Rethinking Disability in an African setting: the case for Zimbabwe

Dr Chamunogwa Nyoni, Francis Maushe, Mr. Jacob Mugumbate and Etiya Edith Chigondo
Lecturers, Bindura University of Science Education, Social Sciences Department
P.O.BOX 1020, Bindura, Zimbabwe
nyonic2008@gmail.com cnyoni@buse.ac.zw

Abstract

Disabled people have lived on the edge of most economies for a very long time. They have been despised and looked down upon. They have lived “…on the mercy of the general community” (male, 56, Bikita), especially through begging. Such choruses and pronouncements as “…ndinokumbirawo rubatsiro vanhu vaMwari or raramo yangu, chekudya nechekupfeka changu zvinobva parudo rwenyu or ndibatsireiwo vanhu vashe ndirara handisini ndakazvida” (Iam asking for help, I live off your mercy, my food and clothing included, please can you help me, I did not choose to be what Iam, please can you help me) have even grown louder by each day passing.

Respondents note that given this perception they are closely associated with everything ominous and are thought to be behind all the misfortunes bedeviling their society. Says a 33 year old Chivi man, “…when people think of us they think of evil people”.

Keywords: Disability, Handicap, Impairment.

Methodology

Using focus group discussions, key informant interviews and questionnaires this research sought to understand the perceptions attached to disabled people and the adaptation strategies and livelihoods options disabled people in Chivi and Bikita areas of Zimbabwe have employed in light of the dollarization of the economy.

Introduction

Disability is as old as humanity. According to WHO (2006) estimates, there are about 1.3million people that have disabilities in Zimbabwe, which is about 10% of the total population. In common with the fate of people with disabilities the world over, people with disabilities in Zimbabwe suffer from widespread prejudice and violation of their fundamental freedoms and rights. A lot has been said about disabled people in Zimbabwe but there are very few tangible achievements in this sector. The United Nations’ Declaration on Disability and the 1999 the African Decade of Persons with Disabilities was launched following a recommendation by the Organization for African Unity to look critically into issues affecting disabled people the world over.

Why disability studies?

The stigma and discrimination attached to disability stems from the way society views disability. Conceptions of disability vary widely across societies, and are influenced by the unique socio-political and cultural histories of those societies (Mpofu and Harley, 2008). People with disabilities on Zimbabwe are still being viewed based on a medical and welfare framework, (anorwara) identifying people with disabilities as ill, different from their non-disabled peers, and in need of care (vanoda kuchengetwa). As a result of the emphasis on the medical need, there is neglect of the wider political, social and economic
needs of people with disabilities and their families. Zimbabwean society has thus not embraced the notion of disabled people as capable people who can do what ‘normal’ individuals can.

**Measures taken in Zimbabwe**

In keeping in tandem with world demands, Zimbabwe has affirmed Rule 18 of the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities which states that:

"States should recognise the rights of organisations of persons with disabilities to represent persons with disabilities at national, regional and local levels. States should also recognise the advisory role of organisations of persons with disabilities in decision-making on disability matters." *(Rule 18 of the United Nations Standard Rules on the Equalisation of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities).*

Zimbabwe has also gone further and attempted to address the myriad problems faced by people with disabilities by putting in place non-discriminatory legislation in the form of the Disabled Persons Act (1992). In Zimbabwe, the fight for the promotion, regularization and protection of the rights of people with disabilities entails changing people’s attitudes so that they drop the conception that disabled people are incapable and move away from the welfare and medical model of thought which views disability as a personal tragedy which incapacitates the disabled person to participate in the mainstream activities of society as they are deemed ‘ill’.

Zimbabwe has been referred to as "one of the most disability-accessible countries in Africa" (Devlieger, 1998, p. 26) owing to greater availability of disability-friendly public transportation policies, disability legislation, and the vocational training and employment opportunities of persons with disabilities as compared to neighboring countries.

**Definitions**

The World Health Organization defines disability as ‘any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within a range considered normal for a human being’ (WHO, 1996). The 1982 National Disability Survey of Zimbabwe came up with a working definition of disability as ‘a physical or mental condition, which makes it difficult or impossible for the person concerned to adequately fulfill his or her normal role in society’ (Zimbabwe Department of Social Services, 1982, p 8). In 1996 the Disabled Persons Act of Zimbabwe expanded on this to define a disabled person as ‘a person with a physical, mental or sensory disability, including a visual, hearing or speech functional disability, which gives rise to physical, cultural or social barriers inhibiting him 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’ (Zimbabwe Government, 1996, p51). It is important to note that disability is multidimensional and that disability in one dimension does not necessarily imply disability in other categories. In reality, disability is defined and perceived differently according to the culture, context, knowledge base, beliefs, and values of a society. While a disability is understood to be a result of actual biological damage to a particular part of a human body that results in a person having impairment, such impairment contributes to difficulties experienced by that person, and interrupts their functioning as a person. In addition, people with disabilities are often further disabled by factors within their environments. Researchers in social dynamics have described this as the ‘oppressive social milieu’ within which disability occurs. Society’s attitudes towards people with disabilities can further handicap individuals, with reactions ranging from horror, fear, anxiety, distaste, or hostility through to patronizing behaviour. This leads to discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities which is often reinforce by many associated myths and stigmas.

