

“They think we are all beggars”: The resilience of a person with disability in Ghana

(overview essay)

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Abstract: *In this study, the authors employed a single-participant approach to investigate the resilience of persons with disabilities in the face of discrimination and marginalisation. An interview was conducted with a woman living with physical disability in the capital of the Northern region of Ghana. The study found that despite barriers erected against a person with disabilities in the study area, the individual has striven to live independently by engaging in productive activities. The discussion of the study focused on the urgent need for society to empower persons with disabilities to enable them to utilise their inherent capabilities to allow them to become productive members of the society.*

Keywords: *Self-determination, persons with disability, inclusion, employment, resilience, Ghana*

1 Introduction

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [CRPD] makes it mandatory for signatory states to create an enabling environment that would promote full inclusion of persons with disabilities. Given this, discourses at the international level have mainly revolved around how the best states could open up respective societies and create opportunities for their population living with disabilities (Anthony, 2011). However, consistently, persons with disabilities have limited opportunities to participate in most activities available in the society because of prolonged barriers erected against them (Avoke, 2002; Kassha, Kassah & Agbota, 2014; Forlin, Lau, Chan & Peters, 2012). For instance, in Ghana, they have been reported to have limited access to necessities of life such as education, employment, and health care (Anthony, 2011;

Badu, Agyei-Baffour & Opoku, 2016; Kassah, 1998; Opoku et al., 2016). Despite these barriers, the resilience of the few persons with disabilities who have made substantial contributions when it comes to the development of self-esteem is rarely reported as the emphasis is always placed on their challenges. Thus, this brief report aims to focus on the strength in disability which drives them to participation in economic activities despite the existence of barriers.

The challenges of persons with disabilities encounter can be traced to several factors – a major one being negative perceptions people hold about disability. In most societies in Ghana as well as in many countries, disability is not tolerated due to negative perceptions of people (Avoke, 2002; Kassah et al. 2014). Largely, people attribute the occurrence of disabilities to spirituality or explain regarding other superstitious beliefs (Agbenyega, 2003; Baffoe, 2013). Thus, when a child is a disabled, the most likely reason for this is that the gods are annoyed (Baffoe, 2013). Consequently, such individuals are labelled and sometimes segregated from other members of society and thus, limiting their ability to live independently like any other members of society (Avoke, 2002; Kuyini, Alhassan & Mahama, 2011; Naami & Hayashi, 2012). For instance, labelling persons with disabilities as sick, stupid person, idiot, dumb, imbecile, and river children create challenges for them and limit opportunities for them to use their potentials (Avoke, 2002; Agbenyega, 2003; Baffoe, 2013). This works against their self-worth and individual capabilities to support themselves and engage in productive activities.

Society has low expectation for persons with disabilities because of doubts about their capacities. The deep-seated stereotype views about disability have accounted for the lack of support to persons with disabilities in societies to enable them to participate in areas productive areas that would see improvement in their lives. The popular assumption in most societies has been that persons with disabilities are unproductive and thus limited to a life of dependency (Avoke, 2002; Munyi, 2012). Especially, persons with disabilities are not given the necessary support, and opportunity to have access to necessities such as education (Kassah et al. 2014; Naami & Hayashi, 2012). Consequently, lack of education means limited opportunity to acquire skills to participate in socio-economic activities (Crowley et al. 2013; Opoku et al. 2016b). Therefore, it is not surprising that many persons with disabilities have resorted to begging in the streets to survive.

Street begging has further worsened the plight of persons with disabilities as society looks down on them as individuals who have to rely on the generosity of others to make a living. In an effort towards achieving an inclusive society in Ghana, commentators are searching for supportive measures to institutionalise in societies for persons with disabilities. On top of that recommendations have been made on the need to project persons with disabilities and celebrate their achievements as part of awareness creation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to share the story of

an individual who defied the odds to make a living by utilising the little resources at her disposal. The study adopted a single case study to investigate the barriers the individual has been able to overcome and engage in income earning activities.

2 Disability and theory of resilience

The physical and social barriers faced by persons with disabilities are widely reported in the literature, and it is mainly investigated from the perspectives of socio-medical models of disability which highlight limitations encountered based on impairments. This study adopted the theory of resilience which provides a useful framework to analyse context and individual variables which may impact or serve as motivation to persons with disabilities to overcome barriers they face in societies. The theory is a strength-based approach to analyse capacity of persons with disabilities to overcome the obstacles erected against them in the society (Zimmerman, 2013). The theory underscores the ability of an individual to adapt to society in the face of adversity or barriers erected against their equal social participation (Ledesma, 2014; Southwick et al. 2014).

