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The Disability Paradox: Better Opportunities Versus the Hardships of High-Achieving Disabled Women of Ethiopia

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Abstract

Purpose: This study aims to provide a better understanding of the life experiences of educated disabled women in Ethiopia. The research focuses on opportunities resulting from their disabilities, as well as the role that obstacles play in the lives of successful disabled women.

Method: Qualitative, in-depth, and semi-structured interviews along with personal observations were used to explore the full experiences of participants from their own points of view, as told in their own words.

Results: The analysis was based on interviews with 13 educated disabled women with various physical disabilities. The results of the interviews indicated the hardships faced by high-achieving disabled women and the different opportunities that resulted from these hardships (stated as paradoxes throughout the study). The categorized paradoxes consist of: paradox of disability and educational opportunity, paradox of separation from family and success, paradox of hardship in obtaining employment and related opportunities and strength, paradox of disability hardships and self-confidence and self-reliance, paradox of disability and improved quality of life, paradox of support and dependency.

Conclusion: This study highlights how difficult life experiences can be challenging but serves to contribute to the resilience of disabled women in their working life.

Keywords

Disability paradox; Better opportunities of disabled women; Hardships of disabled women; educated disabled women; Ethiopia

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Disabled Women of Ethiopia

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Introduction¹

A disability can affect a woman at any stage of her life, and its impact is life-long. During the early years, disabled people may need special programs to make education and future career opportunities accessible. At a working age, they may face barriers to participating in the workforce (Lindsay, 2011; Noonan et al., 2004). Inaccessible work environments and the lack of jobs are the major problems that disabled women face after they complete their education (Vick & Lightman, 2010). Women with disabilities also encounter barriers to fully participating in other aspects of life, including lack of parental care, misunderstanding by society (Hosain, Atkinson, & Underwo, 2002), and lack of access to medical care (Stein et al., 2010).

Elwan (1999) and Emmet and Alant (2006) documented that disabled women experience higher levels of discrimination and disadvantage than disabled men do. Women with disabilities also experience gender discrimination as well as disabling barriers (Gupta, 2011; Mondejar-Jimenez, Vargas-Vargas, Meseguer-Santamaria, & Mondejar-Jimenez, 2009; World Health Organization & World Bank, 2011). Thus the plight of women with disabilities demands special

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attention through research such as this that explores their problems related to health, education, employment, violence, family rights, marriage, housing, and participation in public life. This is important in order to disclose the extent of their problems to relevant parties like policy and decision makers (Ortoleva, 2010).

Ingstad, Baider, and Grut (2011) surveyed in their study of living conditions for people with disabilities in Yemen the self-contradictory and false proposition of rejection from prevalent and aspired performance and that of educational opportunities. In Eide and Ingstad this paradox is stated as follows:

More than anyone else, poor girls with disability are bound by traditional family patterns and will easily be left isolated, uneducated and unmarried. Paradoxically, as they may face exclusion from the dominant and desired female role, this also creates opportunities for a few girls who, due to a supportive family, institutional care or other circumstances, may be able to get an education and live an active life because the traditional women's role of entering into married life does not apply to them (p. 4).

The survey also documented the extent to which the systematic level of the paradox in developing countries exists. Our article attempts to further explore the status of women with disabilities in developing countries. Few studies have actually gone out and interviewed high-achieving disabled women in developing countries. The current study explores the status of successful disabled women in Ethiopia. Moreover, the article identifies the situation exhibiting an apparent contradiction in the life experiences of high-achieving disabled women in Ethiopia and reinforces the complexity of the phenomenon observed elsewhere. "High achieving" in this context refers to disabled women who are educated at least at the level of a high school diploma and employed.

Disabled women who are educated and employed usually experience difficulties in reaching their current levels of education. Contrary to common belief, the interview results

showed that they were often provided with a relatively better chance or opportunity for education, since they are less likely to marry or do other household chores than their non-disabled counterparts. However, disabled women continue to face different problems in education such as access to equipment or devices, and for the visually impaired, access to resources such as readers and interpreters. Securing employment is another difficult life experience for disabled women. After obtaining employment, they continue to face additional problems in accessing facilities, restructuring jobs, changing work schedules, and acquiring equipment or devices.

