Attitudinal, Institutional and Environmental Barriers Confronting People with Impairments in Masvingo Province: Zimbabwe

Nyunyutai Mudzingwa[1] Louyse S Madungwe [2]

1.Great Zimbabwe University, School of Education P.O. Box 1235 Masvingo. Zimbabwe

2. Great Zimbabwe University, School of Education P.O. Box 1235 Masvingo. Zimbabwe

* E-mail of the corresponding author: mudzingwaphyllis@gmail.com

Abstract

Issues relating to impairment have been placed in the mainstream of development discourse at global, regional and national levels. Responding to pressure from international human rights regulations, a number of policies and pieces of legislation have been implemented for the improved understanding of people with impairments. However, people with impairments in Zimbabwe continue to face various attitudinal, institutional and environmental challenges. This study seeks to unveil such challenges which stand as an impediment to their personal and social development. From a qualitative positioning this study used key informant interviews for data collection. The sample was made up of purposively selected thirty participants who are living with impairments. They were all selected from various districts of Masvingo Province. Challenges that people living with impairment face include limited access to resources such as education, land, skills training and general development. They face negative attitudes from people who are not living with impairments and they also encounter barriers in decision making at micro and macro level. This study therefore recommends empowerment of people living with impairments so that they can be strategically positioned in all sectors of development. This will contribute in achieving individual and collective goals for sustainable development.

Key words: attitudes, institutions, environment, impairment, disability.

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1.1 Introduction and background

Most nations have national pieces of legislation on the protection and promotion of the rights of people with impairments which have been drawn from international conventions and agreements on people living with impairments (PWI). However, subtle and blatant discrimination against persons (PWI) prevails in almost all spheres of life. This brings in a number of barriers to their equal participation in society.PWI are the largest minority group in America, (Darlene, 2002). Observations by Harris (2003), brings to the fore the fact that PWI form a substantial minority of any population. National Association For The Care Of The Handicapped (NASCOH, 2012) asserts that, in Zimbabwe, statistics have it that there are over two million people with impairments, making it the largest minority group in Zimbabwe as well.

The terminologies used in this study will be explained for improved clarity. According to the United Nations Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), persons with disabilities(PWD) include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, interactions with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. Disability is any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in a manner, or within the range considered normal for any human being (World Health Organization,1996). To add on to that Clinard (2008) defines disability as a loss of function that accompanies impairment. In Zimbabwe, the Disabled Persons' Act (1992), defines a PWD as someone with a physical, mental or sensory disability including visual, hearing or speech functional disability which gives rise to physical, cultural or social barriers inhibiting him or her from participating at an equal level with other members of society in activities, undertakings or fields of employment that are open to other members of society. The position of this paper is that disability is not synonymous with impairment but the former   is caused by failing to provide for the later.

It is the impairment which comes first and disability comes next. Impairment is the condition of being unable to perform as a consequence of physical or mental unfitness. Those with long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments (UNCRPD, 2006). Impairment is when an individual's limbs or senses do not function well. It refers to the loss of some ability usually caused by some physical reason (Clinard, 2008.)   Disability comes in when a PWI fails to participate effectively due to impairment. This then brings in attitudinal, institutional and

environmental barriers that are situated in the private or public sphere were human beings interact for various purposes. Disability occurs when people with impairments fail to fully and effectively participate in the society due to manmade/artificial barriers (UNCRPD,2006). Impairment is therefore biological, and disability is socially constructed (Kauffman, 1999). This should be understood in the same way sex and gender are defined. Sex is biological whilst gender is socially constructed, (Haralambos and Holborn, 2013). In this study, the term people with impairments will be preferred over the generally used term people with disabilities.

Chimedza (2001) asserts that, impairment has a tremendous impact on the person affected. Impairments invite both negative and positive interpretations from members of the society. The deformity that is brought about by impairment on an individual is a horror to society. Filled with pity, fear and ignorance, members of society intentionally and unintentionally create barriers, bringing in disabling environments for PWI.

It is in line with the socially constructed nature of disability indicated above, limited access to education and economic resources thereby making PWI poorer than their colleagues without impairments. PWI are oppressed, stigmatized and marginalized in almost every country in the world. This is a result of fear, distaste, prejudices and dislike that members of society hold against them. Just because people with impairments are different from their colleagues in appearance, members of society either become afraid of them or just feel uncomfortable in their presence. There are three broad types of barriers that people with impairments encounter during interaction with others in their communities. These are attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers (Harris, 2003).