There have been a lot of mix ups between the words impairment and disability. Many times they have been used interchangeably. Strictly speaking, impairment refers to an actual physical loss or reduction of functioning in an individual, e.g. loss of vision, hearing, movement, speech, or ability to learn.
Disability on the other hand, refers to the way in which an individual with impairment is disabled by the society, through barriers to access, discrimination, exclusion etc. So it is accurate to speak of persons with impairments, or disabled people (not people with disabilities). But the term ‘disability’ is often used interchangeably with the less common term ‘impairment’, (Nyoni 2008).

Definition of People Living with Disabilities

The working definition of PWDs used for measurement purposes in this survey borrows from the Zimbabwean Government’s perception of a disabled person that a person is disabled when that person has a physical, mental or sensory disability, including a visual, hearing or speech functional disability, which gives rise to physical, cultural or social barriers inhibiting him 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’ (Zimbabwe Government, 1996 p51).

Rethinking Disability in Zimbabwe

Disability has long standing perceptions in Zimbabwe. Disabled people have been marginalized and rejected earlier in the country. In Zimbabwe, people with disabilities have remained on the economic edge and have largely been a forgotten lot. They have lived “…on the mercy of the general community” (male, 56, Bikita), especially through begging. Such choruses and pronouncements as “…ndinokumbirawo rubatsiro vanhu vaMwari or raramo yangu, chekudya nechekupfeka changu zvinobva parudo rwenyu or ndibatsireiwo vanhu vashe ndirarame handisini ndakazvida” (I am asking for help, I live off your mercy, my food and clothing included, please can you help me, I did not choose to be what I am, please can you help me) have even grown louder by each day passing. The situation has grown to be desperate with the dollarization of the economy. Given that communities are increasingly being asked to take an active role in their affairs. there is need to experiment with new models, such as the “Compassionate Communities” model, of empowering communities to identify problems and provide solutions using their own initiatives and solutions.
Disability Causes in Zimbabwe: Culture unraveled

A number of negative beliefs on the causes of disabilities persist in Zimbabwe. These include such beliefs as associating disability with witchcraft or maternal promiscuity. The Zimbabwean culture still looks at disability as a curse. They attribute disability to some cultural curse. Generally there is limited social acceptance of people with disabilities by their families (particularly their fathers and paternal relatives) and the communities they live in. The birth of a child with a disability is viewed as a taboo that is likely to bring bad omen to the family. Fathers of such children would usually blame the disability on the mother. The Zimbabwe Department of Social Services (1982, p59) provided the following breakdown of the causes of disability (other/not known categories not included in table1 below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAUSE OF DISABILITY</th>
<th>0-4 YEARS %</th>
<th>5-15 YEARS %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DISEASE</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCIDENT</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABNORMAL BIRTH</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MALNUTRITION</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEREDITY</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAR</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Findings
Figure 1: Household Headship among People living with Disabilities

The distribution of household head in the survey (Figure 2 above) revealed that most household (66.7%) are more vulnerable as they are headed by females. Life is always difficulty for these females to look after children who are mentally or physically challenged as they require special attention and financially support to meet their daily needs.

Figure 2: House Hold Size

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>People living in the hhold</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 5 shows information on household size in the two districts under study. The mean household size was 6. The findings also show that female-heads of households keeping disabled children in their homes than did male heads of households. Some girls reported to have been sexually molested, neglected with some physically and emotionally abused under the care of male guardians. In each household size category it has been found that the number of male and unfortunately the females in their large numbers are more vulnerable.

