
CHALLENGES FACED BY GIRLS AND WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN THEIR EDUCATION AND CAREERS IN HARARE, ZIMBABWE. DOUBLE TRAGEDY

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ABSTRACT

The paper draws on the challenges faced by girls and women with disabilities in the 21st-century Zimbabwean society, with special reference to areas in and around Harare. It seeks to answer the question: What are the challenges faced by girls and women with disabilities in the community, family and education? How does this affect their future lives? Using a purposively selected sample of girls and women with disabilities in and around Harare, this qualitative paper uses semi-structured interviews to gather the lived experiences of this group of people. The paper is thus phenomenological in nature. The paper posits that by dint of their gender, challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities become more complex and heightened. Knowing the challenges that girls and women with disabilities face is vital for a more comprehensive and inclusive response to these challenges. The researcher recommends that the government should come up with adequate budgets to assist girls and women with disabilities in supporting full inclusion and employment. Funding for the inclusion of girls and women with disabilities. Renovations and building of infrastructure to be accessible is another recommendation given by the researcher.

KEYWORDS: *Girls and women with disabilities, phenomenological study, double tragedy, inclusivity.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest challenges people with disabilities face is discrimination and segregation. They dream of being the same as others, having the same opportunities and showing their

abilities, but unfortunately, many families and communities are currently neglecting and alienating people with disabilities. Hence, it was acknowledged that girls and women with disabilities have a double tragedy than their male counterparts, that is of being a female and having a disability, which leads to social exclusion and poverty (Rajni 2020). Due to their gender, they become vulnerable in our communities. Evidently, the consequences of their lives are much more devastating because of the struggles and experiences they face in life. The barriers faced by girls and women with disabilities have become even more complex and heightened. More so on the issue of gender, girls and women with disabilities are placed at a great disadvantage. Knowing the challenges that girls and women with disabilities are particularly facing in the Zimbabwean environment, the paper argues that there is a need for a more comprehensive and inclusive response to the challenges.

Background

The research study focused on the challenges faced by girls and women with disabilities in access to education and career issues in Zimbabwe. Education is fundamental to the personal and national development of everyone. It provides a myriad of life opportunities; hence, its development is very important. It underpins the development of a highly skilled and innovative workforce, which is critical for social, cultural, and economic growth. Therefore, girls and women with disabilities should have access to it to have a career in life. As disability and gender are both associated with disadvantage, the disadvantages faced by girls and women with disabilities are compounded. Additional factors such as age and race/ethnicity may put certain subgroups of women and girls with disabilities further at risk. This compounded disadvantage is illustrated by the Not in Education or Employment (NEET) rates for female youth, where girls and women with disabilities tend to have the highest rates of being excluded (Komabu, 2022).

Research Questions

What are the challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities in the community, family and education?

How does this affect their future lives?

What are the strategies to address the challenges faced by girls and women with disabilities?

Literature review

Challenges of women and girls with disabilities in accessing education and career

Education presents unique difficulties for female students with disabilities, not just in terms of acquiring physical access to facilities but also concerning far broader access concerns regarding the modification and accommodations of the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment (Taddei, 2023). These factors serve as the qualifying requirements for examining education's capacity to accept a wide variety of students. This has caused attempts to provide access for people with disabilities to education to get more attention (Konur, 2022). The most crucial elements in determining a student with a disability's success in education were seen to be a positive outlook and self-advocacy abilities (Komabu-Pomeyie, 2020). There are many girls and women with disabilities worldwide. There are some limitations that students with disability experiences and these were divided into various sections, such as accessibility of facilities, lack of finances, inaccessible curriculum, attitudes of people, cultural norms of society, among others.

Many educational institutions do not have adequate facilities and resources to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. This includes physical accessibility, such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, as well as digital accessibility for online learning platforms and materials (Hammad and Singal, 2022).