The attitudinal barrier is visible when members of society have negative evaluations of people with impairments. For example, when a person with impairment is looking for a job. The employee quickly makes an assumption that he or she cannot perform work duties as is expected. If the individual has visual impairment the employee may ask   questions like , *How will you be able to read and write?* or *How will you interact with others at the workplace?*” The employer may then give the response that they do not have skills and expertise to work with people with impairments   (Harris, 2003.) This is subtle discrimination which is situated in an attitude that does not accommodate PWI. The employee does not show how uninterested she/he feels in employing a person with an impairment, rather she/he shows the concern she/he has towards this individual with an impairment.

PWI are regarded as lesser beings worthy rejection. They are seen as objects of charity, and they may be viewed with benevolent neutrality (Coleridge, 2001). PWI are regarded as lesser beings. Shona linguistic descriptors and classification of nouns relating to PWI carry a picture of an abnormal specimen which is lesser when compared to the normal specimen of a human being. These terms belong to noun classes that are comprised of objects that are disliked by people for their character and behaviour. A person living with visual impairment in Shona is called (*bofu*) and the one with hearing impairment is called (*matsi*) and anyone living with an impairment is generally called *(chirema)*. Shona Grammar states that the word   (*bofu*) is in (class 5), (*chirema*) is in class 7 and (*matsi*) is in class 9 but (*munhu*) a person is in class 1. The first three Shona terms appear in nouns classes that refer to human being or objects that have characteristics that make them lesser human. To a larger extent these nouns are derogatory and discriminatory which is a reflection of how the Shona society views PWI.

People with impairments are also seen as objects of charity. This is demonstrated when members of society at times   give alms to PWI before they ask for them. This comes from the assumption that every person with an impairment is in need of alms, which is not always true. In some cases, members of the society treat people with impairments with benevolent neutrality. They give comments like, “*I do not wish to be involved*,” (Coleridge, 2001).Such people   ignore PWI   thereby   propagating negative attitudes which precipitate discriminatory tendencies. While such negative attitudes prevail in most social circles this study acknowledges that there are some members of society who have a positive attitude towards PWI but these are a rare jewel.

Institutions/organisations are mainly characterized by physical/structural shortcomings that bring in a disabling interface for PWI. Examples of organisations include schools, universities health canters, banks and any place where people get social services. Most organisations do not have sign language interpreters for those with hearing impairment, ramps and lifts for people on wheel chairs and rails for people living with visual impairment. This makes the institutional environment unwelcoming to PWI. The religious or charitable model, which has for a long time, considered people with impairments as objects of charity, compelled PWI to be in a state of complacency. Most of the PWI themselves, do not, at times, involve themselves in institutional activities. Their complacency made it easy for institutional barriers to set in. On the other hand very few institutions were willing to rope them into their activities. Members of society were convinced that PWI were irrelevant to development. They ask this question, *What has impairment to do with development*? (Coleridge, 2001). The present discourse argues that impairment has something to do with development.

Every citizen of any country must contribute in the nations efforts for the achievement of national and global developmental goals. It is not impairment which prevents PWI from achieving a reasonable standard of living but attitudes and policies which deny them equal rights and opportunities (Rieser, 1992. Every person has a right to health but impairment can deny individuals of this fundamental right. At one health centre in Masvingo a lady living with hearing impairment almost failed to get attention for cervical cancer screening. Among the health practitioners who were there that day no one could use sign language. She rescued herself by producing a flyer on cervical cancer screening. Details of her other health needs remained unknown.

Environmental barriers come into play when the infrastructure is inaccessible to persons with impairments, especially those with physical challenge. For example, without ramps, wheel-chair users cannot access services from some public offices. Without proper improvisation, wheel-chair users cannot participate in experiments done on high tables. "*The Science tables were about six to nine inches above my head so I could not conduct the experiments on the table*," said Laina Magama in (Chimedza, 2001.) Laina Magama was a lady with physical challenge who became a victim of such environmental discrimination. She had to change from natural Sciences to Social Sciences which she did not like. This affected her academic choices and ultimate career choice. A young man with physical challenge came for a meeting, and was told the meeting would be held in a room upstairs. "*Sorry, it was an oversight*," said one of the officials but they did not change the venue as indications were that it will be impolite to shift some honorable guests who were invited for the meeting. In a similar scenario a university student at a local university had to extend his course by a semester because lecturers did not bother to change the venue just for one student. It was the students representative council that had to work over the issue until the venue was changed the following semester.

