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# Girls with Disabilities in Zimbabwe's Inclusive Rural Schools: Challenges and Possibilities

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to understand the social and academic experiences of girls with disabilities (GWD) in Zimbabwe's inclusive secondary rural schools. Guided by the concepts of the critical feminist disability theory, data were collected through in-depth interviews with five purposefully selected girls with physical and sensory disabilities and five special-needs teachers. The findings reveal that, despite the presence of supportive attitudes and resource centres, these GWD's basic right to quality, inclusive education is negated in rural schools. The research participants narrated their struggles with barriers created by negative attitudes, resource constraints and inaccessible environments. The intersection of gender, disability and rurality contour the experiences of GWD. In particular, resilient patriarchal, religious and societal norms prefigure GWD as abject beings, unworthy of investment by some parents, teachers and state officials. Thus, the notion of inclusive education as adopted in Zimbabwean official policies does not appear to be supported by the implementation or awareness raising of teachers and school leaders in the Mberengwa district of Zimbabwe's Midlands Province.

**Keywords:** girls with disabilities; inclusive schools; Zimbabwean 2013 Constitution and disability rights; critical feminist disability theory

## Introduction and Background

The concept of inclusive education entails a flexible education system that considers the diverse characteristics of learners to create an autonomous, participatory society. Gabel and Peters (2004) note that mainstreaming the needs of all learners with disabilities remains the most effective means of combating prejudice and discrimination against them, while creating an enabling learning environment. Chataika (2010) and



Turkkahraman (2012) conclude that access to quality inclusive education for children with disabilities (CWD) is the key to justice and to unlock opportunities for all learners.

CWD's access to education is emphasised in various instruments that detail human rights, including Article 24 of the United Nations' (n.d.) *Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)*, the United Nations Human Rights Commission's (1990) *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* – in particular Articles 28 and 29, Article 11 of the *African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of the Child* (UNICEF n.d.), and Section 81 of the 2013 *Constitution of Zimbabwe* (Parliament of Zimbabwe 2013). All these instruments note the importance of inclusive education as both a means and an end in terms of equal rights for CWD. Indeed, CWD's access to inclusive education can largely be regarded as a precondition for personhood, employment prospects, empowerment, and better lives. Mandipa (2014, 75) aptly remarks, “without the requisite knowledge and skills, it is very difficult if not impossible for the children to secure any form of employment when they grow up. In the end, a vicious cycle of poverty and disability is created.”

Despite the acknowledged utility of inclusive education, CWD, especially girls with disabilities (GWD), find it difficult to access it in most parts of the global South. According to Chiparushe, Mapako, and Makarau (2011), an estimated 98 per cent of CWD in the global South have no access to formal schools owing to resource constraints. The Embassy of the United States (2011) reports that 75 per cent of Zimbabwean CWD had no access to education in 2014. The inability of Zimbabwean CWD to access formal education is partly due to ever-increasing school fees in both inclusive and specialist schools. Inaccessibility and discrimination are further obstacles (Chataika 2010). Moreover, in rural areas, where the so-called “nearest schools” are 5 to 10 kilometres away, the challenge of physical access is further exacerbated (Chiparushe, Mapako, and Makarau 2011). Without walking aids and transport, many learners with physical disabilities stop attending school. In addition, most schools in Zimbabwe lack disability-friendly infrastructure and teaching aids (Mafa 2012).

The few CWD in Zimbabwe who are able to find their way into schools, grapple with a myriad of challenges that affect their success and retention (Mafa 2012; Moyo and Manyatera 2014). The challenges faced by CWD in education are more pronounced in rural areas and for girls (World Health Organization and World Bank 2011). GWD face discrimination and abuse in schools and institutions of care (Mafa 2012). Studies show that CWD, including GWD, have a higher risk of experiencing violence as they are heavily dependent on carers and family members (Guyo 2009; Jowanisi 2010). Groce and Trasi (2004) note that violence against GWD can be exacerbated by myths, such as the alarming misconception that having sex with a CWD can cure HIV/AIDS.

Mafa (2012), Jonas (2014), Moyo and Manyatera (2014), NASCOH (2011), and SINTEF (2003) studied CWD in Africa, but these studies did not uncover gendered experiences in inclusive rural schools. Moyo and Manyatera (2014) revealed the plight

of CWD in accessing primary education in rural Zimbabwe, but neglected a specific gendered focus and rural areas. Without studies documenting the gendered experiences of this group in inclusive schools, or evidence that challenges the commitment of actors towards implementing inclusive education (Beratan 2008), the voices and plights of GWD remain unheard and unknown, making it difficult for their rights to be protected and promoted. This study attempted to fill this gap.

