

Empowerment Challenges Faced by Women with Disabilities in Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study was carried out to assess challenges faced by women with disabilities. The study is mainly centred on qualitative approach. The study was carried out in Marondera. A total of forty (40) participants was used in the study. It was established that women with disabilities face many empowerment challenges requiring the attention of both the government and the communities in which they live. Some of these challenges are educational, discrimination and limited access to gainful employment. The study made several recommendations including: a course on disability and special needs for teacher training colleges; in-service training programmes for teachers in schools; government commitment to improvement of women with disabilities education; prohibiting discrimination of all spheres of life on the basis of one's disability status should be prohibited; and many other recommendations.

Keywords: empowerment, challenges, disabilities, women, education, girls

1. Introduction

Zimbabwe has always prided itself of high levels of quality education and one of highest literacy rates on the continent. While many gains have been made, both attitudinal and physical barriers still keep women with disabilities from reaping benefits of education reforms. The researcher after having worked for the Division of Schools Psychological Services noted that not many if any programmes on post school preparation for learners with disabilities were in place. Also noted by the researcher was the fact that most girls with disabilities did not study disciplines such as computer, biotechnology, and other science related subjects so as to participate in the boom of industries of 21st century. Female students are not being fully integrated into the local education system, much less into the academic disciplines that are becoming essential for career growth in the 21st century. It is against this background that the writer seeks to find out the empowerment challenges faced by women with disabilities.

Nations have an obligation to educate all their citizens regardless of their sex. This is because education is a basic human right and it has benefits to families, communities and society as a whole. Since independence the government of Zimbabwe and other stakeholders in education development and change have shown concern for the commitment to increasing education and employment for women and girls with disabilities. Women with disabilities are treated badly, are weak and vulnerable and viewed as less important Maxwell et al (2007). In an effort to foster and face challenges of education and to enhance acquisition by all people, the government of Zimbabwe through the Ministry Education, Art, Sport and Culture enacted and revised the Education Act (1997) and the Disabled Persons Act (1992).

2. Orientation and Statement of the Problem

Concern for improving women and girls with disabilities situation has been growing over the last centuries and lately a great upsurge has been seen at global level to design and implement plans to remedy the situation. But in many cases the remedial measures promise to turn out to be even worse than the existing injustice against the marginalised group. The attainment of independence in 1980 led to the introduction of wide range of reforms in the socio-economic, political and educational spheres.

According to Zvobgo (1988) one of the cardinal principles that would guide Zimbabwe in an independent Zimbabwe was the abolition of sex discrimination in the education system and employment. Discrimination is an enduring issue for all people with disabilities. Women and girls with disabilities however are subjected to double discrimination, sexism as well as disability bias. Thompson (1997) content that while there are many ways in which this discrimination manifests itself, one key result is that women with disabilities are significantly poorer than men with disabilities. Women with disabilities are discriminated against in employment except for lowly paying menial jobs. They have no control over their finances and have very limited social contact. School attendance is lower among people with disabilities especially girls and in general they receive lower levels of education, which then translate into low literacy rates and therefore they cannot compete on the job market. A variety of factors contribute to this situation. Women with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed; if employed they receive considerably lower wages than men with disabilities.

While acknowledging the strides that the country has taken in making education a right for every Zimbabwean many studies in Zimbabwe show that there is great disparity in access to education and employment as forms of empowerment for women and girls. The intellectuals and human rights activists have lately been expressing a profound urge in the manner women and girls with disabilities are treated in terms of empowerment.