The experience of overcoming these day-to-day challenges is conducive to strength of character and the development of self-confidence (Alves, 2013). This in turn allows the disabled women to succeed and paves the road for a better quality of life compared to their non-disabled counterparts. Rutter (2012) inferred the presence of resilience based on evidence that some individuals have a better outcome than others who have experienced a comparable level of adversity. This article also shows the contribution of challenges to the resilience of the disabled women.

Another paradox that disabled women encounter is related to social support. Social support, on the one hand, helps disabled women to overcome problems; on the other hand, it exposes them to more dependence. Disabled people need assistance, but the level of support should not make them dependent.

In reality, disabled women require a certain level of support for the different problems they face according to the type of disability they have. For example, a blind girl cannot read without Braille and a deaf girl cannot communicate without sign language. This idea is supported by (Yeo, 2001) as follows:

In many countries, disabled children are not required to go to school and there is no special provision for their needs if they do enroll... inaccessible "public" transport, a scarcity of information transcribed into Braille or available on audio tape and a lack of Sign Language translators all serve to keep disabled people out, pushed to the margins and without the information they need to participate equally (p. 4).

This study examines the consequences of the overprotection of disabled women when growing up. A modified version of the grounded theory approach of Starks and Trinidad (2007) is used to help develop an explanation of the experiences of disabled women by means of a qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews.

The educated disabled women in the study were asked about their family background, education and employment history, and the beliefs and attitudes of their society towards disability. While the interview results were coded and grouped into different themes, some components of the paradoxes are identified that may have contributed towards the status of educated disabled women as reported by the majority of the respondents. The observed disability paradoxes are examined in terms of establishing the cause and effect of preventing better opportunities.

Objective of the Study

The aim of this paper is to identify and document the life experiences of educated disabled women in Ethiopia. It analyzes how societal expectations present additional challenges. Moreover, it explores other social obstacles facing disabled women. The paper identifies data gaps in existing literature, leading to a more sophisticated discussion of the role that hardship plays in the creation of opportunities and, consequently, opening the door to future studies in this area.

Context of the Study

The study involved an exploration of educated disabled women's life experience in Ethiopia. The population of Ethiopia has increased steadily over the last three decades, from 42.6 million in 1984 to 53.5 million in 1994 and 73.8 million in 2007 (CSA, 2011). Ethiopia is one of the least urbanized countries in the world; only 16 percent of the population lives in urban areas (CSA, 2011). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), seven to ten percent of the population has a disability, and the vast majority of people with disabilities live in rural areas where access to basic services is limited (Central Statistical Agency of Ethiopia, 2011). A survey on disability in Ethiopia (ILO, 2009) reported that 60 percent of persons with disabilities of working age were unemployed in 1995, of whom some two-thirds were self-employed in rural areas in occupations such as agriculture, animal husbandry, or forest activities. Begging is often a means of survival in urban centers, in addition to assistance from religious institutions and charities (ILO, 2009). In Ethiopia, disability and begging are traditionally linked (N. Groce et al., 2013).

Methodology

The primary methodology was the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews based on those used in previous studies such as Career Development Notable Latinas (Gomez et al., 2001) and Highly Achieving Women With Physical and Sensory Disabilities (Noonan, et al., 2004). The questions were tested and refined through a pilot study prior to conducting the interviews. The pilot test was conducted with seven women with physical disabilities located in the Addis Ababa metropolitan area. This was consistent with the goal of qualitative research to allow participants to describe their experiences from their own perspective and in their own words (Morrow, 2005). These pilot interviews were not included in the final study but were used to modify the interview

questions. The interview covered the following areas: family background, educational experiences, employment opportunities, and the beliefs and attitudes of the society towards disability.

