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Key Issues in the
Intersection
Between Gender,
Disability and
Poverty in Low
Income
Countries

A Working Paper by
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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection between gender disability and poverty in Low Income Countries (LICs), exploring the current situation faced by women with disabilities from an intersectional feminist point of view.

It then goes on to describe some of the major theories that have been used to understand the experiences of women with disabilities, such as intersectionality and feminist disability theory.

Ultimately it aims to highlight women with disabilities as holders of unique experiences, and advocates for their voices to be included in mainstream development.

Key words:

Gender | Disability | Intersectional | Poverty | Feminist | Low Income Countries (LIC) | Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) | Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD)

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Contents

Introduction	2
Gender, Disability, and Poverty in Practice	2
Experiences of Women with Disabilities	3
Intersectionality and the Experience of Disability.....	6
References:	8

Introduction

Historically, disability has been a neglected topic within the field of international development. More recently, with the growth of a coordinated disability movement, as well as a greater policy focus on inclusion, the need to respond to disability is now emerging as a development priority. Disability is explicitly mentioned in 5 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, compared with none of the Millennium Development Goals. One hundred and eighty two countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD), and this number is continuously growing (UN, 2020). This shift has largely been down to the advocacy of people with disabilities themselves, in both the Global North and South. Disability rights movements worldwide have campaigned for access, inclusion, and human rights, most notably under the banner of the “nothing about us, without us” campaign (Shakespeare, 2018).

Disability has been conceptualised in a number of ways, including through medical and charity models - which promoted a paternalistic understanding of disability - or more recently, through the social and human rights models, which frame disability within the wider society. In line with the language of the CRPD, the human rights model of disability promotes people with disabilities as human beings with full legal personhood, rather than merely objects of pity and care (O’Mahony & Quinlivan, 2020). This increased focus on human rights goes beyond the social model of disability, and aims to understand people with disabilities as holders of unique experiences.

The recent work of large multilateral bodies such as the UN, WHO, and IFAD, as well as the push from disabled persons’ organisations, point to a near-global consensus on the need to remove the discriminatory barriers that hinder the full participation of people with disabilities in society. Yet many people with disabilities continue to experience discrimination and stigmatisation, especially in the Global South. These experiences are often reinforced by social exclusion and economic deprivation (Cobley, 2018).

To quote Smith and Hutchinson (2004):

“Until it is legitimate, respectable, and acceptable to be a person with a disability in the world... and until the non-disabled majority perceives that millions of people with impairments are fully human and can contribute in meaningful ways to the economy and family, that world will fight against every legal or moral claim made upon it to change institutions, cultural practices, and physical structures to become readily inclusive.”

Despite these comments being made almost twenty years ago, stigma and negative attitudes towards disability still abound. People with disabilities remain one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups in the world today, and the international development community – through the adoption of both the CRPD and the SDGs - has now clearly committed to confronting the various forms of discrimination and injustice that create and reinforce disability. However, it is only by furthering our understanding of the issues and challenges faced by people with disabilities in their everyday lives, that we can move towards a more inclusive society.

Gender, Disability, and Poverty in Practice

Looking first to the experience of poverty, the UN Disability and Development Report (2019) also acknowledges that people with disabilities face physical, social, economic and environmental barriers to participation, which may lead to poverty and hunger. According to Banks et al. (2017), data shows that people with disabilities in low- and middle-income countries are poorer than their non-disabled peers in terms of access to education, healthcare, income, etc., and are much more likely to

experience multiple deprivations when it comes to poverty. The CRPD also acknowledges the connection between disability and poverty, stating that “the majority of persons with disabilities live in poverty”, and calling for greater recognition of the right of people with disabilities to an adequate standard of living (UN, 2006).

The World Health Organisation (2011) also found that disability may increase the risk of poverty, and poverty may increase the risk of disability. This reciprocal relationship between disability and poverty has received much attention over the past 10 years, with research such as Groce et al. (2011) demonstrating casual links between poverty and disability. Moodley & Graham (2015) also argue that disability and poverty are often manifestations of the same processes, whereby people with disabilities often experience similar processes of marginalisation as poor people. This paper suggests that theories of intersectionality provide a perfect lens to better understand the mutual processes of marginalisation and exclusion that pertain to poverty and disability. Cobley (2018) goes on to argue that issues around poverty, exclusion and disability are often more pressing for people with disabilities than impairment related concerns.