Most people with physical challenge cannot travel long distances to school, so they drop out of school. One young woman had a child with physical challenge. This little boy is a wheel-chair user. For some days this little boy did not go to school. When the teacher asked about his whereabouts, his mother answered*, "Everyday I travel ten kilometers to and from the school pushing his wheel-chair. I have decided to stop it, because I gain nothing from that hassle,"* she said. Wheel-chair users find it difficult to use public transport. A young man with physical challenge was at the station intending to go to Harare. The people around rushed to the commuter bus which had just arrived. When he wheeled himself towards the commuter omnibus the driver said, "We *have enough passengers on board, please wait for something else*." When he insisted that he needed to go, he then said, "*How much will you pay for your wheel-chair?*"

A manifestation of attitudinal barriers happened when a lady with visual impairment who is a holder of a Master's Degree in Sociology was denied a lectureship post at a local teachers college in Masvingo. This lady performed very well in the interview but she did not get the job just because she was visually impaired. In the heated argument that followed after the interviews she overhead rhetoric questions thrown to and fro between the interviewees such as "*How is she going to lecture? "How did she attain those qualifications?" After all who on this earth invited her for the interview"*. After the heated argument among themselves the interviewees agreed to give the job to another candidate who was nine years her junior without a Masters' degree. These attitudes are rooted in ignorance about PWI and in cultural perceptions that relegate PWI to the private sphere where the extended family is expected to look after them (Chimedza, 2001).

As if that is not enough a certain lady with visual impairment was invited for an interview. She was given an instruction to wait till she was called. She waited for four hours, only to be told that the interview was over. The receptionist apologized by saying that she did not know that this lady with visual impairment intended to participate in the interview. PWI face challenges in accessing social services. They are exposed to negative prejudices which makes their access to resources and services a surmountable challenge.

The examples given above show that members of society are not comfortable PWI. Clinard (2008) states that, some members of society avoid them because their appearances violate normative guidelines for "acceptable" appearance. They do not know how they can work and associate with someone who is different from them. People with impairments are unique and very different from other members of society, so they meet great resistance from society. When they discuss issues concerning people with impairments, their conversations centre on what the person cannot do rather than on what the person can do, (Clinard, 2008). This is the reason why most of them would ask questions like "*How does she/he read or write?" "How will we associate with him/her?*"

In social gatherings PWI face challenges as well. A certain lady with visual impairment went for a funeral in her neighborhood. She overheard some people around her saying *"Why does she bother to attend funerals?" ""Is she able to cook or do the duties we do at funerals? If not, how relevant is she?"* To them, it is unnecessary for

PWI to attend such functions. In churches PWI are asked to seat in front so that they can quickly be prayed for for their healing. Most people believe that when PWI attend church services they target receiving miracles. Usually, when charismatic churches market their crusades they advertise on radio and television by saying *"Bring the blind, the deaf and the crippled for them to be healed."* People with impairments are treated as recipients rather than participants (Coleridge, 2001.) At times church leaders act as if PWI cannot sing, dance or even preach in the church service, rather they should receive miracles.

One woman took her little boy with physical challenge and albinism to school for enrolment. The school head was perplexed and she said *"Why do you bring   this boy to this school?" "Do you want all twelve lady teachers here to give birth to children like this one?"* The mother was so demotivated she also thought maybe these ladies will be affected and give birth to impaired babies. She left the school and never returned. The views of the teachers were biologically wrong but they denied this child the fundamental right to education. Not even one teacher made a follow up about the boy who had albinism and physical impairment. In another case a man with albinism was denied access to chieftainship. He was the direct successor of his father, but members of the community became a barrier. They said, *"How can a man with such a skin rule over us".*

In the case of sexual harassment females with visual impairment are more vulnerable. This is so because if one has visual impairment it is not possible to pick on the perpetrator, what he was putting on and the color of his clothes and his complexion. These legal expectations stand as a barrier in the case of rape or any other form of sexual harassment. This makes female living with visual impairment more vulnerable to sexual harassment as perpetrators know that   the ladies will not be able to provide enough evidence for incarceration.

Sociologists believe that people with impairments confront various barriers when they attempt to interact with other members of society. People with visible disabilities encounter different social expectations from those with non-apparent disabilities, (Clinard, 2008.) Members of society have both negative and positive expectations towards people with impairments. These emanate from myths, misconceptions and misunderstandings members of society hold against people with impairments. Society cannot fully understand people with impairments because in most cases members of society do not freely interact and associate with people with impairments. They feel uncomfortable in the presence of people with impairments and the result is, they are not free to ask them some questions for them to tap into the vast and unfathomable knowledge that these people have. They make assumptions on what people with impairments can or cannot do.