Perceptions about Disabled People in Zimbabwe.
Respondents from Chivi, Zimbabwe noted that, a physically disabled person (generally referred to as a crippled, ‘chirema’) is universally treated as if he or she is a domestic animal such as a cat or a dog. They note that they are considered “…not to have any rights” (male, 42) and as such no one should bother himself or herself over their welfare.
Furthermore, respondents said that disabled people are specifically ostracized and segregated. For instance within some families in Africa, once a plate or cup has been used by a disabled person it becomes ritually unclean beyond redemption so that no other normal human being can use it. Such a utensil is only used to put food for cats or dogs. Furthermore they were not expected to hold any community responsibility office as they were deemed ‘unfit’ for duty. Respondents noted that even in community for a, contributions from disabled people were not “…seriously considered as they were taken as senile” (female, 36).
Respondents also note d that in African traditional context, disabled people are generally associated with everything which is negative and evil. In many parts of Zimbabwe, it is believed by many people that the best (wizard) witch doctors or traditional black magician with the most dangerous traditional medicine must be someone with a form of visible and queer disability. Respondents note that given this perception they are closely associated with everything ominous and are thought to be behind all the misfortunes bedeviling their society. Says a 33 year old Chivi man, “…when people think of us they think of devil people”.
Results also show that such a person would be expected to be someone who has at least one or more of the following features: very ugly, black in complexion, with less than five toes, always dirty, moving with an aid of a dirty decorated walking stick, illiterate, deformed eyes, unable to speak, stand or sit properly.
Respondents further noted that “…In our daily lives, we continuously battle exclusion and restriction to full participation in society, facing discrimination, abuse, and poverty. We are always reminded that we are not full human beings and as such we cannot share and partake the same with able bodied people” (male, 56).
Respondents were further asked on the problems they were facing. Table 1 below shows the responses on the above question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebuked</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harassed</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

People living with disabilities (PWDs) face a lot of challenges in their everyday lives. In Table 1, 47.6% of the respondents said they faced challenges on being accepted in the society, 28.6% said they are
rebuked by other community members, 14.3% mentioned harassment and 9.5% did not mention any social problems.

What is the basis of your discrimination?
Respondents were asked on what basis the people in Zimbabwe discriminated them. 84% of the respondents noted that there are myths that surround disability in traditional settings like Zimbabwe. Such myths about disabled people they noted have not been easy to remove from people’s minds and were particularly rooted in such religions as the African Traditional Religion (ATR). Without any justification the traditional myths view disabled people are the natural hosts of bad spirits, 'the legions of nowadays' (male, 46 Chivi). As such bad luck or incurable diseases must be deposited to the disabled via different forms of often strange rituals. One of the common rituals involves having extra ordinary sex with a disabled woman. Misa (2008) concurs and notes that such myths about disabled people have not been easy to remove from people’s minds particularly from followers of African Traditional Religion (ATR).

Livelihoods Options for People Living with Disabilities
Community Gardens

The establishment of homestead gardens for people living with disabilities has brought a lot of relief. Compared to prior attempts at gardening, the distribution of agricultural inputs to people living with disabilities has resulted in substantial increased harvests. For example in Bikita, homestead garden owners noted that on average yields from their gardens increased almost two fold with seed pack support from Jairos Jiri to such an extent that the market was now their major worry. Interviews with beneficiaries established that households with homestead gardens and rabbits were having a balanced diet as they could afford to trade off their produce for items that they did not have. The majority of respondents regarded the benefits of homestead gardens and rabbit keeping as “…reason why they are smiling today” (Chivi participants). Gardens established at households yielded and supported people with a diversity of nutritional vegetables. Jairos Jiri also reached over 500 households with small livestock through direct and ‘pass on’ distributions. Beneficiaries reported that owning small livestock had enhanced their status and provided a source of income, meat and manure. As summed up by one beneficiary in Chivi, before this project, “zvipfeko zvaingova zvekungoti chero, madhende zvawo nechikafu chaingova chero, asi iko zvino zvakachinja” (female, 56).

Economically the People Living with Disabilities have been given a shot in the arm and report today of access to basic needs. “Pagarden tinowana chikafu, nekuwana mari kupfurikidza nezvekutengesa zvemubindu. Tava vanhuwo hatichatarisirwi pasi, nyangwe vanwe munharuanda ino votondikumbirawo. Jairos Jiri yakaita zvidaro” (from the garden, we get food and money through selling our produce. We are now dignified individuals even the able bodied ask from us) (female, 49, Chikuku, Bikita). Dignity was restored through the food security and advocacy programme which helped in the de-stigmatisation of People living with Disability. Food security was improved as was the asset base at household level with beneficiaries reporting acquisitions of essential assets such as water pump, bicycle, cell phones and small livestock such as goats and poultry. The participatory ethos of the programme enhanced community participation sowed in communities the need to care for their own.