Employment is not the only culprit. The educational system must also be held accountable. Education plays a pivotal role in contributing to the lack of equal opportunity for women and girls with disabilities. Snyder (1999) posits that girls with disabilities are a large and diverse group whose educational needs have gone largely unnoticed by those committed to promoting either gender equity or disability equity. Widespread cultural biases based on both gender and or on disability greatly limit the educational opportunities of such girls. According to UNESCO, the world blind union estimate the literacy rate for the disabled women and girls at 1% compared with the estimate of about 3% for people with disabilities as a whole (Groce, 1997). In terms of school enrolment UNESCO suggest that more than 90% of children with disabilities in developing countries do not attend school. While education can influence women and girls with disabilities, opportunities to find formal employment in non traditional sectors, economic policies, legislation and the environment also matter.

Female students with disabilities confront challenges that differ from those faced by their peers, especially as they prepare to leave high school. It has suggested that the combined effects of stereotyping based on gender and disability track women and girls with disabilities into the most traditional female roles. In addition to being channelled into historical female fields by school counsellors, women and girls with disabilities often feel pressure from those same counsellors to pursue a career in disabilities related field such as social work, rehabilitation, or special education.

This study seeks to investigate how issues of empowerment and disability connect in hindering women and girls' access to education, vocational training and employment as forms of empowerment. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- To what extent does empowerment and disability influence women and girls with disability's access to schooling, vocational training and employment?
- How successful are the strategies and policies in place in preparing women and girls with disabilities for employment?
- What changes need to be put in place in order to enhance access to schooling, vocational training and employment by women and girls with disability?

3. Significance of the study

- The study has significance to the government and policy makers in that they will plan strategies on how to facilitate accessibility to education, vocational training and employment by women and girls with disabilities as a form of empowerment.
- The study could be of importance to the division of schools Psychological Services and Special Needs whose current Post school opportunities for learners with disabilities need to be strengthened and extended to school.
- The study could also be argument efforts by organisation for and of people with disabilities to lobby for access to post primary vocational skill programme.

4. The Study Context

4.1 Gender inequality and disability

Discrimination is an enduring issue for all people with disabilities. Women and girls with disabilities however, are subjected to double discrimination; sexism as well as disability bias. Needless to say, girls, girls of colour who are disabled face a third layer of bias in the form of racism. According to Rousso (2003) there are many ways in which discrimination manifests itself; one key result is that women and girls with disabilities are significantly poorer than men with disabilities and women without disabilities. A variety of factors contribute to this. Studies from the West reveal the following patterns on public arena. For ages it was believed that the different characteristics, roles and status accorded to women and men in society are determined by sex, that they are natural and therefore not changeable. Gender is seen closely related to the roles and behaviour assigned to women and men based on their sexual difference. Gender inequality is assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. Gender inequality is therefore a form of inequality, which is distinct from other forms of economic and social inequalities. It dwells not only outside the household but also centrally within it.

Gender inequality has adverse impact on development goals as they reduce economic growth. It hampers the overall well-being because blocking women from participation in social, political and economic activities can adversely affect the whole society. The greatest impediment to one's taking full part in society is not physical flaws or disabilities, but rather the issue of myths, fears and misunderstanding that society attaches to disability. Yoder and Kahn, (1993) indicate that generally women are discriminated against in most societal

issues and disciplines because they are considered inferior. It is then a worse of situation for women with disabilities.

The Government Inter- Censual Demographic Survey (1997) also established that there were a total of 218421 people with disabilities in the country (56% males 44% females). It was also established that 75% of the people with disability were living in the rural areas and 25% in the urban areas. Disabilities in rural areas are seen by close relatives and fellow villagers in more socially valued roles of livestock tending, home keeping and child minding than those in urban centers. This positive visibility mitigates the perceived social role function of individuals with disabilities in rural areas as compared to urban areas who are defined more by their marginalization than their peers. However we cannot ignore the fact that the work assigned is inferior.

Discrimination prevents society from recognizing the rights of the minority in both the domestic and public spheres. Such persons may be discriminated against fundamental freedoms in the political, economic and social field. The basic tenets of human rights principles are non-discrimination and equality of treat.

