are plagued with information poverty. Information poverty can be described as whereby one lacks access to information systems hence their vulnerability in all aspects affecting their lives is increased. The exclusion from policy and decision making further weakens the young women with disabilities and it exposes them to all forms of inequalities. There is need to educate communities of persons with disabilities on all the policy frameworks that govern the country.

It was later last year when the government drew out the Venture Fund for youths and also invited young people to a discussion about an amendment bill in the Constitution. I learned about this from my hearing friend. When I went there with my friend there were no sign language interpreters. I also did not see other young people with disabilities. My friend signed what was being discussed for me but she struggled to sign some other words as she is not a professional sign language interpreter. I also could not understand some of the words she spelt. Danai (not her real name).

When issues concerning amendment bills or policies are passed out, they are only accessible to the population without disabilities. They are rarely accessible to braille, large print and sign language users. There is need for our government to include young women with disabilities. Yanano (not her real name).

Men with disabilities are usually preferred by prospective employers to their female counterparts. Females with disabilities are usually viewed as liabilities by most business owners. Noone wants to employ them because they are viewed as incompetent. They say they are afraid they would incur more losses than profits if they employ young women with disabilities. Chioniso (not her real name).

Discussion

The prevalence of discrimination of young women with disabilities in workplace settings

The study revealed that young women with disabilities tend to suffer many forms of discrimination in the workplace setting because they are female and have a disability. Young women with disabilities are often viewed as inferior to their male counterparts and so the barriers which confront the women are more severe than the ones which confront their male counterparts. The discrimination and the exclusion of the participants from formal employment has had negative impact upon their social, economic, emotional and psychological wellbeing. However, the adoption of Ubuntu in the workplace promotes equality in that people are not defined by their differences in race, abilities, gender or any dichotomy. It should be noted that the concept of ubuntu values dignity, equality and existence whereas dichotomies invoke fear within members of the society which often results in the marginalization, discrimination, stigmatization and isolation of those who fail to conform to the normative or are different, (Kasomo and Maseno, 2011).

The adoption of the ubuntu ideology and its impact upon the lives of young women with disabilities

Socially the young women remain in the position of the society's outcasts as disability has not been fully accepted as normal and as a unique feature of human experiences. Disability can be said to contradict a normative body and the fear and belief is that it is linked to evil and supernatural ancestral powers, (Dolamo, 2013). They continue in isolation as they are not invited and encouraged to participate in the economic empowerment forums in the country, continent and world at large. Ubuntu as mentioned above promotes equality in that people are not defined by their differences in race, abilities, gender or any dichotomy. It should be noted that the concept of ubuntu values dignity, equality and existence whereas dichotomies invoke fear within members of the society which often results in the marginalization, discrimination, stigmatization and isolation of those who fail to conform to the normative or are different, (Kasomo and Maseno, 2011). The study shows that discrimination continues to exist in every aspect of the young women's lives as the mainstream society fails to embrace disability. Some of them do not have the opportunity to continue pursuing education because they are limited by financial problems, educational facilities and their families' doubts to invest in them. There are multiple barriers that limit the excelling of young women with disabilities. In the study it is also evident that these women are subjected to information poverty. They are ignorant of vast information that could empower them and address the obstacles blocking their paths to success. They lack an idea of the nature of policies that govern their lives every day. They have either little or no idea of their rights which are encrypted in the nation's constitution and many other international policies such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Policy makers and decision makers need to acknowledge the ubuntu ideology for it will eliminate inequalities and unfairness. When applied in politics the ubuntu ideology encourages political leaders and government officials to put people first and not exploit the nation's resources for their selfish gain. The ubuntu theory ensures that policies are formulated and implemented in a manner that includes everyone and expels exclusion and marginalization, (Manyonganise, 2015). It has also been divulged by the study that the prospective employers are ignorant about disability as most of them bear the primitive notion of disability being either a punishment or curse from the supernatural powers. The prospective employers refrain from employing the young women with disabilities because they view them as liabilities to their businesses. Economic empowerment through provision of employment in the formal sector really helps address personal hygiene challenges faced by the young women with disabilities. As young women they go through the menstrual cycle which often demands that they be able to purchase sanitary pads, deodorants, menstrual cups, tampons and many other things that will help them feel worthy and dignified. The unavailability of employment opportunities happens to have exposed these women to all forms of gender-based violence especially sexual violation.