Economic disparities and financial constraints pose significant barriers to gender equity in education. Families facing poverty often prioritize the education of boys over girls due to limited resources and perceived economic benefits (Wolf et al., 2016). As a result, girls from low-income households are more likely to miss out on educational opportunities, leading to disparities in enrollment and completion rates. Moreover, indirect costs associated with education, such as school fees, uniforms, and transportation expenses, can further exacerbate financial barriers for girls. In some cases, families may resort to withdrawing girls from school to save money; worse will be for girls with disabilities (Baki, 2021).

Cultural norms and societal expectations play a significant role in perpetuating gender disparities in education. In many societies, traditional gender roles dictate that girls are responsible for domestic duties and caregiving, while boys are expected to pursue education and careers outside the home. These entrenched norms often result in girls receiving less support for their education compared to boys, leading to lower enrollment rates, higher dropout rates, and limited access to educational opportunities (Ridgeway, 2022; De Welde and Stepnick, 2023). Furthermore, cultural beliefs and practices, such as early marriage and gender-based violence, can further inhibit girls' access to education, leading to no career as

they become women. In some communities, girls are married at a young age, preventing them from continuing their schooling. Moreover, girls may face discrimination and violence in school environments, making it unsafe for them to pursue their education. Imagine these done to ‘normal’ girls, what more to those with disabilities?

Strategies to address the challenges of girls and women with disabilities in accessing education and career

Addressing the challenges faced by girls and women with disabilities in education requires comprehensive strategies that involve engaging with communities, religious leaders, and policymakers to challenge harmful gender stereotypes and promote their value and inclusive approach. This may involve having an accessible and supportive environment, implementing awareness campaigns, providing education and training on gender equality, giving them support and enacting laws and policies that protect their rights.

Accessibility of the environment is very important to people with disabilities. Ensuring that the infrastructure, classrooms, libraries, and other facilities are fully accessible to individuals with disabilities (Chinyama et al., 2019). This includes providing ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and designated parking spaces. To address inadequate infrastructure and access to resources, investments are needed to improve school facilities, expand access to educational materials, and provide transportation options for students, particularly girls and women with disabilities. Vincent-Lancrin (2018) has rightly opined that students with disabilities require equal opportunities for expressing themselves through education. Besides, Ruijs, Veen, and Peetsma (2010) argued that if amenities and help are provided at schools’ learners with disabilities, including girls and women with disabilities, they will acquire all the necessary skills and education to lead a successful life. The government can initiate the building and renovation of school buildings, provide textbooks and learning materials, and establish transportation programs to ensure that girls and women with disabilities can access education safely and conveniently (Tandrayen-Ragoobur and Gokulsing, 2021).

Curriculum modification is to review and update the curriculum to become more accommodating of different learners’ needs. With the use of a variety of teaching methods, materials, and technologies that cater to various learning styles and abilities. Carson (2020) added that society has to offer equal opportunities for learning in inclusive and enabling environments. This will help girls and women with disability to access the curriculum and be included which leads to their success.

Support for students with disabilities that denies negative attitudes from society, other mates and increases the awareness of disability law can provide better outcomes for girls with disabilities who attend institutes of education (Fleming, 2017). Therefore, it is suggested that workshops and training sessions for learners without disabilities and staff are to be conducted to raise awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities and challenges faced by girls and women with disabilities and to provide guidance on creating an inclusive learning environment. These workshops help build self-esteem in those with disabilities

Support can be in terms of finance, peer, resources, parental and any other. Financial challenges by offering scholarships and grants specifically for girls and women with disabilities are to be addressed, as they may face additional expenses related to their disability. Interventions are needed to support girls and women with disabilities (Psaki et al., 2022) and this may include providing scholarships, stipends, and other forms of financial assistance to cover educational expenses.

Through peer networks or support girls and women with disabilities can make friends and socialize (Herz and Sperling, 2014). It is possible to ease the success and adjustment of learners with disabilities as they receive support. Peer support is available to students in a range of contexts, including social gatherings, tutoring, study groups, and peer mentoring. Girls with disabilities can feel at ease, relaxed, and inspired when they get social support. Academic achievement for girls with disabilities can be facilitated by social supports (Fleming et al., 2017; Lombardi et al., 2016). Additionally, they can learn how to behave properly around their schoolmates, friends, and peers (UNESCO,2023).