4.2 Women empowerment and supportive legislation

Zimbabwe has ratified various international and declarations on gender equality- CEDAW (1979), The Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the SADC Gender and Development declaration (1997) and put in place various national legislation instruments aimed at guaranteeing women's legal and constitutional rights. The government has also enshrined various ILO conventions in labour regulations, including those on equal remuneration for work of equal value. In addition there are various affirmative policies in the health and education section that have opened doors for women to participate in national development process. The government has set up various frameworks for mainstreaming gender throughout the society at various levels for example, The National Gender Policy and National Plan of Action for Gender mainstreaming and national machineries for example the Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and community Development, Gender Focal Points and a gender management system.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set out a powerful, agenda for a global partnership to fight poverty, offering a shared vision of a better world by the year 2015. The third goal challenges discrimination against women, and seeks to ensure that girls as well as boys go to school. Indicators linked to this goal also aim to measure progress towards ensuring that more women become literate, have more voice and representation in public policy and the decision making, and have improved job prospects. The issue of gender equality and the empowerment of women, none of the MDGs will be achieved. Getting more girls into school not only impacts directly on their welfare.

Research has shown that women with a few years of primary education have better economic prospects, fewer and healthier children and are more likely in turn to ensure their own children go to school. The benefits to families and society of these gains are enormous and the impacts on the poverty reduction immediate and direct. Empowering and investing in women cannot be done in a piecemeal fashion. Nor can it be limited to instrumental actions aimed at achieving specific goals, valuable though these can be in the immediate term. Sustainable progress requires broader framework for action of the kind.

Despite these efforts to bring awareness at various levels in society, what exists now is a national economic policy environment (both fiscal and monetary) that is still highly gender insensitive. Zimbabwe's fiscal and monetary policies have had a counter effect on gender relations as these policies have worked against adequately guaranteeing that the economic and social rights provided by the law can be actualised and achieved in fulfilment of the various international conventions and declarations and national legislation. The policies have generally assumed a 'gender neutral' and 'gender blind' perspective and have failed to consider the differential impact of the fiscal and monetary policies on women and men in Zimbabwean society.

According to Williams, Sweet man and Pidump (2001) if any empowerment approach is to be effective, it needs to foster the development of the core aspects of empowerment. It therefore requires a methodology that will in and of itself contribute to an increase in self esteem, self confidence, and so on, irrespective of the actual content of the activities. The methodology needs to be based on the attitude of complete respect for the women involved. The methodology must in no way collude with the internalized oppression that women carry.

4.3 Theorising empowerment

Empowerment is for poor and marginalised people like women with disabilities if they are to change their situation. Price (2006) argues that empowerment also moves beyond personal change and growth to increasing participation in the broader field of politics and needs identification. The issue of who identifies women's needs is also important, since in so many approaches to development interventions that understand human developments as concerned with justice, peace and equality as well as economic growth. It has been developed by southern women, and critiques the current model of global development from a race, as gender perspective. It emphasizes women's potential for self-reliance, and the importance of grassroots mobilization to effect changing power relations in favour of women and girls. Because empowerment is by definition self generated, the role of development organisation is to provide women with support to enable them to transform their lives.

A range of processes enable women to bring about changes in their personal relations that may have an impact on men's violence towards them within the home. The first stage is development of "power within", the

development of the self esteem and self worth. Power from within has been described by Williams (1995) as the spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in each of us and makes us truly human. It is the basis of self-acceptance and self respect that extends, in turn, to respect for and acceptance of others as equals. In concurrence Rowland (1998) outlined that the development of power within can enable an individual to maintain a point of view, or continue an activity, in the face of overwhelming opposition or take a serious risk. The concept of “power within” offers an explanation for women’s bravery and tenacity in holding on to the gains in the face of increasing threats of violence by men who fear a threat to their position of dominance.