Participants included 13 educated disabled women with various physical disabilities. The interviewees lived in the Addis Ababa metropolitan area of Ethiopia. Because the number of vocationally successful women with disabilities in Ethiopia is small, snowball sampling was used to select disabled women for the structured interview. Six of the 13 interviewees have graduate level education, three have undergraduate degrees, and of the remaining, three have associate degrees, while one has a high school diploma. All of the interviewees currently hold jobs. Four of them are project coordinators and facilitators, three are accountants, two work as secretaries and cashiers, two are high school teachers, one is a system administrator, and one is a budget analyst.

Participants were contacted initially by visits to their workplaces and then by telephone calls with a description of the study and an invitation to participate. Those who agreed to participate received a letter and brief information about the interview. Participant interviews were conducted by the first author and took place at a site of the participant's choice (with some interviews held in the interviewer's car). The interviews took between 1 and 2.5 hours each, and the average duration was about 1.5 hours. The interviews were performed in Amharic (the native language of both the interviewer and interviewees). The interviews were audio-taped for later transcription and analysis. At the conclusion of the interview, field notes were completed by the interviewer (author) on the interview location, length of the interview, perceptions of rapport, and other interview characteristics (e.g., interruptions). The field notes were used in

interpreting transcripts as well as during data analysis to assess the trustworthiness and legitimacy of the narrative data.

Data analysis was conducted using a modified grounded theory approach (Starks & Trinidad, 2007), in which a theory is generated through a series of steps that proceeds from data collection to coding of data into concepts; to categorization of concepts into increasingly comprehensive aggregates of categories, or constructs; to descriptions of categories based on their properties and dimensions; and finally to the articulation of a theory in which the emergent constructs and their interrelationships are described. The grounded theory practice of theoretical sampling, in which data collection (including continual interview revisions) and data analysis proceed simultaneously, was modified in this study by identifying a diverse sample at the outset, based on *a priori* criteria (Patton, 2002) and administering the same interview protocol to all participants.

Our analytical approach is consistent with procedures established by Burnard (1991) and Lavelle and Dowling (2011). We largely followed their methodology for analyzing semi-structured open-ended interviews (See Footnote 1 for details of the methodological approach).²

² In this study, interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim and translated from Amharic to English by language professionals who checked the meanings of the translations by the author. The first stage involved taking notes after each interview and using them as “memory joggers” (Burnard, 1991) during the initial analysis phase. The second stage involved reading through all the transcribed interviews while making notes on descriptions given. The third stage focused on open coding and involved re-reading the transcripts. The list of open codes was then examined more closely, and those that were similar were collapsed into broader categories (stages four and five). In stage six, the co-author of this paper, who was not part of the interviews, examined three interview transcripts and identified a category system. Similar themes were also identified by the interviewer. The aim of this step was to enhance the validity of the categorization process (Burnard, 1991; Lavelle & Dowling, 2011) and to enhance the study’s validity. The transcripts were then examined again in light of the themes generated, and themes were distinguished in the text using a color coded system.

The text from the transcripts was then reorganized under the themes, with attention to context maintained by working alongside complete copies of each transcript (stages 8-10). Three study participants were invited to review their transcribed interviews and make notes on the main points that emerged during the interview (stage 11). These were then compared to the themes and categories identified in the analysis. All of the sections were filed together for direct reference when writing up the findings. Copies of the complete interviews were kept close to the authors during the write-up stage, as were the original tape recordings. Whenever anything appeared unclear during the write-up, the researchers referred back to the transcript or the recording. Once all of the sections were together, writing began, which constituted stages 12 and 13 (Burnard, 1991).

Hardships Faced by High-Achieving Disabled Women

In Ethiopia, disabled women pass through many hardships from early childhood. To start with, they are treated like outcasts by society because their disability is believed to be the result of wrongdoing by their families (Simkhada et al., 2013; Getachew, 2011). The beliefs and social perceptions about disability often result in the dislocation of the disabled from their places of birth, and they become deprived of the opportunity to live with their families. One interviewee articulated the reason for her isolation from her family as follows:

For example, the reason why I did not grow up with my family is because of my disability. So, my physical disability deprived me of living with my family. I grew up in an institution... (Interviewee 2)

Another woman described her disconnection from family as follows:

...I neither lived with my family nor do I have a person to live with in general. Generally, I am isolated and live by myself. This resulted in lots of problems in my life. (Interviewee 5)

The above excerpts show that physical disability is normally the direct cause of the disabled people's separation from their families, which in turn presents them with more problems. This can be viewed as a result of society's perceptions of disability.