Overall, addressing the challenges hindering gender girls and women with disabilities in education and career requires comprehensive and coordinated efforts from governments, policymakers, communities, and individuals. By implementing above mentioned strategies, it can help girls and women with disabilities achieve their full potential and contribute their unique perspectives to the community and country (Hammad and Singal, 2015). Girls and women with disabilities are one of the most marginalized and vilified groups in society today hence addressing the mentioned challenges, we can create more inclusive and equitable educational systems that provide equal opportunities for all genders to thrive and succeed.

Theoretical framework

Theoretical frameworks are empirical theories that are proven or tested by theorists and they guide the research study throughout. The theoretical framework of the study was hinged in the social model of disability theory which states that disability is not caused by the

impairment itself, but by societal barriers, as it focuses on removing barriers and promoting inclusion, not fixing individuals. The theory emphasizes on equality, human rights, and social justice while recognizing individual differences as valued aspects of diversity.

The social model of disability views persons with disabilities as people with inherent human rights. Through the social model, disability is understood as an unequal relationship within a society in which the needs of people with impairments are often given little or no consideration (Carson, 2020). According to the social model of disability, persons with disabilities are people with the potential to live independently, provided they are given equal opportunities as their counterparts without the impairments (United Nations, 2006). As noted by Chataika (2019), it is society that disables persons with impairments through imposing attitudinal (cultural and religious beliefs), environmental (physical and communication), institutional (policy and practice) barriers on them. Therefore, inclusive education is promoted by breaking any barriers that may be imposed on educating children with disabilities in mainstream schools, hence girls with disabilities are included. In a barrier-dismantled environment, students with disabilities are included and can interact with their peers and develop cognitively and behavioural through observing others (Miller, 2011). When students (girls included) with disabilities are included in mainstream schools, they have the opportunity to see their peers' working habits, they model those habits and behaviours to reflect their own. Thus, girls with disabilities can learn not only desired behaviours from their peers through social interaction but also benefit academically in their learning community and lead independent lives through inclusion.

Research methods

A qualitative approach was used in the study as it was grounded on an interpretivist position, that is, it is concerned with how the phenomena of interest are interpreted, understood, experienced, produced or constituted (Mason, 2022). Qualitative research is based on research methods that are flexible and sensitive to social context as interviews, observations and focus group discussions which will be employed in the study. The methods take account of complexity, detail, and contexts and are good at answering the 'How' and 'What' questions in research (Miller & Boulton, 2020), which are the major questions of this research. The researcher interacted with the participants, assessed the school setting, teachers and students, hence she gained a deeper understanding of the participants' challenges.

A case study was used as a research design. It is a way in which a research idea is transformed into a research project or plan that can then be carried out in practice by the

researcher (Cheek, 2018). Challenges faced by girls and women with disabilities were examined. Regarding that, case studies can penetrate situations that are not always susceptible to numerical analysis but using methods that involve direct observation and interaction with the participants (Cheek, 2018), case studies allowed the researcher to use various methods that were necessary in gathering relevant and useful data that made it possible to answer the research questions to the study. The case study used focus group discussions, interviews, observations and document analysis to collect data, focusing on the characteristics of an individual unit to probe deeply and analyse the phenomena with the intention to generalise to the wider population to which it belongs (Flick, 2022), that is, the findings were generated in appropriate contexts.

Using a purposively selected sample of women and girls with disabilities in and around Harare, this qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to gather the lived experiences of this group of people, thus phenomenological in nature.