The expectation and stereotype views about persons with disabilities have contributed to a limited avenue for them to explore opportunities in societies. Society has their biases against persons with disabilities. Therefore, efforts have to be made before persons with disabilities could have access to opportunities available in the society (Carter et al. 2015; Frankland et al. 2004). In the midst of scarcity, major determinants of resilience in the field of disability have been linked to social barriers erected against persons with disabilities (Ledesma, 2014). Persons with disabilities are endowed with innate abilities which could only be teased out once their strength and capacity have been identified (Field, Server & Shaw, 2003). As discussed by Zimmerman (2013), the availability of assets such as self-esteem and self-efficacy determines how far persons with disabilities would be able to respond to barriers. To roll-out policies which would have an impact on the lives of persons with disabilities, it is important to find out how they think about themselves so as to figure out the best way to reach out to them (Wehmeyer & Garner, 2003). The support could be in the form of creating an enabling environment for them to explore opportunities available in the society.

Society has to acknowledge the primary role persons with disabilities could play to support their lives and that of the society. Until people are educated about the individual abilities and capabilities of persons with disabilities, they would always be regarded as second-class citizens who have to depend on society to survive (Field et al. 1998; 2003). The quest to attain an inclusive society depends on realising the capabilities of persons with disabilities, then, provide the platform for them to exhibit their talent (Field, 1996; Frankland et al. 2004). Despite these barriers, the resilience

of the few persons with disabilities who have made tremendous achievements in life is underreported. This study takes the campaign of supporting persons with disabilities further by presenting the account of a person with a disability, who in the face of limited resources, has worked to make a living.

3 Method

3.1 Study design

The study was descriptive narrative research which used both observation and face-to-face interviews to collect data. The design provides the opportunity to closely study a private life of the interviewee with the aim of drawing inferences for the general well-being of the society (Muylaert, 2014). It encompasses the study of individual sharing their life story which has the potential to influence others or bring about transformation (Muylaert, 2014; Sandelowski, 1991). In achieving inclusive society in Ghana, it is important to project the image of persons with disabilities. Consistently, studies have reported the challenges faced by persons with disabilities (Avoke, 2002; Agbenyega, 2003; Baffoe, 2013; Kassah, 2008) without reporting on issues which could encourage them to live independently. In this study, our objective was to report on success stories of person with disability who has succeeded in a field of endeavour despite societal barriers. From a constructivist perspective of representing reality from the participant's perspective (Etherington, 2013), we documented the life story of a woman with a disability with the aim of gaining an understanding of how she became independent to encourage others who find themselves in a similar situation.

The participant for this study was Rahi (who agreed that we used her first name in writing the report) a 38-year-old married woman with two kids living with physical disabilities. She is a renowned seamstress who has committed herself to train other women with disabilities without a job in the community. She was born with her disability which she believed was caused by polio.

3.2 Data collection and procedures

We led discussions with executives of disabled people's organisation [DPO] in Tamale, which is the capital of the Northern Region of Ghana, to assist us in identifying any member of the association who has excelled in field of work. Rahi was recommended, and we met her in June 2016 and discussed the study objective with her and sought permission to use her for this study. As reported by Muylaert (2014), studying the life of an individual require close observation to corroborate the story of the participant. Due to this, we spent one week in the community observing and gathering information from family and friends in the community. We arranged a face-to-face interview at her place of work on the seventh-day of our observation.

We did not use structured interview guide which according to Muylaert (2014), is ideal for a narrative study in order to keep the conversation flowing. The interview centred on her daily routine, family support, access to education, job opportunities, her personal motivations, her views on begging and her appeal to the government for support. The interview was conducted by the first author and lasted two hours which was audio-recorded with permission from the participant.

3.3 Data analysis

Since Rahi could not speak English, we conducted the interview in the Twi language which is the dominant language spoken by most people in Ghana. After the interview session, we played back the audio to Rahi to make a decision on content which we could include in our reporting. Since the study was done from a constructivist perspective, it was important that we allowed the participant to listen to the taped conversation to make sure that her story is rightly reported (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The audio data was then transcribed verbatim into English by the first and second author separately. They met and condensed the two documents together before typing in Microsoft Word for analysis. We followed Muylaert's (2014) steps to analyse data in the narrative study. In Microsoft Word, we drew a table which was split into three columns under the following headings; transcription, reduction and keywords. We extracted key categories from the interviews which were assigned codes. These were pulled together to form the story in the analyses.

4 Results: Rahi's story

I could not go to school due to my disability. The school was very far, and I could not crawl such a long distance to attend school. I was able to go in the morning, but due to the sun, I found it difficult to come home when I close. The distance was too far. I told my father that the school is very far for me so I wanted to stop. Looking at how I was suffering, he accepted, because he did not have money to support my transportation. Even my health care was a problem sometimes my sister would come and tell him to take me to the hospital, but my father would refuse due to lack of money. My parents are good such that I cannot compare my mother to anybody. My mother does not have money, but she considers my disability and help me with the little she has. It would be better for family members to help us so that we become useful with our lives.