People with impairments are then regarded as not only physically but also emotionally different, (Clinard, 2008.) It is true that people with impairments are physically different from others   but that they are "emotionally different" leaves room for research. Every human being is unique and peculiar to him or herself. Whether one has an impairment or not, he or she reacts to things differently. Therefore, every human being is emotionally different from another. Everyone should be treated as an individual. Members of society should not stigmatize and marginalize people with impairments.

Clinard, (2008), asserts that, stigmatization is the process by which an individual becomes recognized not as a total individual, but specifically as a person with a particular socially undesirable characteristic. People with impairments are recognized not as total individuals. Just because they are physically different from others, they are treated as lesser human beings than others. Harris, (2003), describes people with impairments as: bitter, twisted and aggressive if they are beginning to question the status-quo; Courageous and inspirational, if they have managed against all odds to overcome the barriers that confront them. These are some of the assumptions; society has towards people with impairments.

1.2 Statement of the problem
While a number of initiatives have been put in place to cater for the rights of PWI and also to concientise communities on issues relating to impairment and disability, PWI   continue to face attitudinal, environmental and societal barriers. The stigma attached to impairment brings in mostly negative attitudes that contribute to limited participation of PWI in decision making in communities. This affects development at micro and macro levels. This study therefore presents attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers that PWI encounter in their lives for awareness raising in communities and for policy intervention where possible.

1.3 Methodology
This study is purely qualitative where the interview was used to collect data. The research site, Masvingo Province was purposively selected as it has a number of schools and training institutions that enroll and/train PWI. The

multiplicity of these institutions in Masvingo province carried the assumption that people without impairments in this district have a better understanding of PWI. Information rich participants(PWI) were purposively drawn from various districts of Masvingo Province as indicated.One participant from Bikita district, two come from Chiredzi urban district, five from Chivi district, three from Gutu central district, sixteen from Masvingo urban district and three from Zaka District. For the purpose of capturing gendered experiences of PWI the sample had 18 male and 12 female participants The total sample had 30 participants

The researchers used the face to face interview in gathering information from the participants. This approach helped the researcher to capture information on attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers each participant encountered in life. The researcher allowed them time to tell their stories. They promised them not to disclose their names to anyone. Participants were assured maximum confidentiality and dignity as human beings and as participants They were encouraged to freely responded to all the questions. The researcher then classified these stories under attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers.

1.4 Findings

The barriers that PWI face are not divorced from each other. In social interactions these factors develop into intertwined and intricate thread that is part and parcel of any community. Attitudinal, institutional and environmental factors reinforce each other in creating a disabling interface for PWI. In the following section an attempt has been made to discuss them separately while taking into consideration the aforementioned observation.

Environmental Barriers

On environmental barriers Mr. Moyo a participant living with visual impairment bemoaned the unfriendly physical environment in Masvingo urban District. He had this to say:

> *This town has a lot of disabling environmental factors. For those on wheelchair some buildings do not have ramps for example at a certain point of sale machines for some banks(names were mentioned).While I can do everything for myself the absence of easy access takes away the dignity and privacy that anyone deserves when dealing with personal issues. The potholes on the roads and the trenches that charcterise most towns today are a challenge to PWI in various ways and with different intensity."*

Two young ladies living with physical impairment and coming from rural districts reiterated Mr Moyo's sentiments and added the following :

> *In rural areas it is worse because the terrain is worsened by furrows caused by ox drawn ploughs and those caused by erosion during the rainy season*

Institutional Barriers

In relation to this a lady who is living with visual impairment highlighted policy issues in organisations Quoting verbatim she said:

> *When I applied to this organisation (name supplied) they openly stated that our current recruitment policy has no provisions for people living with visual impairment.With further probing the human resources officer who was there just summed it up by telling me that it was just not possible for me to get that job.*

Another man, John, living with physical impairment and coming from Gutu central had this to say :

> *Most institutions adopt the chariy model to give us what they think we need . Especially basic needs like food and clothing but these do not change anything in our lives. Infact it does not change our poverty and begging. When these institutions declare these charitable acts it is them who benefit not us.*

Attitudinal barrier

Attitudinal barriers are influence institutional and environmental barriers:

Grace a lady living with visual impairment had this to say

> *'At form four when I was the best overall student in certain subject I overhead one parent saying to another parent," these kids must be crazy how can this blind girl do it better than them maybe the teacher is just favoring her because she is blind"*

Chenai a female young lady living with physical impairment had this to say:

> *'One day when I was travelling home from college, two ladies who were seating behind me in the bus whispered to each other saying ,wasted beauty, what manner of man will marry such. As for me my son can only do that over my dead body"*

One of the participant, Samanyanga had bitter sentiments against politicians in Masvingo province especially those in Chiredzi District

> *'I was hurt and I felt so stripped of my dignity and stature as a man, when my party which I had supported*

for years could not allow me to stand as a party candidate for the position of a councilor in my constituency. I was subjected to a technical knockout but later on realised that it was related to the impairment that I am living with."