Findings

Financial challenges

When my father saw that I had a disability, he divorced my mother so she has financial challenges to take me to school. If she gets money, she gives first preference to my siblings who are not disabled. (Girl participant 1)

I attended my primary school at Jairos jiri. When I finished, I could not continue to secondary because my father said he no longer has sufficient money as we are 5 in our family. (Girl participant 5)

As long as I wanted to go to school, my parents said girl child could not continue with school as they can get married at any time. They told me that I am ready for marriage as I am 20 years old. (Girl participant 6)

The fees that were needed at the school was more and my parents could not afford it, hence I was withdrawn from the school. (Girl participant 10)

I am now selling airtime in the streets because my parents said they had no money to send me to school. (Women participant 1)

I came from a poor family that was not financially stable. So they failed to pay school fees for me and I did not go to school I only did primary level and with that level, I could not find a job. (Women participant 2)

With the above sentiments, it clearly shows that girls and women with disabilities are not getting enough education to get jobs and careers. Empowering women and girls with

disabilities through education and economic opportunities is essential to increasing their capacity to seek careers and jobs for them to become independent in life. Education helps them in future as noted by Mark (2018), who said equity in education stands as a fundamental pillar of social progress and human development. This ensures them fair and equal treatment regardless of gender and disability. Gender equity in education is vital for fostering inclusive societies and achieving sustainable development goals (Lwamba et al., 2022). Everyone has the right to education World declaration for Education for All (EFA 1990), postulates that every individual, regardless of gender, has the right to access quality education without discrimination. Educating girls and women leads to economic productivity, improved health outcomes, and lower rates of poverty (Twikirize, 2014). Educating girls can lead to entering the workforce, earn higher incomes, investing in their families which can break poverty for future generations.

Societal challenges

I uses a wheelchair for mobility and was enrolled at a certain school but the school had no ramps and pavement so I could find it difficult to move from point A to B as a result I find it difficult to continue going to school. (Girl participant 7)

My parents told me that you will soon be getting married so why do you want to continue going to school. If you want to pursue with education, it will be the duty of your husband to do so. After being told that I had no other apportion than to stay at home waiting for the man. Now I was just given a baby no marriage. (Women participant 3)

I was told you are not capable of doing that job that you want so stop dreaming about working in a bank. People assume that we are not capable of doing certain activities and jobs so they alienate us. (Women participant 6)

Cultural beliefs have been shown as another challenge for girls and women with disabilities to acquire education and get jobs. This has been seen in the responses above. The participants pointed out that the society believed that due to disability they are not able to perform certain tasks. Given equal opportunities girls and women with disabilities can do some other jobs which can be done by others in the community. By given equal opportunities for learning and participation, it fosters a sense of belonging and mutual respect among girls and women with disabilities. This can challenge traditional beliefs of gender roles and stereotypes in all spheres of life. Cultural norms and societal expectations often dictate traditional roles for boys and girls, limiting their educational opportunities (Dost, 2024). As girls and women are entitled to marriage, household responsibilities, and societal pressures to

prioritize marriage over education and career, leading to high dropout rates and lower enrollment rates in schools.

On another note institutional barriers, such as discrimination, labelling, policies and practices within educational systems, obstruct gender equity in education. Many institutions and buildings are not accessible by people who uses wheelchairs hence lack of safety that will affect girl's ability to attend school (Small, and van der Meulen Rodgers, 2023). It has been noted that girls and women with disabilities are discriminated in schools and careers hence they are not given equal opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The study has examined the challenges faced by girls and women with disabilities in Zimbabwe. It has clearly shown that girls and women with disabilities have financial and societal challenges. These challenges barred them in education and career.

RECOMMENDATIONS

There is need to finance the education of girls with disabilities and sponsor women with disabilities to start their own businesses. Adequate budgets need to be developed by governments to ensure that programs, services and facilities support the full inclusion and enjoyment of human rights by women and girls with disabilities on an equal basis with others. Funding on the inclusion of girls and women with disabilities.

The inclusion of women and girls with disabilities should take into account the diverse needs of all women and girls with disabilities including marginalized groups. On the issue of inadequate and inaccessible infrastructure the government may initiate on the renovation of buildings and build new structures that are accessible. Improvements on all facilities that may help girls and women with disabilities to access education and career opportunities safely and conveniently.

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