



CHAPTER 21

PROMOTING GENDER IDENTITY OF FEMALES WITH DISABILITIES

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Introduction

The girl child, a female gender, is being faced with various societal challenges, the most prominent of which is the discrimination from their male counterparts. This discrimination may have existed as a result of the patriarchal society that was in place in most part of the world until recent times. In the African setting for example, a woman is to be seen and not heard, even though there were some cultures which have had women who were successful warriors, leaders, and business moguls source?. Colonialism however, entrenched the patriarchal nature in the African society. The incursion of the western world into the African society made women to be second class citizens source?. In the area of education for instance, male children were given education while the female children were encouraged to stay at home and help with house chores. The rise of feminism in the western has to some extent addressed the gender stereotype and discrimination against females, however, females with disabilities may not have been adequately captured in this struggle for liberation. Over time, the African women realised that the western feminism did not sufficiently capture the vision and demands of the black women source?. Movements that served their peculiar situations were therefore created; movements like African feminism and Stiwanism. Unfortunately, such movements/bodies are not identified for the disabled female who are often marginalised in and invisible to the society, including among those promoting the rights of persons with disabilities, and those promoting gender equality and the advancement of women.

Gender is a notion that refers to a political and social construction of the difference between the sexes. In other words, gender refers to the social and cultural classification between masculine and feminine. According to Simone de Beauvoir, year? "one is not born a woman, one becomes one, just as one is not born a man", but one becomes one through the whole process of family, school and professional socialisation. Gender and sex do not symbolise the same thing. Sex refers to the biological distinction between males and females, while 'gender' refers to the cultural distinction between the social roles, psychological attributes and identities of men and women. Zambon (2022), asserted that although genetic factors typically define a person's sex, gender refers to how they identify on the inside. Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of women and men that



society creates within a given culture or space. These roles are influenced by perceptions and expectations arising from cultural, political, ecological, economic, social and religious factors, as well as customs, laws, social class, ethnicity and individual or institutional prejudices. Gender attitudes and behaviour are learnt and can be changed (Odeleye, 2020b; Ozoji, 2021).

Initially, the term “gender identity” referred to a person’s inner sense of belonging to the category of male or female. It has however, evolved to include people who identify in other ways like transgender, and so on. Gender identity is now expanded to refer to a person’s own sense of their gender, regardless of the sex a doctor assigned to them at birth (Zambon, 2022). A person’s gender is how they identify internally and decides to express their internal choice externally. In the African society, people associate femininity with women and masculinity with men and the mode of dressing also follows this construct. With the contemporary development in gender identity, someone who was biologically male can choose to be addressed as a female and dress like a female. Others may identify as neither male nor female, both, or somewhere in-between (Zambon, 2022). For this chapter, attention is placed on the initial definition of gender identity of the inner sense of belonging to the category of female.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) defined disability as "long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder [a person's] full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others." Other definition of disability posits it as “a condition or function judged to be significantly impaired relative to the usual standard of an individual or group” (Disabled World, 2022). ‘Significantly impaired’ means that there is a substantial limit to one or more major life activities of an individual. Examples of disabilities and impairments are physical impairment, sensory impairment, cognitive impairment, intellectual impairment mental illness, and various types of chronic disease. Ozoji (2021), affirmed that every member of the society manifests gender bias towards females with disability. He asserted that women and children with disabilities are typical Nigerians who have some forms of disabling functions. Disability manifests in different ways and various forms. The disability experienced by women and girls positions them for special needs, special recognition and special education.

Females with disability suffer discrimination within the society in which they live as they do not deservedly get fair treatments. Discrimination against women and girls with disabilities hinders economic development and erodes societies of the substantial contributions that females can make to the society. Women and girls with disabilities are capable of becoming leaders in their communities and thereby contribute greatly to the economic development of their communities (USAID, 2019). It has therefore become imperative to encourage disabled females to strive for greatness in every stratum of the society they find themselves. To this end, this chapter will identify who females with disability are? the challenges they face, why their gender identity should be promoted particularly



among females with disabilities and the benefits they stand to gain as they appreciate the need for promoting their gender identity. Suggestions would be made as the chapter concludes the discussion.