On issues of marriage and love relationships girls are the most affected. Nothando a young lady living with albinism had this to say:

'Men are not bold enough to ask me out for a serious cause. For boys living with impairment it is better especially when you have money and a good job. Girls without impairments will fight for such a person .Girls with impairments need God's grace to get married. To add to that there are a number of myths associated with girls living with impairments which can subject you to rape or ritual murder. Parents who believe in those myths have denied their daughters access to education that is why educational levels for females living with impairment are very low when compared to their counterparts without impairments."

1.5 Discussion of Findings

The challenges that PWI face are gendered. This is a pointer to the double discrimination that women living with impairments face in their day to day activities. A number of factors contribute to the gendered nature of these challenges. Culture, social norms and expectations as well as religious prescriptions of femininity contribute to that. Impairment is seen as an element which takes away the sexual, physical and social completeness of women therefore greatly disqualifying them as potential wives or daughters in law. On this aspect is based the double discrimination of females living with impairments.

It was also revealed from the study that attitudinal challenges can lead to limited access to education for PWI especially girls. Parents without an understanding of issues relating to impairment are at times reluctant to sent children to school. Some of those with physical challenge do not go to school because of long distances to be travelled to school. Others do not take up the courses and degrees they wanted because lectures were run upstairs and also that experiments were done on tables which were higher than them. Even when educated people living with visual impairment are at times denied access to employment of choice because members of society have no understanding of how they would ,write or supervise during the implementation of their duties.

 Findings from the study point to the fact that PWI   encounter challenges in participating in decision making especially in religion, politics and in governance of communities PWI are at time denied the right to participate in decision making because some people consider them as unfit.   Still others, were denied the right to vote, let alone being a candidate to be voted for. They are at times dismissed from essential meetings because they are seen as less competent than others. At church, they are excluded from giving offerings as they are considered too poor to make any meaningful contribution.

 People with impairments sometimes face difficulties in accessing social amenities. Public transport, toilets, supermarkets, beerhalls, public transport and banks. At a very conservative level some organisations are implementing recommendations from the UNCRPD. However, some organisational structures are characterized by deep seated disabling perceptions about people with impairment. These manifest as retrogressive organisational approaches and policies which discriminate against PWI.

1.6 Conclusions and recommendations

The results have revealed that, there are various attitudinal, institutional and environmental barriers confronting people with impairment on daily basis. Oliver (2002) asserts that: people with disabilities have increasingly analyzed their segregation, inequality and poverty in terms of discrimination and oppression. Members of society use subtle and blatant discrimination against people with impairments. They either gently or rudely dismiss them from activities. Some of them are denied access to education, employment, property ownership or participation in decision making platforms. There are at times denied the right to vote or to be voted for and also deprived opportunities to participate in religious activities. When Zimbabwe ratified the (UNCRPD 2006) and its protocols on 23 September 2013 the stage was set for improved treatment of PWI in this nation. In line with that the government of Zimbabwe embarked on a number of legal and social measures to improve the experiences of PWI. However, findings from this study resonate with those from previous studies where disability was taken as an indicator or an equal of inability. When this research was carried out   the situation on the experiences of PWI have not changed much. This study reiterates the view that people with impairments must be treated with dignity in relation to the context of their human rights. Opportunity should be availed to them so that they build personal and collective empowerment, possibility and hope for the achievement of sustainable development in Masvingo community and in the nation at large.

On the other hand people with impairments themselves develop intrinsic motivation for active participate in possible fields in development. In the process disabling circumstances in whatever form will be addressed through

the cooperative efforts of PWI and those without impairments. To add on to that people with impairments must not position themselves for charity but should work for their survival. Combating discrimination against people with impairments is a complex issue, but with these recommendations above, we may go a long way in improving the experiences of PWI in our communities. This study recommends the need for further studies on how communities can accelerate the   sustainable integration of PWI in our communities as nations work towards the attainment of sustainable development goals

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