## **Concepts and Theory**

There are various models of disability, each of which has a different take on the definition and the factors that contribute to disability and related policy. The different models show changes in the ways that ability and disability are constructed and captured in policy responses. Legislation in Zimbabwe sets inclusivity of people with disabilities as its goal, thus embracing liberal, biopsychosocial, and rights-based notions, yet the implementation of equitable practices and outcomes is still lacking. The reason for briefly outlining the different models below is to demonstrate the suitability of the critical feminist disability (CFD) theory as a lens for this study. The CFD theory, by questioning hegemonic ideas, takes stock of diverse disability models to come up with a nuanced understanding of disability.

The religious-moral model, for example, regards disability as divine punishment or as a moral test of perseverance (Henderson and Bryan 2011). The biomedical model of disability sees impairments as individual health problems that require prevention, cure, treatment, and therapy by medical experts (Goodley 2011). Despite its wide use in the global South, this model's view of disability is narrow as it sees it as an unwanted condition and therefore deficit-based. The charity model sees people with disabilities as pitiable victims who should be saved and humanely treated by those labelled as not living with disabilities (Henderson and Bryan 2011).

The social model and a close companion, the human rights model of disability, look at social constructions of (dis)ability and champion the agency of people with disabilities and their right to flourish, enjoy inclusion, dignity, and social justice (Degener 2016; Owens 2015). The identity model regards disability as a marker of a minority status as a basis for activism (Forber-Pratt and Zape 2017). The cultural model foregrounds the socio-cultural context that underpins the particular experience, construction of, and practices pertaining to, disability, whereas the interactional-relational model, also sometimes referred to as the Nordic relational model, focuses on the relative experience of disability in terms of environments and contexts (Jackson 2018). The postcolonial model of disability links colonialism and disability to historically constructed power relations, globalisation, and transnationalism that produce forms of disease, disability, and dispossession based on sexism, racism, and disablism (Sherry 2008). The World Health Organization and World Bank (2011) use the biopsychosocial model of disability

to marry notions of physiological limitations with those pertaining to socio-political participation and socio-cultural practices.

While the social, the biopsychosocial, and the interactional-relational models of disability seek to consider issues beyond impairment, they tend to neglect the personal experience of the ability-disability experience continuum and downplay the way in which oppressive practices relate to institutionalised ableism (Beratan 2008). Overall, these models are criticised for narrowing the definition of disability to individual biological conditions, while ignoring the wider disabling conditions in society.

The CFD theory questions a false distinction between various models. Instead, it argues that disability is a complex, embodied, and lived experience and this requires the acknowledgement of medical, psychological, economic, moral, political, identity, cultural, human rights, physical-environmental, and social assistance needs (Kafer 2013; Spade 2003). The CFD theory, as a maturation of the disability discourse, favours an intersectional approach that allows for a multiplicity of models tested through research that is based on situated experiences. The study does not purport to test any of the models of disability, but to argue from the standpoint of the CFD theory that the lived experiences of GWD in rural Zimbabwe matter.

The tenets of the CFD theory that shaped this study pertain specifically to, firstly, its take on normative notions, and, secondly, to communicative practices and actions. In terms of the normativity, the CFD theory foregrounds the agency of people with disabilities in terms of empowerment and social change (Garland-Thomson 2002). This tenet includes an interrogation of asymmetrical dependency where people with disabilities are made dependent on the state, or welfare organisations, or benevolent carers. In terms of communicative practices and actions, the CFD theory looks at representations that structure reality so that people are differentially disabled, enabled, or excluded or included in specific contexts (Parekh 2008). Both these tenets regard the ability-disability continuum as an intersubjective construction (Schalk 2017). In addition, the feminist ethic of care is furthered through the CFD theory's understanding of interlocking systems of oppression on the one hand and the agency of people with disabilities as solution producers on the other (Tremain 2015). Illustrative of the latter point, Sevenhuijsen (1998, 28) points out that care as part of the human condition implies that all people are vulnerable and can occupy a position on the ability-disability continuum at any point in their lives. These central tenets of the CFD theory make it an appropriate way to frame the study on the experiences of GWD in inclusive rural schools beyond gender or the impaired body in rural Zimbabwean schools.