Females with disabilities - Who are they?

In the context of this chapter, females are inclusive of the girl child and women. A girl child is a female child under 18 years of age. It is the girl child (anyone with disability inclusive) who is expected to grow and become an adult given an appropriate environment for development (Odeleye, 2021; Agusiobo, 2018). It is also important to note that females, women and the girl child are used interchangeably in this chapter.

Women and girls with disability are first and foremost of the female gender and should be seen and treated as such. According to Ozoji (2021), women and girls with disabilities are marked by two domains of feminism - gender and exceptionality (disability). The situation these women and girls find themselves in makes them exceptional, that is, they are different in one way or another from other members of the society. An estimate by the United Nations (UN) placed women with disabilities at one fifth of the world's women (USAID, 2019), making them invisible because of their gender and their disabilities. Ozoji (2021), further categorised females with disability as belonging to a minority group that has triple disadvantages of, belonging to the female gender, belonging to the minority group in a male dominated world and having disability.

Challenges facing females with disabilities

Women are generally subjected to social, cultural, and economic discriminations but females with disabilities face significantly more discrimination (United Nations' department of economic and social affairs disability, online). Females with disability face difficulties in getting access to basic things of life, like housing, health and education and are rarely seen in political settings. The challenges females with disabilities face include:

i) **Unemployment:** According to USAID (2019), unemployment rates are highest among women with disabilities. The United Nations, quoted by USAID year??, estimated that 75 percent of women with disabilities are unemployed and those who are employed often earn less than their male counterparts and women without disabilities. Because they rarely get employed by the government or private companies, it is usually difficult for them to participate in economic decision-making. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) goal number 3 was for promoting gender equality and empower women by 2015. As a follow-on to the MDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were conceived with goals 4 and 5 focusing on inclusive and equitable quality education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all and to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (Agusiobo, 2018). Empowerment of women, including the disabled ones, require them to have viable jobs and means of livelihood.



ii) **Poverty:** An estimated 80% of disabled people in developing countries live below the poverty line (The Guardian, 2011). They include women and girls with disability. A lot of the disabled females are forced to take on begging for survival.

iii) **Limited opportunities in relationships:** Females with disability are human beings. They have feelings like other human beings. They would like to love and be loved in return, not just by disabled people like themselves but by “normal” members of the society. They would love to be married to abled bodied men and women but unfortunately, this is not always the case. Ozoji (2021), affirmed that girls with disabilities often encounter difficulty in getting married to people without disability. As a result many of them unwillingly end-up marrying disabled members. They also experience limited social relationships. They are more likely to be snubbed non-disabled persons.

iv) **Lack of access to adequate health care:** Hospitals and health centres fail to provide a welcoming, inclusive environment with accessible parking, accessible toilets, and accessible examination tables for females with disability.

Ways to promote gender identity among females with disabilities

Over the years, individuals with disabilities have been excluded from education, politics and other social aspects of life. In contemporary times, attention is being given more to the disabled male to the detriment of the female. There are several ways to promote gender identity of females with disability, but we shall consider a few.

i) Inclusive Education:

One major way to promote gender identity of females with disability is through education especially an inclusive one. Whereas developed nations of the world have consistently and progressively worked at inclusive education, developing nations like Nigeria have not been able to ensure inclusive education due to several reasons. These include but are not limited to biased attitude, lack of requisite infrastructure, poverty, obsolete approach to education and inadequate policy position (Odeleye, 2020a).

Inclusion is the process whereby every person (irrespective of age, disability, gender, religion, sexual preference or nationality) who wishes to, can access and participate fully in all aspects of an activity or service in the same way as any other member of the community. Inclusion addresses an individual’s dignity (basic human rights), opportunities (equal employment and attitudes) and accommodation (accessibility, assistive devices). Inclusion is about society changing to accommodate difference, and to combat discrimination. Inclusion of people with disabilities ought to be everyone’s concern and is absolutely fundamental (Odeleye, 2020a; Tuwor & Sossou, 2008). Inclusion of people with disabilities into everyday activities involves practices and policies designed to identify and remove barriers such as physical, communication, and attitudinal, that hamper individuals’ ability to have full participation in the society. Giving the females with disability unfettered access to the regular education settings would