Taking a combined view of poverty and gender, the IFAD (2020) have reported that gender inequality stems from systemic gender biases in the form of customs, beliefs and attitudes that confine women mainly to the domestic sphere in many countries. Gender gaps in the distribution of economic resources, combined with heavy workloads, continue to impose severe time burdens on women, especially in the Global South. Women living with disabilities are often at a greater disadvantage than women without disabilities, due to the increased discrimination that emerges with the intersection of gender and disability (Groce et al., 2014). Of course, gender, disability and poverty are not the only factors of identity which may lead to discrimination, but they are some of the most influential.

Exploring all three factors of identity together, Cobley (2018) highlights that consideration needs to be given to the gender aspect of disability, and how this serves as a main factor in determining the meaning and implication of disability, and its perception by the world of people without disabilities. This is an interesting statement, but Cobley’s choice to not elaborate further is emblematic of issues in this area as a whole. It is clear from this example that many researchers have made the links between gender, disability and poverty, but have failed to dive deeper into gendered research. Abu-Habib (1997) further argues that the worlds of both feminism and disability discourse have failed to make the necessary links between gender, disability and poverty, as aspects of social identity which lead to potential marginalisation from a society which is essentially designed and run by able-bodied men. Although great progress has been made in the years following Abu-Habib’s comments, research linking gender and disability is still nascent, and so far seems to lack some cohesion.

Experiences of Women with Disabilities

Although poverty and disability affects both men and women in LICs, long-standing, gender-based discrimination experienced by women in many societies compounds the impact (Welch, 2002). The ILO (2015) also highlights that men with disabilities are almost twice as likely as women with disabilities to be in employment. For many women living in countries without robust disability-related social welfare programmes, these barriers can translate into extreme poverty.

Despite the consensus that women with disabilities face different problems from men with disabilities, there has been disagreement over whether they are necessarily worse off than their male counterparts. Some authors have used additive approaches to describe women with disabilities as ‘double disadvantaged’, whereby women are discriminated against based on both their gender, and their disability status. A recent CBM report (2018) explains that in addition to suffering discrimination based on their disability, women with disabilities are also subjected to discrimination on grounds of

sex, as experienced by women the world over. This double discrimination means that disabled women's experiences are profoundly different from those of disabled men.

An example of the discrimination directly faced by women with disabilities comes from a study by Katusi & Mojtahedi (2015) in Ethiopia, which found that the intersection between gender and disability tends to lead to a denial of opportunities and choices for women with disabilities, particularly in the areas of education and employment. This is largely due to societal expectation that women with disabilities will fulfil traditional gender roles within the household. These findings are emblematic of the issues and barriers faced by many women with disabilities worldwide.

As well as the challenges outlined here, women with disabilities often face violations of their human rights more commonly than others. Both CBM (2018) and Plan (2013), cite the statistic that women and girls with disabilities are 2 to 3 times more likely to be victims of physical and sexual abuse than women without a disability.

Globally, data on gender based violence against women with disabilities is very limited, which in itself speaks to the depth of the issue. Despite this, anecdotal evidence is telling, with CBM (2018) stating that it “is clear is that women with disabilities are more exposed to practices which qualify as torture or inhuman or degrading treatment; are more susceptible to violence and abuse; and are at an increased risk of poverty...” Pearce (2015) reports that sexual violence was the most common type of GBV experienced by research participants with disabilities, with some women being subjected to rape on a regular basis, and by multiple perpetrators. The World Bank (2019) also found that “there are many cases of involuntary sterilization being used to restrict the fertility of some people with a disability, particularly those with an intellectual disability, and almost always women...” These harmful practices are most often perceived as legitimate medical care for women with disabilities, and are condoned by legislation in many places (World Bank, 2019). Additionally, if women with disabilities do bear children, globally, mothers with disabilities are up to 10 times more likely to have their children removed from their care based on their disability, rather than on evidence of child neglect (Ortoleva & Frohmader, 2013).

The World Bank (2019) reports that young women with disabilities are particularly at risk from sexual violence, highlighting that in East Africa, some people believe that having sex with a girl with albinism may cure HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections, or that it brings luck and wealth. As persons with disabilities are often perceived as asexual, girls and young women with disabilities are presumed to be virgins, and are easy targets for sexual violence because of their disabilities, which make it less likely that the violence will be reported or prosecuted.