Indeed, many power relationships including patriarchy come into play to influence the experience of rural GWD in inclusive secondary schools. Patriarchal societies in the global South perceive the girl child as a second-class citizen destined for wifely duties. This is compounded for GWD who are regarded as having poor marriage prospects. CFD scholars note the intersection of disability, gender, socially constructed power

hierarchies, and rural residence as shaping the experiences, challenges, and possibilities of GWD (Garland-Thomson 2004; Grech 2009; Meekosha 2011). Moreover, the CFD theory is critical of the imposition of progressive disability policies on countries in the global South without considering local ideas, infrastructure, and realities (Sherry 2008).

## **Methods**

Inspired by the CFD theory, this qualitative study directly engaged GWD at secondary rural schools and other stakeholders in conversations meant to gain deep, authentic, and nuanced accounts of their lived experiences. This article stems from a larger study, comprising semi-structured interviews with five GWD at secondary schools, twenty-five adult women with disabilities, five special-needs secondary school teachers, and fifteen state and non-state actors in the field of disability rights. In this article, results from the interviews with five female learners and five special-needs teachers purposively selected from three rural secondary schools in the Mberengwa district of Zimbabwe's Midlands province are discussed.

The purposeful selection of the GWD and the teachers was done in consultation with the sampled schools, teachers, and school principals. The fieldwork was carried out in 2017 by the lead author. The five GWD ranged in age from 18 to 20 years. This age selection, as well as the exclusion of GWD with mental or intellectual disabilities was deliberated for the purposes of informed consent (this is further discussed in the section on ethical considerations below). Two of the research participants had physical disabilities and the other three were visually impaired. The researchers use disability and impairment as equivalents, although some disability theorists, especially those who subscribe to the social model, would differentiate between physiological impairment and socio-politically constructed disability. In this research project, such a false dichotomy was actively resisted.

Individual, in-depth interviews with these participants were conducted at the resource centres located at three rural secondary schools. These locations were familiar to the participants and allowed for a safe, relaxed, and secure environment for the discussions. The interview schedules (one for learners and one for the teachers) were developed in English, and pretested and approved by various committees. The final versions were translated into the participants' native Shona language. All of the interviews were conducted in Shona and audio tape-recorded with the consent of the participants. Each interview typically lasted between 40 minutes to an hour.

Because the interviews took place at the research participants' schools, it was possible to augment interview data with observations of the physical condition of the facilities such as classrooms, dining halls, dormitories, schoolyards, resource centres, and bathrooms.

The transcribed interviews and research notes were collated and analysed in Shona as textual data. Once all notes were available, a thematic analysis was undertaken. This deductive process was mostly theory-driven to code pieces of text that were indicative of (1) normative notions such as attitudes, and (2) communicative practices such as the accessibility of structures, financial support, and learning material. Themes were repeated topics, representations of thoughts and actions, similarities and differences. The researchers set up a matrix of themes, coded the text, and translated the coded text for each theme into English. For the purposes of the article, only the English translations are reported.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Owing to the vulnerability of GWD, the informed permission and ethical clearance were sought from national, provincial, and district authorities in Zimbabwe and with the institutional bases of the researchers well in advance. In addition to this, the informed consent was based on the principles of voluntarism, competence, full disclosure, and comprehension (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2000).

The two GWD participants, who were able to do so, were asked to read and sign the informed consent forms before the interviews started. For the three visually impaired GWD, the informed consent form was read out and they replied their consent verbally for audio-recording purposes. In addition, all three were able to add their thumbprints to the consent forms in the presence of a trusted friend, relative, or teacher. As all five special-needs teachers were sighted and able to confirm consent, written consent forms could be used for this group.

The researcher carefully explained the purpose of the study to the participants, and the type of information sought. In particular, the participants were informed that the study was undertaken purely for academic purposes. Considerable care was taken to ensure that the research participants did not expect that their immediate material needs (those of the GWD, their special-needs teachers, or their schools) could be fulfilled owing to their participation.

The participants were informed that their identities would remain confidential. Pseudonyms were assigned to the respondents in the analysis and reporting of the data.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The study excluded children with impaired hearing or those who are unable to speak, because the researchers are not skilled in sign language. The various proposal and ethical clearance committees in South Africa and Zimbabwe advised against the inclusion of GWD who have mental impairments in the study, precluding them from granting informed consent for participation in the research. Hence, the results of the

study cannot not be confidently generalised to represent the experiences of all rural GWD in the Mberengwa district, let alone in the remainder of Zimbabwe.