A second power that women may develop is the power to bring about changes in their lives to meet their own interests and needs. According to Muzumder (1989) development interventions that promote women’s power to participate move effectively in the wider process of socio-political development to wrest from society the right, the dignity and the resources to which they were entitled for their own development, through collective action to increase their voices in the development decisions that affect their lives. This may involve developing vocational skills, undergoing leadership training and to assert their rights.

4.4 Empowerment as a gender issue

In discussing empowerment and in examining case studies, it has become clear that the empowerment of women is a gender issue and not simply a women’s issue, it is also a class issue and race issue, according to the various and changing identities people have. It is about transforming social relations. If empowerment of women is a gender issue, there is need to tackle the corresponding task with men that will contribute to reducing the obstacle of male chauvinism and open the possibilities of change in gender relations. Women who become empowered act to meet their own needs and can also contribute to the development of the wider society. Empowered women, especially within an organisation where collective empowerment can become possible, are more likely to act to exert political pressure for change in favour of essential development needs.

4.5 Empowerment and the change agent

The role of the change agent in programmes intended to promote empowerment with women and girls with disabilities is important. With respect to empowerment, there are a number of attitudes and skills which are essential for change agents to have if women are to develop self confidence, self esteem and a sense of themselves as able to act in a wider sphere. These attitudes include complete respect for each individual and for the group, humility and an eagerness for learning to be mutual, flexibility to the empowerment process. All human beings are the product of their particular life history and culture; it is vital for the change to have self awareness in terms of their own biases, priorities and area of similarity and differences in relation to the women they are working with.

5. Research Methodology

This study adopts the qualitative research methodology as its main approach of generating data. As a process, the approach enabled the researcher to understand a social or human problem basing on holistic picture, formed with words, reports details of researched and conducted in a natural setting. The researcher saw qualitative research as ideal in this research as it allowed continuous reflection on the research and there was more room for on- going alteration as the research proceeded. The study was carried out in Nyameni in Marondera. The total number of households in this suburb is about 400 and there are two government primary schools that mainly draw their clientele from this suburb. Forty participants were selected as sample. Purposive sampling is used in this study and it targets a particular group of people specifically excludes certain types of people because their presence might confuse research findings. The selected participants possessed the knowledge and appropriate skills required for this particular area of study. In this study, the researcher used purposive sampling technique to select the case/site of study and the informants/participants to be interviewed.

6. Study Findings

6.1 Overview

On problems experienced in a bid to get education the respondents cited that female students with disabilities confront challenges that differ from those faced by their peers, especially as they prepare to leave high school. The majority of respondents cited that disability is not an acceptable condition because often, there are suppositions of evil casing it. Some communities believe that disability is as a result of prostitution, divine punishment and witchcraft. Because disability is not a socially acceptable condition, it results in myths and all sorts of bias.

On what can be done to solve problems indicated the majority called for increased awareness and advocacy on issues and also called on society to embrace disability through systematic education against cultural beliefs, myths and practices that discriminate against women with disabilities. One respondent representing the views of many others said: “even among the enlightened, disability is a challenge.”

On what can be done to solve the identified problems, respondents cite that there is need to have policies that address support for women with disabilities. Such policies would ensure:

- access to appropriate goods and services such as access to schools, disability devices and gadgets;
- appropriate information and public education that meets the needs of citizens; and
- personal empowerment programmes that affirm women living with disabilities and give information and skills for dealing with empowerment issues.

A number of respondents felt that the disability movement is not doing enough advocacy work on empowerment of women with disabilities. This silence of movement is risk factor, which allows the discrimination of women with disabilities to go unchallenged. The negative effect of this silence is further increased by the operating philosophy of the movement that “there is nothing for us without us”. Some respondents noted that while there is involvement of and leadership of the disability Movement is important in issues of disability, the movement needs other voices to speak with them for effective advocacy and public education initiatives. The current poor public advocacy initiatives on empowerment of women with disabilities are a risk factor for women with disabilities.