Overall, the UN (2020) summarises that the systemic marginalization and abuse of women and girls with disabilities, coupled with the attitudinal and environmental barriers they face, lead to lower economic and social status; increased risk of violence including sexual violence; discrimination and harmful gender-based discriminatory practices; and barriers to accessing education, health care, services, and justice. These barriers hinder their full enjoyment of social and cultural rights on an equal basis with others. The report also states that women and girls who experience intersecting forms of discrimination as described above, also experience higher rates of unemployment, and tend to encounter other gender-based barriers such as precarious livelihoods, and unequal access to and control over resources. From an intersectional feminist point of view, it is clear that cultural systems of dominance heavily influence the lives of women with disabilities in the Global South. The social institutions surrounding women with disabilities need to be examined and critiqued, in order to understand and combat the many barriers that exist to women with disabilities' full participation in society.

Palmer & Woodcroft-Lee (1990) echo the point that society's resources are often unavailable to women with disabilities, because they have been structurally defined as unemployable, as well as unable to fulfil traditional roles often associated with womanhood. In patriarchal societies, such as many African countries, the social role of women and girls is often primarily reproductive. Djoyou Kanga (2011) found this role to be problematic, as women with disabilities are often considered to be asexual, unable to marry, or to have and raise children. The issue of marriage comes up often in literature surrounding women with disabilities, and appears to be of great concern in patriarchal societies. Naidu et al. (2005) found that women with disabilities "as compared with women without disabilities, and men with disabilities, are more likely to be unmarried, married later or divorced earlier". African women with disabilities also "tend to be shunned in the marriage 'market,' whereas more men with disabilities actually get married" (Djoyou Kanga, 2011). For women and girls, the effects that disabilities have on health and beauty can also lower their status, and even devalue their families, both in terms of wealth and social standing. With fewer opportunities to fulfil this reproductive role, women and girls with disabilities usually experience more discrimination than their non-disabled peers (Chataika, 2013).

There then arises a question around women who acquire a disability later in life, for example after child birth, or following gender-based violence. Quantitative research from Dunkle et al. (2018) found that among women under 40 years of age in low income countries, 61.5% of women with disabilities had experienced gender based violence, as compared with 32.4% of women with disabilities over 40. This suggests that young women with disabilities experience more stigma and abuse than older women with disabilities, but does not expand on the social roles attached to living with a disability at any age in life. How does disability impact their social standing, life course, and income in this case? What roles do they play in society, and if they have become disabled later in life, are these different to their previously 'able-bodied' roles?

Arnade & Haefner (2006) have also described women with disabilities as being 'doubly disadvantaged' when compared to men with disabilities, stating that: "While women with disabilities have much in common with men with disabilities, women with disabilities have to face multiple discrimination in many cases, so that they are often more disadvantaged than men with disabilities in similar circumstances". Price and Goyal (2016) however, present an interesting argument that generalised disability analysis surrounding multiple disadvantage has led to many myths surrounding women with disabilities. They propose that women with disabilities:

"are almost universally believed to be: living in poverty, often close to destitution; without work and without education, thus lacking skills to support themselves; subject to widespread magical beliefs of fate and misfortune; asexual and unable to establish a relationship or have children..."

While Price and Goyal do concede that generalisations such as the above do not emerge without there being some truth to them - mostly in terms of the poverty and lack of education women with disabilities often face - they nevertheless argue that the view of women with disabilities as victims of multiple disadvantage is a surface view of the issue, and that there is more contextual detail found in local epistemologies, which offer deeper perspectives on the lives of women living with disabilities in the Global South, "perspectives which have been commonly ignored or dismissed by international researchers".

It should also be considered that studying 'multiple disadvantage' may cause the misrecognition of multiply marginalised groups (Cobley, 2018). There are a myriad of factors that may cause the marginalisation of any one group of people, and these factors may influence and interact with each other to create new or heightened experience of disadvantage. Taking an intersectional view on the

situation of women with disabilities may be more useful in terms of exploring multiple disadvantage and understanding how different factors of identity interact and create oppression.

Certainly, more focus on the lived experiences of women with disabilities would be useful in providing a deeper view of the issue, as well as moving the discipline towards lending greater autonomy to women with disabilities themselves, thus allowing them to shape the discourse.

Intersectionality and the Experience of Disability

As a general concept, intersectionality is a way of understanding and analysing the complexity of the world, of people, and of human experiences. It recognises that people's lives are influenced by many different factors, and are shaped not by a single axis of social division, such as race, gender or class, but by many axes that work together and influence each other (Collins & Bilge, 2016). At its core, intersectionality is used to describe how the major axes of social division in any given society operate not as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other, and work together.