## **Presentation of Findings**

The four key themes that emerged from the data are attitudes, accessibility of structures, the availability of teaching and learning materials, and access to financial support. The themes span normative notions, communicative practices, and actions that regulated the lives of GWD as scholars at inclusive rural schools.

### **Theme One: Attitudinal Furtherance and Impediments**

The interviews with GWD revealed that learners, teachers, and guardians who do not have disabilities displayed both positive and negative attitudes to them. The participants mentioned that some teachers, parents, or relatives seem to understand that disability is not inability. Such positive attitudes underlie their attempts to ensure equal access to education, for example:

Some people believe in me, especially one of my uncles, and my special-needs teacher. When other family members discourage me from pursuing my education, my uncle and this teacher remain supportive, and are always encouraging me to work extra hard and to outclass abled-bodied learners. (Chido, GWD)

Some teachers at this school understand my situation as a visually impaired learner and try by all means to embrace me ... and they keep me engaged throughout their lessons. They do this by continuously checking if I'm on track. (Chichisai, GWD)

My Divinity subject teacher often creates some time for me to go and consult on difficult topics at his office. He and my special-needs teacher motivate me and make me feel strong ... (Chennai, GWD)

Encouraging competition, ensuring that the GWD are on track with other learners and making time to discuss issues were all narrated as positive attitudes. The GWD also revealed supportive attitudes and behaviour by fellow learners, for example:

I always find school mates who treat me exceptionally well at this school. They have time to associate, talk, share jokes and study with me. (Chennai, GWD)

My class monitor is supportive and friendly to me. She plays girls' soccer ... and I like soccer so much ... and she makes it a point that when she comes back from sports competitions, to update me on what would have happened there ... During weekends, she finds time to take me around the schoolyard and the orchard, telling me stories. (Chichisai, GWD)

The participants mentioned acts of kindness such as other learners pushing wheelchairs or accompanying girls who are visually impaired to the bathrooms. In the translated



vignettes, we use the term “able-bodied” to refer to people who are not disabled to stay true to the way in which these encounters were narrated by the research participants. These acts were articulated as rooted in religious values, for example:

It’s compulsory for all of us here to attend church services and it is during these services that together with able-bodied pupils we are taught to see one another as equal human beings. It is from these services that some able-bodied learners begin to embrace and feel pity for us. (Chenai, GWD)

... able-bodied learners are taught to embrace disabled learners. However, this is not to say all learners embrace special-needs learners, but all I’m saying is that any learner found to act outside the parameters of the church is strongly counselled and reprimanded ... (Teacher Mandi)

I often see many learners and staff members looking at me with teary-eyed reactions when they find me struggling to move my wheelchair in sandy roads. They often say ‘sorry’ and push me to my destination. (Chengeto, GWD)

Inclusion tended to be valued more than patronising empathy or pity. Although these participants understood pity to be embedded in religious-moral reasoning, they regarded displays of charity as a complex form of exclusion and oppression. The interviews, as exemplified in the two quotations by Chenai and Chengeto above, uncovered a telling tension between positive attitudes and actions aimed at inclusion and those that reified the othering of GWD (for example feeling pity, apologising, or “teary-eyed” embracing). In addition, outright negative attitudes were mentioned as hurtful. In particular, the participants spoke about attitudes of fear towards disability that led some learners to avoid them, or even to belittle them by name-calling, for example:

Most able-bodied learners seem to have nothing to say to me. They approach me with fear ... they run away after helping me, especially the Form Ones. If you ask them to show you the way, or to read for you, they run away immediately after they have finished the task ... it is like they cannot get away from me fast enough ... (Chido, GWD)

Sometimes when you joke with or tease able-bodied learners, they lash back at you by referring to your physical impairments. (Chengeto, GWD)

You are sometimes disappointed to hear able-bodied learners laughing and murmuring bad things about you .... or even giving you unpleasant names that demean you. (Chichisai, GWD)

Some teachers discourage me from taking their subjects, as they blame visually impaired learners for previously lowering their subject’s pass rates ... We are believed to be weak students ... (Chenai, GWD)

Such negative attitudes to GWD from teachers were also revealed in the interviews with special-needs teachers, for example:

Some teachers easily forget that they have special-needs learners in their classes ... and learners come to us complaining that they were omitted when teachers are handing out tasks in the classroom. (Teacher Mandi)