In Ethiopia, disabled girls live far away from their families because of social influences such as a negative perception and beliefs about disability that force parents of the disabled to send their children away to cities, either to an institution or to live with relatives. The following excerpt from an interview with one disabled woman helps to clarify this:

When my family knew that my disability is beyond cure, the stress killed my mother. It was like my family is condemned. I was told that people said that my disability was a curse. "What did the family commit to deserve this?" they asked. Imagine my mother had died and there was one child in the family with physical disability and there was no education. (Interviewee 2)

In this excerpt, the interviewee also shares the beliefs of the society in associating the death of her mother with her disability. Another interviewee confirmed this idea as follows:

Every time a child is born an animal is slaughtered, either a chicken or sheep (Certain gods were offered sacrifices in the form of animal sacrifices for the purpose of appeasing those gods seeking counsel and blessings). But when my mother had a child, my grandmother was poor and she didn't know that her mother did slaughtering for this kind of purpose. Since she didn't know that my great grandmother did this and because she didn't have that much money she didn't slaughter immediately. After some time, my grandmother had a dream, and she told me they (the gods) said, "Was it better to take out money for the hospital for your granddaughter, or to slaughter one chicken?" As a result, I lost my sight... (Interviewee 7)

The above statement shows that even some of the educated disabled women continue to believe that their disability resulted from failing to comply with the rituals. It suggests that cultural values are very important and that the education provided does not address these types of cultural norms around disability.

One facet of Ethiopian culture that some may consider chauvinistic is that most women in rural areas of Ethiopia perform the household duties by themselves. However, when it comes to disabled women, they are considered burdens to their families even when they carry out the various household chores. Their families do not value the chores the disabled children perform as worthy. The president of the Ethiopian disabled women association puts it as follows in an interview:

If you ask parents what their disabled daughter does, they would say, "She doesn't do anything, she doesn't work, she is not educated. What could she do?" But they give her 90 percent of the work in the house. She prepares "wot" (staple sauce dish in Ethiopia) sitting down right there, grinds coffee (by pounding roasted coffee), washes clothes. Everything is brought to her to do, but her efforts are not considered. They say she doesn't do anything since doing the house chores is not considered work.... She spends her whole day bringing water not only for her family but also for the neighbors. She does this because she thinks that is the right thing to do. The ones who encounter this kind of thing are the female ones. Girls face more problems than disabled boys.

This shows us that, in developing countries such as Ethiopia, the constructive awareness by parents of disabled children about issues and concerns of people with disability is low, as interviewee 3 corroborates below.

I was not that good at communication because I did not go through a life that encouraged that. I have told you that my family wanted me to always stay and sit at home. And I used to stay at home the whole day, sitting alone in a corner. My family sometimes even used to lock me inside the house, fearing that a thief might enter the house and steal. I did not ask them why they did that. But I used to cry a lot... I often wonder, how would they think that I might not understand as a thief entered while I am there? As I told you, I was like a second citizen in that house so I did not have the strength or the right to tell them not to do that.

In general, women in the rural areas of developing countries such as Ethiopia do not usually have access to educational opportunities. Literature shows that educational opportunities have been improving in developing countries, although the opportunities are still limited (Lewin, 2009). For disabled persons, finding educational opportunities has become even more difficult than it is for others since they are the least expected to enroll in school and the infrastructure makes facilities inaccessible. As (Groce, 2004) observed, sending disabled children to school, including them in social interactions, and preparing them for participation in the adult world seem unnecessary.