Within the realm of public institutions, there is death of understanding of behaviour that women with disabilities exhibit as a result of discrimination. This lack of knowledge is a risk factor for women seeking access in public institutions have failed to get adequate assistance. Organisations for people with disabilities noted that often sometimes women with mental retardation may not have the capacity to reject the unwanted overtures of no disabled people in return for a service.

The negative attitudes of people towards women with disabilities have made it difficult for any one organization to track most cases of discrimination based on disability. Because the opportunity for advancement for women with disabilities is so limited, a dearth of female role models and mentors in positions of authority exists in the workplace, a condition that exacerbates the situation. Respondents cited that women with disabilities rely on the experiences of those who have persevered and attained advanced positions. Women with disabilities in the workplace offer “richness of skills determination, and diversity of ideas. One respondent, who spoke on behalf of the organization, highlighted that negative attitudes coupled with gender bias present a powerful negative influence on the opportunities for women with disabilities. These situations and countless others like them, reveal insensitivity to and lack of awareness of disability issues. For women with disabilities to the skills and confidence they need to participate fully in the workforce, the attitudes they encounter in training and advising situations must be enlightened and supportive.

The Disability Movement noted that they are currently excluded from decision-making that do not have a parliamentary representative for women with disability to championing their cause and ensure their equal access to national resources.

On recommendations to empower women with disabilities, organisations for people with disabilities noted that they needed to strengthen Disabled Persons Organisations through equipping them with skills for empowering women with disabilities. It is also recommended that within the Disability Movement, disability groups come together so that they represent the interest of other people living with disability who may not be able to articulate and represent their own interest. Organisations for people with disabilities should be mobilized and coordinated to play a leading role in ensuring that all women with disabilities rights activities and specific intervention through identified problems are inclusive of the needs of all women with disabilities.

6.2 Educational level profile

The presentation of educational level is meant to reveal the relationship between employment and level of education. Findings established that there is an undeniable link between the level of education and one’s employment opportunities. This correlation is reflected in the views of women with disabilities who participated in the study. Their views are supported by Syden (1999) which revealed that the higher level the person possesses the more likely he/she is to be employed and the higher level the salary he/she is likely to receive. Significantly, in a survey carried out in Healthy and Lifestyles Survey (HALS), conducted in (1991) reveal that fewer women with disabilities possess university degrees than do men with disabilities, or men without and women without disabilities. While the number of people with and without disabilities receiving degrees has increased since independence, women with disabilities continue to have lower levels of education than their non-disabled counterparts. This trend has become particularly significant in recent years, as the skills needed in an increasingly technological world have resulted in fewer jobs for people with lower levels of education. It has been estimated that half of all new jobs require at least 17 years of education or training. All these figures show, in order for women with disabilities to achieve full and equal participation in Zimbabwe’s labour market, they need to be supported in their attempt to obtain higher level of education.

6.3 Employment barriers

The findings indicated that whether women with disabilities attempt to further their education through post-secondary training or through other pre-employed training programmes, women with disabilities were not made aware of all career options available to them. Another form of barrier that was mentioned by the respondent was the employment traditions, along with assumptions that about ability and gender influence employment counselling and create training situations that are not consumer driven. As a result the presence of women with

disabilities persists in traditional, often low paying fields. The study confirms that the limited scope of career for women with disabilities. The study also revealed that the incidence of discrimination on the basis of disability is underreported than for the general population. The discrimination of women with disabilities, getting to and from work presents a significant employment barrier.

6.4 Relevant programmes to support women with disabilities

The study reveals that there are no programmes that promote work equity, including the advancement through the development and enforcement of policies that focus on employer responsibility. Women with disabilities in the study highlighted that they are not considered for actual support to assist them in empowerment programmes. Some respondents however outlined that there are some activities that include workshops, forums and publications on issues such as developments in human rights legislation, workplace, harassment, employment equity and education equity. The findings also revealed that many programmes already exist for women with disabilities to address their needs as they prepare for employment.