As the special-needs teacher, you will transcribe a visually impaired girl's work from Braille and give it to the subject teacher. The next thing you hear, the subject teacher is saying that you 'people' are just adding on extra work for us. (Teacher Gagwe)

Most teachers are concerned with pass rates and are not willing to accommodate GWD in their classes as they are regarded as academically too weak and likely to spoil their anticipated excellent results. (Teacher Taisoni)

In another instance, a teacher explained how a girl who is hearing-impaired, after winning district and provincial 100-metre races, was excluded from participation in the national athletics meet in 2017, because her sign language teacher was disallowed from accompanying her as authorities regarded this as an unnecessary expense. The othering of GWD thus extended to their special-needs teachers as seen in these attitudes and actions of other teachers, funders and authorities.

## **Theme Two: (In)Accessible Places and Spaces**

A recurrent theme in the narrations was the way in which infrastructural barriers defined the lives of the participants. One of the schools had wheelchair ramps which learners valued as enabling independent mobility, for example:

Most buildings at this school, including the dining hall, resource centres, classrooms and the administration block have ramps and I can easily access them on my own. (Chido, GWD)

The paths are made in such a way that I can even walk alone from the hostel to the dining hall or even the resource centre without a friend to support or direct me ... We are grateful to the school authorities to have renovated the paths around the school, putting in quarry stones. (Chichisai, GWD)

At the other two schools, however, GWD relied on friends to access certain areas:

The environment and paths make it difficult for me to walk alone around the schoolyard ... Sometimes I try to walk alone when friends are not there to help me, but I struggle a lot and I end up falling down and sustaining injuries, and becoming dirty at the same time. (Chiedza, GWD)

Visually impaired girls have a torrid time in our schools. Their main challenge remains that of being unable to independently live without the help of sighted learners. These learners always need a fellow learner to accompany them to the toilet and when they want to change their sanitary pads. Given a choice, they would want to do these things alone, in private, without the knowledge of fellow learners. (Teacher Taisoni)

I always need a friend to push my wheelchair, and sometimes to lift me up on to the toilet. The Blair toilets at the school have steps and the corridors are too small to enter with a wheelchair ... (Chengeto, GWD)

Shared toilet facilities proved difficult for GWD, as Chiedza explained:

In most cases, you find the toilets very dirty, so you need to ask someone to help you manoeuvre to find clean ones. If you go alone, you obviously will get dirty and even risk contracting diseases.

These challenges were exacerbated by limited disability mainstreaming in the allocation of hostels. At all three schools, GWD were allocated to the same hostels as able-bodied learners. Chenai, a GWD, stated:

I would have wanted a separate hostel for me, one in which the rooms are always locked ... because in the same hostel, some pupils steal our stuff, and you find the trunk unlocked ... it's because I'm an easy target.

These narrations show that access is not only about adapting the physical environment to allow for inclusivity, but also about enabling the agency of GWD to exercise greater independence to practically secure their possessions and access clean toilets. The tension between inclusion as an infrastructural fix and the need for specialised facilities as expressed in these interviews is an interesting paradox. Although GWD can thrive in an inclusive learning environment, they have specialised needs for toilet facilities and hostels.

### **Theme Three: Teaching and Learning Resources**

All of the research participants were especially appreciative of disability resource centres at their schools. Here, the young women could consult with their special-needs teachers, study, and access some learning resources. For example, Chichisai, a GWD, said:

The disability resource centre is important for us, because this is where we keep our reading materials and devices. As learners with disabilities, we study and consult our special-needs teachers in this room without disturbances from able-bodied learners.

Despite this acknowledgement, the researcher found that all resource centres had limited assistive devices and study materials, including textbooks, digital voice recorders, slates, styluses, Braille paper, talking calculators, wheelchairs, reading glasses, and hearing aids. This observation was tested in follow-up conversations with the research participants, who commented:

There are limited Braille books for use by us in our resource centre, and this is made worse with the adoption of the new curriculum, which means that most of the Braille material in the resource centre is no longer that useful. (Chido, GWD)

Many of the Braille books in our library are not in the syllabus and I face challenges to find prescribed books in Braille ... If the recorders are working, I sometimes ask a friend to read to me whilst I'm recording and then listen to it later. However, the problem has been that most of our recorders often do not have batteries. (Chichisai, GWD)

In as much as I want to study all subjects, I find it difficult to study science, maths and other subjects with practical components and many drawings. As such I dropped out of these subjects and only focused on humanities and arts subjects with minimal drawings. (Chipo, GWD)

The participants also complained that, in few cases where devices are available, many of them are not functional and are rarely repaired. Teacher Gagwe explained:

School authorities do not prioritise concerns pertaining to learners with disabilities. We often request authorities to buy batteries for talking calculators, and recorders ... but these are rarely bought, and most of these devices have remained in the cupboards.