The other problem disabled women encounter is finding employment, as illustrated in the excerpt below:

It was tiresome to get a job... and even more difficult for physically disabled people. You have to apply for a job in several places before you are considered for a job. Even when hired, my employment is not considered by merit but out of fear of God. (Interviewee 2)

This above citation demonstrates that disabled women are required to make an extra effort to secure employment, and once employed they suffer from a perception that they got the job due to fear of God on the part of the employer(s) or societal guilt. Some employers use recruitment

exams and interviews to discriminate against disabled job candidates, as captured in the following excerpt:

I applied to work for many companies that I thought could be related with my credentials, but I was repeatedly told that I failed the recruitment exam.
(Interviewee 1)

This suggests that the interviewee considers her disability as the underlying reason for not being considered. Another interviewee witnessed that sometimes employers explicitly tell disabled job candidates that they do not meet the hiring criteria due to the impairment, as in the following case:

Let me tell you my own history. I competed for a position of ticket officer. Although it is not such a difficult job, I was told that I could not do the work because of my disability. Such incidences are common. (Interviewee 12)

Often, educated disabled women may not find employment opportunities, and if employed, it may not be in their own profession, as expressed below:

Very few disabled educated women find a job, and often they stay home. Although educated, I have many friends who are forced to take non-professional positions. (Interviewee 9)

Once employed, disabled women have to prove to employers that they can perform as well as able-bodied employees, as captured by the following response:

When I am employed, I am subjected to undue stress because of preconceived bias towards disabled people not performing well. What can I do to change preconceived views? If they are not satisfied by my performance, would they link that with my disability? (Interviewee 3)

This in turn may result in less pay, as stated below:

They hired me as an assistant teacher with less pay than what is set for the position. I performed equal to or better than my colleagues. Although I worked for a religious institution where equality should have been the norm, this was not the case. (Interviewee 13)

This excerpt shows that at times the employed disabled women work for less pay doing equal work compared to non-disabled employees with the same capacity. The employment experience of disabled women is often frustrating, as discussed below:

I am often reminded by others that the job is difficult for me because of my disability. People think that my guide is doing everything for me and they don't seem to acknowledge my work. This negatively impacts my work morale. For example, I always worry that if I fail to do things to their satisfaction, my employers will interpret that it is because of my disability. (Interviewee 3)

The interviewee here implies that she worries about acceptance by others around her. She is also expected to do things at the satisfaction level of others and she feels that any failure will be attributed to her disability.

The above excerpts of life experiences of disabled women in Ethiopia provide a window into the magnitude and scope of socio-economic barriers faced by disabled women.

Nevertheless, the experiences of educated disabled women in Ethiopia also seem to create more opportunities than seen by their uneducated counterparts, as discussed in the following section.

Paradoxes

In this section, the paradoxes encountered in the lives of educated disabled women are explored.

To begin with, the educational opportunities offered to disabled women due to their social exclusion are discussed. The perception of society towards disabled people resulting from the separation from their family appears to instill traits of success. The strength, self-confidence, and independence they develop through the hardships of their life experiences are also documented. It also shows the resilience of the disabled women in their working life. As a domain of inquiry, resilience science in human development refers to the study of the processes of, capacity for, or pathways and patterns of positive adaptation during or following significant threats or disturbances (Masten, 2011:494). The paradox of disability leading to a relatively

better quality of life is also discussed. The paradoxes are presented using quotes from the experiences of high-achieving disabled women in Ethiopia.

Paradox of Disability and Educational Opportunity

Some disabled women in Ethiopia obtain certain institutional benefits because of their disability, as described below:

My father had a distant relative in Addis Ababa who worked near the Ethiopian Association of the Blind and told my father that I could be educated. Through her assistance, I was enrolled in a boarding school for visually impaired at a young age. That opportunity is the foundation for my success in life. I was the only one who was educated from among my family members. (Interviewee 3)

This excerpt shows that the educational opportunity the interviewee obtained was due primarily to opportunities created only for disabled children. This concept was further articulated by another interviewee as follows:

I don't think I could have been educated and been in a better position if I were not disabled. I can say this because when I see my non-disabled brothers and sisters, I am the only one who was educated. But my elder siblings are all married and did not have the educational opportunities that I was privileged to receive. (Interviewee 2)

Women in the rural areas of Ethiopia are mostly forced into marriage without education. But disabled women are not considered for marriage, and this creates an opportunity for them to go to school. Educational opportunities separate disabled women from their families at an early age. This also results quite often in relocation from rural to urban settings in order to access education.