Even though I was not able to go to school, that did not deter me from pursuing my dream in life. I move from where we were to Tamale where I came to learn vocational training. When I came, somebody introduced me to DPO, and I have been a member ever since. While learning the training, I was also farming and selling bread

in front of our house and was able to raise money to pay for my hospital bills and also support my training. I am now a seamstress. I work for a company. What I have realised is that persons with disabilities are mainly poor because many employers do not want to employ them. When I was looking for employment, my employer told me I am disabled, so I will not be able to do the work. I responded that I could do the work since it is not my legs which I will use to work. When I was accepted, they shared responsibilities for us (employees). I did not exclude myself but agreed that all of us would do the sweeping. I accepted responsibility because I wanted to prove to them that disability is not inability. It hurt me that they were using my disability as a basis to deny me a job because I did not create myself so there is no need for people to judge me based on how I look. Besides my disability fits me and that is why God made me as such. Everyone could be disabled at any time so we should not use disability as a basis to discriminate between others. Even with my disability, I have been able to work effectively and now I have been able to buy my wheelchair. I do get money on my own, so I can buy whatever I want. I am proud to be employed, very happy to be working and can work like any other person.

I am now financially independent. People in this community see every disabled person as a beggar. They think we are all beggars. They have made it general to cover everyone. At times someone will see me in my wheelchair going to town or moving around, and they will come and give me money. I have been rejecting such things. I believe those who beg on the road side need help. However, they can also help themselves. My fellows with disabilities, my advice is stop begging and do something because everything starts small. I was selling bread on a small table in front of our house. That is how you should begin, and it will surely grow with time. With that, I was able to generate money to support my training. I did not rely on people. It took determination to get to where I wanted to be. So you also can. I have married, but I have not given birth, but I take care of one child and also help my siblings and their children.

I tell you that if you have disabled yourself, they will call you disabled but if you are active, no one will call you a disabled. No one calls me a disabled because I have decided to work hard. Where I am living now, there is no tap water in the house, so when I close from work, I take my bucket and go out and fetch water and cook for myself. If you are not disabling yourself, your neighbours will not call you a disabled. I really work hard and sometimes if I tell people the kind of work I do, they doubt about me. I work on the farm, I crawl and work on the farm. I do not consider my disability, but I always try to work hard. So when you go to where I stay and make enquiries about me, they will tell you I can do everything. I sometimes wake up at 4:30 am or 5:00 am and do my house chores, and by 6:30 am I will be at work because my work starts at 7:30 am. We should keep in mind that disability is not an excuse to be lazy, dependent and unproductive. This is because some disabled persons sleep and

wake up at 8:00 am or 9:00 am so if you have to send your child or sister to school or you need money to work, and you sleep like that how that can be possible? I want all disabled persons to behave like me! I want those who are not working to come to us and learn the sowing. I tell you, because of how hard I have worked, my employer now recruits other disables who are walking without jobs. Now there are other disables working with us. If I speak like this, some disabled will say I am working that is why I am saying that. However, they do not know how I suffered to come by this job. So, friends, you have to struggle for yourself because very few people and organisations are willing to help disabled people.

People always say that there are so many NGOs who are helping disables, but many NGOs support non-disabled than us. They spend much money on non-disabled and neglect us disables. Many of the disabled are not having money to feed, so I am pleading with authority to help create opportunities for disables who are beggars to find something to do. Even if they cannot take part in skilled training, they could be supported to do business. Also, I implore NGOs to help disables. Because I went to one NGO when I was aspiring for Assemblywoman in my village, but they didn't help me. They told me they would help me but they did not until I finished my campaign. Anyway, I lost, but I will try again next time. I campaigned, but no one voted for me.

5 Discussion

Resilience theory discussed the strength in disability which policy makers could capitalise on and support persons with disabilities in societies. Ghana has ratified international and domestic legislation in an effort towards achieving equal rights for all persons in the society. One major recommendation has always been awareness creation for societies to recognise the abilities of persons living with disabilities. However, persons with disabilities have endured systematic discrimination despite the existence of both local and international legal laws aimed at protecting their rights (Anthony, 2011; Opoku, 2016). As documented by other studies, there are barriers faced by persons with disabilities in most developing countries in which Ghana is no exception. Barriers such as negative perception, limited access to education, jobs and other necessities hinder the inclusion of persons with disabilities in societies (Agbenyega, 2003; Kuyini et al. 2011; Munyi, 2012; Opoku et al. 2016a; 2016b; Naami & Hayashi, 2012). It is unsurprising that the resilience of persons with disabilities has received less attention in contemporary disability discourses.