Teacher Jonono noted:

This school does not prioritise the repair of malfunctioning devices used by special-needs learners. Sometimes we end up having to raise our own funds to purchase batteries or to have devices repaired.

Beyond matters of physical access and learning materials, the special-needs teachers also felt neglected by the state. For example, Teacher Gagwe said:

Since joining the service as a special-needs teacher in 1990, I am yet to attend a refresher course on disabilities ... If there are any refresher courses, maybe people in higher offices and those in urban areas attend, but not us in the rural areas.

Inclusive education for GWD thus did not fully link to implementation in terms of sufficient and updated teaching resources, teacher training and equipment.

#### **Theme Four: Financial Support**

The interviews revealed challenges in terms of financial and material support in inclusive schools. All five GWD expended considerable effort to access government support for their fees, but this was in vain. In their repeated efforts to benefit from the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM), all five girls were informed that they are ineligible as their institutions are inclusive schools.

The BEAM policy failed to adequately conceptualise the educational needs of CWD. This policy enables disadvantaged learners to benefit from the government scholarship scheme, including those with disabilities (Smith, Chiroro, and Musker 2012). However, the policy does not provide for CWD in inclusive educational institutions. By excluding learners in inclusive schools, the BEAM policy contradicts Article 24 of the CRPD

(United Nations n.d.), which stresses that CWD have a right to inclusive, quality and free education on an equal basis with others in the communities in which they live. Teacher Jonono noted:

BEAM favours the institutionalisation of learners with disabilities. The BEAM's 4/1 form clearly states that it may only be used by children with disabilities in registered resource units, and that children with disabilities in inclusive schools cannot benefit from the scheme.

The interviews revealed that many GWD are excluded from the government's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) scholarship initiative, which allows underprivileged, but academically gifted, learners to pursue these subjects at advanced levels. This exclusion is not deliberate, but instead a result of a lack of resources in STEM subjects for learners who are visually impaired, for example:

... I find it difficult to study science, maths and other subjects with practical components and many drawings. As such, I dropped out of these subjects and only focused on humanities and arts subjects with minimal drawings. (Chipo, GWD)

Our visually impaired learners cannot benefit from the STEM programme since most of them study arts and humanities subjects. Visually impaired learners find it difficult to study science, mathematics and technical drawing, because there are no dictionaries or books in Braille or other teaching aids which can explain the meanings of key apparatus, calculations, or ideas used in these subjects. (Teacher Gagwe)

These problems are compounded by the limited support and prioritisation of GWD's educational needs by parents and guardians. Faced with these challenges, many GWD are supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or well-wishers, for example:

My grandmother used to pay for my school fees, but when she died, I dropped out of school since my mother and other relatives saw it as useless to send me to school. I only resumed school last year, when my teacher came to our house to tell me that she had liaised and lobbied for a scholarship by an NGO that supports learners with visual impairments. (Chennai, GWD)

My relatives refused to pay for my school fees ... they rather chose to pay for my younger abled-bodied uncle, saying it was useless to pay for me ... I was therefore lucky to be included in a scholarship scheme by an organisation that supports visually impaired learners. (Chido, GWD)

Pervasive and deepening poverty in rural Zimbabwe means that households take strategic decisions about how best to invest scarce resources to ensure their members' future potential for waged labour, income-generating work, and marriage. Following a charity model of disability, NGOs attempt to fill the gap left by the state for the inclusive education of GWD. This contradicts the constitutional commitments that guarantee

education to all people with disabilities and calls for additional strategies to realign educational provisions and financing with the constitution.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Inspired by the CFD theory, this study uncovered lived experiences of disability and found that no single model fully accounts for these. Similar to the study by Moyo and Manyatera (2014), the results show that some persons without disabilities, especially special-needs teachers and fellow learners, embrace, accommodate, and support GWD. As demonstrated in the vignettes quoted above, with such positive support, GWD felt empowered, encouraged, and determined to pursue their academic goals. The participants narrated positive support as often embedded in religious-moral teachings. Pity borne out of benevolent convictions has potential negative consequences (Gabel and Peters 2004). In keeping with a CFD approach, a construction of rural GWD as objects of pity implies othering them, thereby reifying the notion of their differences and dependence (Don, Salami, and Ghajarieh 2015).