Paradox of Separation from Family and Success

Disabled women move to metropolitan areas of the country for education, and paradoxically, this separation seems to inspire disabled women to succeed. One interviewee explains this situation as follows:

[When] I went to the rural area after I was educated, I met my father, who told me that my mother died and he was left to raise my other siblings by himself. He also said that if I had been left with my family, this wouldn't have happened; I wouldn't be the success I am today. Although it was to redeem himself of guilt, he was right! ... Others such as my aunt said, "Your father told us that you are educated and successful. Sometimes we thought you were not alive."
(Interviewee 2)

The interviewee stated that even though it is difficult to be removed from family, it did bring her success. The interviewee further explained that when she became independent, she started thinking of what life could have been like if she had been left with her family:

Later when I became self-reliant, when I heard what my siblings said about their experience at home..., I realized what could have been my life if I had been left at home, although I missed out on knowing my parents then. (Interviewee 2)

The interviewee missed out on her family love. However, the separation from family made her inspired and successful.

The adversities do not end for disabled women after their success in education. The challenges of employment persist, and the strength developed as a result of the sustained adversities is discussed in the following section.

Paradox of Hardship in Obtaining Employment and Related Opportunities and Strength

Although educated disabled women have to pass many hurdles to become employed, many do find jobs. One interviewee described her experiences as follows:

I got my first job because I was a person with disability. At the time, I was doing nothing because I couldn't find a job. Then, there was a vacancy that was advertised needing a visually impaired person. Overall, I benefited from my disability to get the job. The job enabled me for training, travel abroad, and accumulated experience. I enriched my resume, and that furthered my chances for opportunities in higher studies abroad. (Interviewee 3)

This excerpt suggests that the difficulty of securing employment and the limited opportunity for physically disabled people is an exception, not the rule. Despite the challenges, all the disabled women interviewed in this study appear to be confident and hard-working individuals, as stated below:

In order to survive what I was dealt by my disability, I focused on my education ... [That] also made me realize that I have to do it on my own. Sometimes people tell me what I have is enough, and they don't understand my effort to further improve myself in education... [That] helps me realize that being physically disabled has become an inspiration for strength. (Interviewee 2)

Disability and the limited support system has become an incentive for hard work and self-reliance. Those interviewed here who succeeded in careers tend to strive to help other disabled women, as one of the interviewees explained:

We organized a physically disabled women's association with eight of my friends... I graduated in IT, and now I am an expert. I am a high-level expert in information communication technology. I got here through promotion after starting from a lower level. But I am focused more on the physical disability thing. I want to be an example for those people to get beyond their physical disability and be strong. (Interviewee 2)

The continued adversities that disabled women are subjected to made them strong. The women interviewed in this study also regularly reported that they developed good work ethics due to the efforts they made to prove themselves to employers and colleagues that they could perform. Moreover, they organized themselves to help others and became role models for the others. The trials and tribulations of their disabilities helped them to develop self-confidence and self-reliance.

Paradox of Disability Hardships and Self-Confidence and Self-Reliance

Self-reliance for women in developing countries is generally difficult. For disabled women it is even worse. Paradoxically, many of the women in this study felt they had achieved self-confidence and become self-reliant, unlike their female siblings who were dependent either on their husbands or on their family members. One disabled woman who met her family after she became successful articulated the effect of her self-reliance and self-confidence on her family as follows:

My relative saw the self-confidence and how self-reliant I was when she came to my house. ... Before that visit, she depended more on my brothers rather than me. My brothers are not physically disabled. ... [It] was me whom everybody had looked down on, the one who everybody thought won't become anything. But it is me now who has graduated and is self-dependent. She said I am disabled but completed school, and she looked at my brothers as inferior when compared to me. It became the reverse... Nobody noticed me before, but my situation made me a success. (Interviewee 2)