A loss of control and power over self by the young women due to disability

The young women have become recipients of money and mercy at the hands of potential sex predators who after offering them financial help will demand sexual favors in return. For married young women with disabilities birth control is another of the challenges they struggle with as they lack power over their bodies and reproduction. The young women are tortured mentally, economically, socially and physically as they do not own themselves but are owned by those who have access to money. The study also showed that lack of education plays a huge role in depriving the young women access to formal employment as most are unable to read and write proper English language. Some of the women with hearing impairments suffer

because most people lack an understanding of the Deaf Culture, its norms and sign language. Very few people view Deafness as a peculiar culture and experience in humankind. Most view it as an impairment that needs to be fixed and this is through hearing aids and cochlear implants surgeries. The social model of disability emerged as a reaction towards other models of disability such as the religious, charity, medical and traditional models of disability. The above-mentioned models were centered upon the functional analysis of the body in that persons with disabilities are seen as machines which need to be fixed in order for them to conform to the normative values rather than exploiting the physical environment so that it addresses the needs of persons with disabilities (Oliver, 2004).

Conclusions

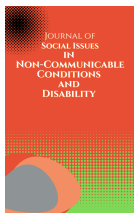
The goal of the study was to uncover the circumstances surrounding the unavailability of employment opportunities for young women with disabilities. The study uncovered the causes of the unavailability of employment opportunities for the employment and these include the discrimination, lack of adequate knowledge and capital to start a business, exclusion from policy making, lack of understanding of disability by prospective employers and the communication barrier to mention but just a few.

In the Mashonaland region the rate of unemployment among young women with disabilities was discovered to be very high. The causes of unemployment among these women are very much complex to be characterized by one causal factor especially when the social context is put under consideration.

The research would contribute to a better knowledge with regards to the unemployment of young women with disabilities, its causes and its impact. The research would contribute towards the very little information that is available so far about the unavailability of employment opportunities for young women with disabilities. The study is also meant to guide social workers and policy makers as well as community leaders, traditional leaders, political leaders, schools, organizations and other stakeholders on ways of addressing unemployment among young women with disabilities. The findings made the study a peculiar phenomenon as no such study has been conducted in the Mashonaland region of Zimbabwe.

Recommendations

The study recommends that all forms of discrimination towards young women with disabilities should be addressed through awareness campaigns. The awareness campaigns on disability will be instrumental in educating people about disability and its differences. People will be encouraged to accept disability and accommodate it as a unique feature that exists among humans. It is of paramount importance to create platforms that will encourage young women with disabilities to participate in policy and decision making. This will ensure that their needs and challenges are effectively addressed. Communication barriers need to be solved as well through the introduction of the inclusion of persons with disabilities. Disability is not supposed to be limited to the models that view it as an illness like the medical model or charity model which views the persons as objects of pity rather than persons with disabilities should be viewed as humans who are equal with the rest of the population without disabilities. The ubuntu concept should be synchronized with initiatives that will be put in place to address disability so that people grasp the essence of humanness in disability. Education, is every human's right,



therefore the study recommends that young women with disabilities be enrolled in school without any stigma and discrimination. The school environments should be conducive for the learners in that they should have access to information and facilities like any other student. The employers need to be more flexible in their recruitment strategies in that they make room for persons with disabilities in their firms.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the unavailability of employment for young women with disabilities is being overlooked. To enhance their wellbeing special policy frameworks should be designed and put in place in the country. Social workers could play a pivotal role in designing resilient methods for the young women so that they do not find themselves in desperate situations because of unemployment. Finally, the study implies that economically empowering young women with disabilities through provision of formal employment opportunities would reduce their vulnerability and susceptibility to abuse and menstrual hazards.



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