While the intersectionality discourse has historically been bound to the experiences of African-American women in the United States in the 1960s (Collins & Blige, 2016), it is also useful as an analytical tool for understanding disability. In this sphere, it is often used to understand and explore the issues faced by subjects who are seen to deviate from society's perception of 'normality'. Intersectionality calls attention to the limitations of this single-axis analysis, which may consider race, gender, religion, language, or disability - as if these are ever strictly autonomous categories. The intersectional approach aims to highlight hidden, interrelated oppressions that reproduce inequality and further the misrecognition of multiply marginalised groups (Wallace et al., 2018).

Disability often intersects with other sources of social disadvantage, which can create compounding forms of oppression and exclusion. These interactions need to be understood and accounted for in order to understand the ways in which race, gender, and socio-economic status intersect with the experience of disability (Liasidou, 2013). Discrimination against people with disabilities forms part of a complex web of social conditions which subjugate certain factors of identity, and create compounding forms of oppression and exclusion that should be addressed through policy and research. Intersectional understandings of disability expose the multiple dynamics that impact upon constructing disabled peoples' identities (Liasidou, 2013). These identities are not fixed, and may shift over time.

People with disabilities, especially in LICs are frequently essentialised, and assumed to share the same views, experiences, and priorities, regardless of gender, age, cultural background, socio-economic status, and other categories of difference. Consequently, primacy is given to "disability" over other key attributes of a person, meaning that the interactions among all factors are often neglected. In order to counteract this essentialism, an intersectional approach is needed (Goethals et al., 2015).

Intersectionality can be used not only to account for multiple complex identities, but also to identify the nature of power in social life. This is particularly relevant to the interactions between poverty and disability, as power is very often linked to the social roles people with disabilities occupy. Effective use of intersectionality in this case calls for an examination of social identities, as well as structural inequalities, and the relationship between the two (Wallace et al, 2018).

According to Moodley & Graham (2015), there has been very little research into the interactions between gender, disability, and poverty in the Global South. However, anecdotal data shows that women with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed than men with disabilities, and also tend to earn less in cases where they are employed (Emmet & Alant, 2006). Similarly, as described in earlier

sections, women with disabilities tend to fare worse than their male counterparts on educational outcomes, as well as access to social welfare assistance.

Many women occupy caring roles within households, as well as society, and as such their participation in the labour market is limited, thus also limiting income. Moodley & Graham (2015) also found that living with a disability serves to compound women's experience of limited participation in the labour market, and low levels of employment mean that women with disabilities are more likely to report increased disillusionment with the labour market. This also leads to a greater likelihood of women with disabilities opting out of the labour market altogether.

There is a definite gap in the literature here, as many articles surrounding the intersectionality between gender, disability and poverty only go as far as acknowledging that the relationship exists, without working to further examine the causes and effects of this relationship. Information is available on the intersection between gender, race, and disability, as intersectionality has historically been used as a tool by black women with disabilities, but these reports do not often include poverty analysis, and are almost universally based in the Global North. Nguyen (2021) also argues for the use of intersectional tools when exploring the nuances of lives of women and girls with disabilities in LICs, as the "Third World Woman" has often been assumed to be a homogenous category by academics from the Global North.

Disability studies is historically bound to its origins in the UK, and while research from the Global North can produce knowledge that is valuable within its own distinct political context, when applied to the Global South, it most often fails to recognize the unique epistemological and contextual dynamics in the Global South (Nguyen & Stienstra, 2021). In an early paper, Grech (2009) argues that disability theory in the Global South has generally constituted an exportation of ideas from north to south, together with inferences from the Western context about the presumed situation of people with disabilities. This conceptualisation of disability, he believes, discounts the wide and varied socio-economic, political, and historical contexts of developing countries, which have influenced the lives of people with disabilities. As of 2014, another of his papers reasserts that the politics of excluding disabled voices from the Global South, "reflects the continued dominance of Western knowledge, practices and institutions, the unfettered control over what counts as knowledge, and how it is produced, by whom, and how it should be disseminated" (Grech, 2014).

Recognising the colonial history of research and knowledge collection, Meekosha (2008) suggests that: "We need to develop a Southern [relevant to the Global South] theory of disability that challenges the implicit values and concepts of contemporary disability studies and includes the lasting impact of colonialism".

In conclusion, it is clear that a number of barriers exist to women with disabilities achieving full enjoyment of their rights. Having been historically marginalised, women with disabilities are now fighting for their voices to be heard on global platforms, and the international development community is beginning to take notice. What is clear from the above studies is that a number of complexities exist in the intersectionality between gender, poverty and disability, and these need to be further examined and studied, with special focus on the voices of female academics with disabilities from LICs. It is important moving forward, that women with disabilities in LICs are acknowledged as holders of unique experiences, who should be involved in every stage of development policy and practice.

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