The above excerpt shows that the success of disabled women can even improve the views of family members towards disability. The self-confidence these women developed was the result of sustained efforts to manage their disability. The challenges faced from childhood to the present helped them develop the ability to solve problems. One interviewee explained this as follows:

My self-confidence evolved over time. During my graduate studies, I asked for help with things that I wasn't able to do in a relaxed manner without being worried. (Interviewee 4)

The disability experience brought incentive to find solutions to their problems. One interviewee stated that she could not have developed the level of self-confidence had it not been for her disability experience, as follows:

I do not think or see that I could do better if I were not disabled. I could have, maybe, thought of it like that in the past but now I do not believe I could add

anything to the things I could do and think had I not been disabled. I think I could do all things that other people at my level could do. (Interviewee 4)

The experiences disabled women in this study were subjected to helped them to believe in themselves and realize that they could do what others could, thereby increasing their self-confidence. In addition to this, they became self-reliant, which they could not have achieved had they not been disabled. The urban life also improved their quality of life compared to those who lived in the countryside.

Paradox of Disability and Improved Quality of Life

The lifestyle of women in the rural areas of Ethiopia is generally difficult. Interviewee 3 articulated it like this: *“By the way, I am truly a lucky person. The life of many people is not like this. I am very, very lucky.”* Paradoxically, the disabilities of some created improved opportunities in life, as explained by another interviewee as follows:

For example, if I were in the rural area, what would have happened to me? I would have stayed at home and my other job would have been brewing coffee and nothing more of value. Then, when your parents separate from you, maybe by death, you can’t go out there and be self-reliant... (Interviewee 2)

Some of the educated disabled women helped their siblings to become educated. An interviewee articulated this experience as follows:

So, if I had not learned, my life would have been what most other people expect. Maybe I would have been found at the lowest level of life. I have helped myself and others. For example, I have helped two of my nephews through high school and allowed them to stay with me and join the University this year. I personally help other people like this too. (Interviewee 3)

This excerpt explains the extent to which the woman went to help her non-disabled siblings.

Beyond this, the same interviewee stretches herself to help her community:

I was born in the rural area and my family still lives in poverty in the community, and I want to start a program that helps my community. Before starting that work, I want to develop the capability to fulfill my vision effectively. But until

then, this is the ladder that will make me reach there. Do you understand? I didn't find it as a job that you just get up at one point and do... But, whatever the case, my vision is to do something that reduces poverty. (Interviewee 3)

According to the interviewees, the hardships have ameliorated their circumstances compared to those of their non-disabled family members who are still leading poor lives in rural areas. Many aspire to help their families and communities.

Paradox of Support and Dependency

The experiences of the women in the study suggest that the level of support provided to disabled people should be limited to the extent that cannot discourage them from doing things by themselves. Otherwise, the support will be more like overprotection, which might discourage disabled people from handling responsibilities by themselves and from developing their careers properly. The negative effect of too much support from families of disabled women hindering the disabled from achieving success is best presented by the following excerpt from a partially blind woman:

I could see a little. So I used to go to school and come back with the children in my neighborhood. It was a small town and my father was well known there. So other children's notes were given to me. I also had a tutor at home who read to me and helped me with my homework. My parents did not encourage me to read with Braille. I should have also done my homework by myself. It is not good to be overprotective. It hindered me from working on my own. I relied on others for support and that hurt me. (Interviewee 6)

Support becomes an obstacle when it reaches the level of overprotection, described as over-facilitating activities, which makes one dependent (McDonald & Kidney, 2012; Field & Hoffman, 2002; Hawkins, Redley, & Holland, 2011; Thompson, Galbraith, Thomas, Swan, & Vrungos, 2002). These authors articulated this concept as care at the level of restricting the autonomy of a person, which emphasizes the dependent role of the recipient. The same idea is articulated by one disabled woman as follows:

I grew up in a rural area where people are very conservative. You are not to speak loudly and girls are expected to go to the back when a guest comes ... especially me. When others would go to the river, herding or to play with each other, or go to a far place, I couldn't do that. Even if I wanted to go to some distant place, I would be told that I will fall into a ditch or that a thorn would wound me. For those reasons they wouldn't let me out of the house. In addition to that, for example, I couldn't even bend to pick up my shoes. Instead, they were the ones who handed them to me. All the things they did made me dependent and its influence has made me a shy person. ... I am very shy. If you tell me to go to an office to talk about anything, unless it is something that I must do, I am very afraid. What I think in my heart and what I actually say are not the same. And this is my family's influence because they didn't tell me to be strong. (Interviewee 5)

The quotation implies that the cultural norms of the society affect the socialization of girls.