6.5 Goal of education

The study revealed that the goal of education for people with disabilities is the same as for the general population. Respondents suggested that the goal of education for women with disabilities should include career planning as an important element of readiness training. They outlined that many young women with disabilities will have often experienced years of stereotyping regarding behaviour and career development. As part of their readiness training, they should be exposed to non-traditional career exploitation, taken to visit business that promote equity and diversity, and given the opportunity to hear non-traditional career speakers (Khahn 1993). Another finding reveals that disability is a natural part of human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in education and employment. Improving educational results in women with disabilities is an essential of national policy of ensuring equality of opportunities, full participation, independent living and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.

6.6 Current school curriculum and transition programme

The study established that there is need for an appropriate curriculum that prepares young women with disabilities to the world of work. This could be due to the fact that there are no transition programmes in place for people with disabilities. Rowland (1997) posits that female students with disabilities confront challenges that are differs from their peers, especially as they prepare to leave high school. Another call for an appropriate curriculum and transition services could be the negative attitudes of towards proving unequivocal acceptance by society, adequate support systems and access to opportunities in natural, physical, psychological and socio-economic environment where people with and without disabilities, reciprocally value each other.

Other studies are challenging Government and other organizations to look at women with disability as citizens with rights and entitlements instead of continuing to look at them as dependents and in need of charity and special care (Nosek 1996, 2002, 2003, Curry et.al.2002, 2003; Young et.al. 1997; Saxton et.al. 2001; McFarlane et.al. 2001).

6.7 Legislation

As testament to their strength, despite all the barriers, women with disabilities are becoming a political and social force. To that end respondents in the study in direct response to the recommendations of different statutes in place cited that government initiatives provide a framework for addressing the barriers faced by women with disabilities, further steps need to be taken to ensure full participation and equal inclusion of people with disabilities. The respondents in concurrence with the Beijing Platform for Action 1995 proposed therefore that the legislation address:

- the right to work must be provided for in the Constitution and the right should guarantee equality of access to employment between women and men; and
- ratification of ILO convention is key for women with disabilities to address the gender dimensions presented by care work performed by women, thus domestication and ratification of ILO convention 156 which recognise the rights of parents with children in workplace is key.

7. Recommendations

- Teacher training colleges should put in place a course on disability and special needs with major emphasis on transition programmes for people with disabilities. Design and implement gender sensitive curriculum with women, girls community based organisation to address the needs of women with disabilities.
- In-service training programmes for teachers in school system where integration is practised must be undertaken and be reasonably effective, for example staff development courses on how to plan for school opportunities.
- There must be commitment to the fact that education for young women with disabilities must provide for every girl child a guarantee of an education which will bring him/ her to the maximum level of his/her potential and equip him/her by the time he/she leaves the school system as a young adult with

skills requisite to appropriate employment.

- In vocational schools, there must be a delivery of services to women with disabilities, and valid pedagogical procedures must be made available to women with disabilities.
- Disability support services must be supported by empathetic and appropriate administrative arrangements in vocational schools and supplied with adequate aids and equipment. Teaching of leaving skills should be fostered across the curriculum for acceptance.
- Women with disabilities can only be liberated if they are economically independent, which require them to work outside the home. With regard to women with disabilities' right to self employment it was noted that work has an added value to women natural role as a maker and considered it her most sacred and respectful duty. To that end women with disabilities should have the same opportunities as men and access to education should be availed at work places.
- The right to gainful employment that is the public and private sector should be upheld and recognize the principle that women with disabilities must be empowered to exercise their human right to employment in both rural and urban. To lay groundwork for change , it is necessary to look at the existing statutes that have been enacted to ensure equal opportunities irrespective of gender and disability find the gaps and plug them
- Discrimination of all spheres of life on the basis of one's disability status should be prohibited. This includes the elimination of derogatory terms used to refer to persons living with disability

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