Table 2: How have the livelihoods Options improved your way of Living?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bought blankets, clothes, meat for nutrition and vegetables</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clothing, chickens and general upkeep</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>food security, school fees payment buying clothes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>free from financial burden on and rabbits assists on nutrition</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generation of income from rabbits and manure for market gardening</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improved nutrition, income and purchased cloths</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improved source of income through sales</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improvement on nutrition and mental capacity and children do core activities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JJ provide a wheel chair and paid school fees</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
knowledge to assist development and can now take children for outings  & 2  & 4.8  
maintenance of health status due to balanced diet & 4  & 14.6  
managed to get chicken by exchanging with rabbits & 2  & 4.8  
no improvement at the moment & 6  & 14.2  
nutrition education, clothing and groceries & 2  & 4.8  
**Total** & **42** & **100**

Respondents noted that they have managed to score some significant improvements in their lives as a result of their livelihoods. Some mentioned that their health status has improved significantly, they now have source income through selling of vegetables from their gardens, rabbits, children were going to school, have balanced diet. Some have even managed to buy themselves some clothes.

**The Touching and Success Stories from Disabled Persons in Zimbabwe**

**Karungano kourema hwangu (The story of my disability): E Matongo**
I was just as normal as any other human being working as a driver and I just became disabled unaware and I accepted it. My left leg was broken first and then the right leg became broken too and I lived like that since I was discharged from the hospital. I depended on others for help since I couldn’t do anything by myself and it became difficult for my family because they even escorted me to the toilet which was a very difficult task. Fortunately the Jairos Jiri Association in conjunction with CARE International came to my rescue. I couldn’t believe it when I was offered a wheelchair due to the excitement I had and also considering the years that I had spent without doing things on my own. I didn’t even move around my yard but this day I began to move around after a long time. I am so very thankful to the Jairos Jiri Association and CARE International. They also made ways compatible for the movement of my wheelchair to every door of every house and also adjusted the toilet seats with the help of committee members. They also taught us some projects to sustain ourselves such as the keeping of rabbits.

I am so thankful to the organizations I mentioned that I am now living a better life and also to move with friends and relatives even going to the funeral with others.

CASE 2: My drive towards Irrigated farming

Insert is the man called Shangwa and his wife. According to his touching story, Shangwa grew a number of crops and vegetables with the help from Jairos Jiri that saw him get $47.00 first and have seen him make savings from the venture resulting in him acquiring the coveted water pump to realize his cherished dream of producing crops under irrigation. As Shangwa notes, “Zvamunoona imbeu yakadyarwa mandiri semunhu wakaremara neveJairos Jiri ne CARE kuti ndikwanisa kuzviitira. Pasina Jairos Jiri ne CARE hapana ramangwana rangu randanga ndakatarisira. Imba yamunoona iyi ndakapendesa nekurima mugarden rangu. Kuremara hakusi kufa”.(This dream is the result of the seed that Jairos Jiri and CARE International sow in me that as someone physically challenged, I can still take care of myself. Without these, there is no dream to talk about, I heartily thank them for making me what I am today. The house that you see painted was painted from the garden proceeds. Disability is not death”.

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**Changing Mindset about Disability**

Respondents noted that some communities in Zimbabwe have started embracing the disabled people. They claim this is revealed by the construction of user friendly social amenities. Respondents also noted that unlike in times before where disabled individuals were kept away from the larger community as they were deemed inhuman, progressive Zimbabweans have noted the importance of education to the disabled as well. The success story at one of the Primary schools where a ramp has been constructed to ensure that the classroom is user friendly to children with disabilities on wheel chairs.
This ramp is one of the many that have been established at learning centers across Bikita and Chivi as a measure to make education available to people living with disabilities in a bid improve the welfare of children living with disabilities.

Insert one of the researchers, Dr Nyoni talks to children living with disabilities in a classroom at Zifunzi Primary School in Bikita. From the picture, one can see the user friendly furniture procured by Jairos Jiri Association for the classroom.
Hopes and the Future Restored

Overleaf insert is the story of an 11 year old girl who under normal circumstances should have been doing grade six or five. She dreams big, she has great hopes. She would love one day to be a nurse. Her hopes were dashed when her father left for South Africa and never returned. Her mother left her and her sibling for another man. They were left under the care of her aged grand mother. Because her sibling is physically challenged and her grand mother is very much aged, she had to pull out of school to take care of the sibling. “Ambuya vanga vasingakwanisi kumusimudza, kwamakore manomwe hwaiva upenyu hwangu kusvika Jairos Jiri yatipa wheel chair uye ndaenda kuchikoro. Ndinotenda Jairos Jiri chose. (Grand mother could not lift him, so I pulled out of school and for seven years, that was my responsibility, until Jairos Jiri gave him a wheel chair and took me to school.).
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