The CFD theory demands that research locates experiences in the rich, intersecting context of mundane routines. In keeping with this tenet, the routines of everyday life as retold in interviews and observed in the field uncovered regulation, control, and exclusion that were often unconscious and covert. In particular, exclusion from tasks, discouragement to take certain school subjects, or regarding GWD as necessitating extra work were some of the effects of the negative attitudes of teachers as experienced by the participants. Avoiding GWD or pointing out their disabilities in retaliation for teasing was mentioned as micro-aggressions perpetrated by fellow learners. These actions likely stem from limited awareness of and training in special-needs education with reference to the needs and rights of GWDs as opined by the CFD theory. Educational policies in Zimbabwe adopted the notion of inclusive education without the concomitant training of teachers through refresher courses. In this void, some teachers and learners perpetuate inequalities and discrimination based on disability. Without up-to-date training in special-needs education, people rely on stereotypical or even stigmatising constructions of disability. Moreover, GDW can internalise discrimination as the normal consequence of their impairments. Such a deficit model cannot undergird positive psychosocial well-being.

While the research participants were appreciative of the resource centres at their schools, the limited resources at such centres, especially textbooks and assistive devices, posed serious obstacles to GWD's ability to learn. In terms of infrastructure, inaccessible paths, toilets, bathrooms, and unsecured rooms for independent living posed barriers to inclusivity. This also speaks of the failure of authorities to mainstream disability in the construction of buildings and the allocation of hostels at inclusive schools.

Limited financial support for GWD was found to be an issue. Despite it targeting all learners, including those with disabilities, the BEAM programme only assists those in special schools. The failure by BEAM to consider GWD in inclusive schools is a violation of this group's right to inclusive, quality, and free education as enunciated in legal frameworks. The STEM programme only targets advanced level learners who study certain subjects. The study found that many GWD, especially those with visual impairments, found these subjects inaccessible due to limited assistive devices and/or dictionaries. Inclusive education has become a mantra with its practical realisation reduced to an unattainable dream for GWD in rural Zimbabwe. Employing the language of the CFD theory, it can be concluded that liberal disability praxis was codified into inclusive education as a rights-based ideal without paying attention to local emplacing and displacing practices that empower and disempower GWD.

The lack of financial support for rural GWD is compounded by the fact that many of their parents cannot afford fees, books, and uniforms. Based on their negative perceptions of the potential of GWD as influenced by the narrow biomedical, religious-moral, and charity models, parents find no motive to invest in GWDs. Thus, they prioritise children without disabilities. Hence, as outlined in the tenets of the CFD theory, the material constraints of disablement have been established as the main reason why many GWD drop out of school (Groce et al. 2011; Trani et al. 2011; UNICEF 2013; World Health Organization and World Bank 2011).

The intersection of gender, disability, and rurality shapes the experiences of GWD in terms of corporeal, physical, social, attitudinal, and financial barriers to the full enjoyment of academic and social life. Stemming from patriarchal norms, social values, beliefs, history and socially constructed myths about disability, GWD in inclusive rural schools in Zimbabwe face pertinent challenges to their social and academic performance.

## **Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The study underscores the need for widespread awareness raising about disability and inclusive education based on the tenets of the CFD theory regarding mutual dependency, intersubjectivity and the ethics of care. There is a need for policymakers to develop measures that make the ideals of inclusive education a reality for GWD in rural Zimbabwe.

The study thus embraces CFD theorists in their condemnation of narrow models of disability, which are focused on the politics of the body whereby GWD are seen as inferior beings instead of capable change agents. In addition, institutional researchers, social workers and diversity trainers should put the need to mainstream disability on the agenda of schools, universities, colleges, and workplaces. Part of such agenda setting

should be the active inclusion of people with disabilities as teachers, researchers, and advisors in authentic dialogue.

It also remains vital for teacher and social worker training institutions and schools in general to include disability modules in their curricula. Similarly, government departments responsible for inclusive education, gender, and disability matters should devise refresher courses to capacitate teachers, parents and other school support staff to implement effective gender- and disability-sensitive inclusive education.

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