Persons with disabilities have endured many years of marginalisation, but many of them have been able to survive, which underscores their spiritedness. Historically, persons with disabilities have not been favoured in societies because cultural interpretations were given to their impairments (Avoke, 2002; Baffoe, 2013; Kassah, 1998). However, their resilience is undoubted as they have been able to endure the

harsh environmental conditions while striving to make a livelihood. The reduction of persons with disabilities to individuals who feed on the benevolence of society was a major boost for the participant to overcome this erroneous notion. Persons with disabilities need to motivate themselves to reduce negative perceptions about them. As demonstrated by the participant, they have to fight and participate in social activities for society to see their ability.

The support Rahi had at the family level was invaluable which urged her to exploit her potential in life. The family provides invaluable support to its members with disabilities which are an essential resource, and motivation individuals need to enable them to unearth their talents (Kassah, 2008; Kassah et al. 2014). The acceptance of persons with disabilities at the family level would allow them to discover their potentials and confidence to go over barriers in the society (Abgenyega, 2003; Kassah et al. 2014). Despite the fact that Rahi's family did not have enough financial resources to enrol her in school, they supported her to acquire vocation skill to enable her to earn a living. With some push from family members and determination to make a living, Rahi supported herself through farming and petty trading to make a living. It is advisable that poverty or limited support from the family should not be a basis for persons with disabilities to sit idle and depend on the benevolence of society.

The needs of persons with disabilities are mainly ignored by society as they are looked down upon and expected to continue to maintain their status quo. Adverse perceptions about persons with disabilities have been a basis for their exclusion in societal activities (Abgenyega, 2003; Avoke, 2002; Kassah, 1998; Baffoe, 2013). Consequently, the inaccessibility of education indicates the absence of opportunities for persons with disabilities. In Ghana, special schools are found to be few and access limited to few children with disabilities (Opoku et al. 2016a; 2016b). This brings to bear the need for government to prioritise the implementation of inclusive education for persons with disabilities to expand their career opportunities in life. However, the implementation of the policy has been found to be facing challenges which mean that the government would be unable to extend the programme to other parts of the country (Anthony, 2011; Opoku et al. 2016a). Largely, their needs are overlooked and unable to benefit from jobs opportunities or engaging in productive ventures education open for the larger citizenry. It was not surprising that persons with disabilities have taken up begging as an alternative means of livelihood (Kassah, 2008). Due to the widespread of begging among persons with disabilities, they are seen as needy persons who may be unable to attain higher heights.

The absence of jobs has contributed to most persons with disabilities engaging in begging which seems to be the most easily available jobs. This kind of mentality further weakens persons with disabilities about aspiring to achieve higher heights. The engagement of most persons with disabilities in the begging business might have led to a generalisation that they are all beggars. It is important to state that not every

person with a disability are enthused about this kind of disability-begging synergy as they are motivated to feed on their sweat. As Rahi said, some people tried to give her money thinking that she is also engaged in this act which she said she refused all times. Rahi has demonstrated that most persons with disabilities are capable of supporting themselves and change the erroneous notion of society against them. Persons with disabilities could attain the self-worth in society in the event they are supported either by family or at the national level to overcome social barriers and engage in productive activities.

6 Conclusion

The study was only limited to only one person in the Northern Region of Ghana who has defied the current social obstacles and involved in activities reserved for other members of the society. Also, we relied on accounts of executives of the DPOs in the study area to settle on the participant, and we are unable to tell if she is the individual who have excelled in her field of work. Therefore, it is recommended that future studies look at the broader spectrum of society and engage persons with disabilities who have been able or do something to support themselves. Despite the limitation of the study, it provided a rare opportunity for an individual with a disability to share her life experiences.

The study has demonstrated that there is the ability in disability. Thus, policy-makers should focus on effective ways to support them to exhibit their talents in life. To achieve an inclusive society, the creation of space for persons with disabilities to participate in societal activities is inevitable. Persons with disabilities are capable of working as any individual so society, especially the family, should give them necessary support to enable them to become productive (Kassah et al. 2014; Naami & Hayashi, 2012). When such opportunities are given to individuals with disabilities regarding having access to education, vocational training or life skills, they will not become a burden on society (Baffoe, 2013; Crowley et al. 2013; Kuyini et al. 2011). On the other hand, person with disability has to be proud of their disability and not demeaning themselves. Once they accepted their disability and determined to work like any other person, society would open up spaces for them. It is not their destiny to depend on others to make a living as with the necessary training; they could work to support themselves.

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