When these norms are implemented in the lives of disabled girls, it restricts them from performing different activities and sometimes can make them shy, as was mentioned in the excerpt. The same interviewee stressed the influence of her family on her social life as follows:

Related to family influence, for example I prefer to read a book, if there is one nearby, than to talk to staff there. Rather than chatting with them or going to some place, I would prefer to have a computer and write something. I think it may be the influence of my family. The fact that my family said stuff like, "Sit down, don't do that" I think has influenced me. Being with my colleagues doesn't make me that happy. (Interviewee 5)

This interviewee shows the adverse influence of her family on her social life while another interviewee described the effect of overprotection as follows:

The teachers at my school used to say that Mr. X's daughter is sick... Even if I did something wrong, they let me pass my tests saying that I was sick. I did not go through most of the challenging things on my own. (Interviewee 6)

As stated in the above excerpts, overprotecting disabled children can lead them to failures such as relying on others for support, being shy, and being lonely. On the other hand, failure, prevention, and discouragement were found to create better results in terms of their achievements. In relation to failure, one interviewee explained it this way:

The other children who did not get passing grades got employed in cafes and went to Arab countries and they used to do small things. I was the only one without a job while some of the people I knew used to do something. I realized that I could not be employed in shops or anywhere else. What is considered the last resort was being hired as a maid. Right? It came to my mind that I could not do that. So, I studied hard and took the exam privately. I passed and then entered Addis Ababa University. (Interviewee 6)

This excerpt indicates that disability can prevent people from carrying out some duties. Even if they cannot succeed in their education, non-disabled women may have plenty of opportunities to generate income. But for the disabled ones, finding work is more difficult, and this issue forces them to stick with their education and study hard.

Interviewees stated that barriers that are associated with their disabilities (like fear of failure and judgment by non-disabled persons) hurt them. Generally, women report greater fear and are more likely to develop anxiety disorders than men (McLean & Anderson, 2009; Sagar, Boardley, & Kavussanu, 2011). Here we might assume that fear of failure affects disabled women more. But the interviewees believe that this helped them to develop the determination to perform better and to have plans and visions for their lives.

Conclusions

This study documented the experiences of a select group of educated high-achieving disabled women in Ethiopia using in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The interviews capture how disabled women are viewed by society. The study sheds light on the belief that their disability is the result of wrongdoing by their families. These beliefs and traditions have unintended consequences for disabled women such as dislocation from their places of birth and separation from family. Most interviewees also shared issues with finding jobs, problems of access to the technology they need to perform, and when employed, the extra effort required to prove

themselves to employers and co-workers. These adversities tend to create resilience in the interviewees.

The issue of educational opportunities not being available for disabled women's able-bodied siblings in rural areas may well be an exception rather than the rule. However, the continued challenges such women faced due to their disability inspired them to reach high levels of education.

The women interviewed in this study also regularly reported that they developed good work ethics due to the efforts made to prove themselves to employers and colleagues that they could perform.

It appears that the disabled women believe that the struggle they experienced in shaping their lives has made them confident and self-reliant.

According to the interviewees, the hardships have ameliorated their circumstances compared to those of their non-disabled family members who are still leading poor lives in rural areas. Many aspire to help their families and communities.

The interview results also suggest that too much support from family members can make disabled women dependent, while prevention/exclusion can make them stronger, although they also felt deeply hurt by their family, colleagues, and/or the society.

This paper identifies data gaps in existing literature, hopefully leading to a more sophisticated discussion of the role that hardship plays in the creation of opportunities and, consequently, opening the door to future studies in this area.

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