open them up to gender identity and self-confidence. According to Ozoji (2021), inclusive education involves educational practices which make room for functional and effective learning and training for all learners within all settings. Inclusive education embraces all comers in a regular school and de-emphasises segregated education in separate institutions for special needs children. Using inclusive education as a tool for promoting gender identity could bring about a cohesive force which could drive each disabled female to exhibit her inherent talent(s) and contribute her quota to the development of the society. According to Ozoji's (2021), inclusive education should be considered as a tool for change. As he rightly opined, if inclusive education must have an impact in the lives of females with disabilities, there must be preparations, and these preparations include physical restructuring that would make the school environment disability friendly, as well as attitudinal preparation of teachers and children without disability to mentally prepare them to accept children with disability as equal members of the school.

ii) Eradication of violence and abuse against women and girls with disabilities

Females with disabilities are especially vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse and they are usually seen as easy targets. They are more likely to experience violence and abuse compared to women without disabilities. It is estimated that women with disabilities are two to five times more likely to experience violence and abuse compared to other women (Mijatović, 2022). Providing safety for females with disabilities and taking drastic measures against anyone caught molesting them in any form would go a long way to promote gender identity. The morale and self-confidence of these females would increase when safety and security is available for them.

iii) Participation and inclusion of women and girls with disabilities

Females with disabilities should be encouraged to participate in politics and societal activities. They should be made welcome within the society to which they belong. There should be consultations with members of this group before decisions taken in government policies and their opinion should be taken into cognisance as they understand best what is good for them and what works best for their lives and situations.

iv) Females with disabilities as identity promoters

Females with disabilities should be a vanguard for the change they desire. They should rise and challenge stereotypes that portray them as passive, and dependent. They should brainstorm on how to organise programmes that would advertise the strengths they possess and talents inherent in them.

v) Innovative Curriculum

Though inclusive education is advocated for as a tool for promoting gender identity, an innovative curriculum is essential to achieve this goal. Curriculum is the means through which gender identity and equality can be taught and acquired. The content of the curriculum would not only help the disabled females, but it would also help to reorientate the general populace in the school environment to imbibe correct concepts, attitudes and behaviours towards disabled females.



Benefits of promoting gender identity among females with disabilities

Promoting gender identity of females with disabilities come with several benefits, not only for the disabled but also for the abled and the society. Firstly, there would be job opportunities for females with disabilities and this would help them to access paid work and lead the lifestyle of their choice. Females with disabilities will do away with inferiority trait and develop boldness and self-assertiveness to fight for their rights in the society. There will be equality as well as equity in access to education and educational services. Violence against women and girls will be eliminated as much as possible. Other benefits as stated by Ozoji (2021), include: economic prosperity, safer and healthier society and respect of human rights for everyone.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the discrimination experienced by females, especially those with disabilities. Discrimination against women and girls with disabilities hinders economic development and deprives societies of the substantial contributions that these females can bring to the societal tables. The chapter highlighted the need to promote gender identity amongst females with disabilities and the benefits that would emerge from such escapade, both for the disabled women and girls and the society at large. The chapter concluded that women and girls with disabilities are capable to be leaders within their communities and can greatly contribute to the economic development of their countries if they are motivated to promote and own their identity. With Nigeria's slogan of 'leave no one behind', it is high time the nation started promoting the gender identity of females with disability.

Suggestions

The following suggestions are made to aid the promotion of gender identity of females with disabilities, especially in Nigeria:

- i) Human rights of females with disabilities should be promoted by the government through the creating, investing in and strengthening of organisations for them.
- ii) The vision and resolve of UN women where and when??? should be replicated around the Nigerian nation with concerted efforts made to promote female disability inclusion, gender promotion and gender equality.
- iii) There should an active participation of and consultations with females with disabilities and their representative organizations in governmental activities and decision-making at all levels.
- iv) Females with disability must actively participate in intergovernmental meetings and consultative processes to bring about the needed change in the conditions they currently find themselves in as well as the promotion of their identity.

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