

Examining the motivations of women students with disabilities' participation in university education in Kenya

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This paper discusses factors that influence women with disabilities in Kenya to pursue a university education. The paper draws on findings from a larger research project that studied the experiences of women students with disabilities in Kenyan universities. Findings show that the need to become economically independent, the desire to become a 'somebody', and the determination to challenge their subjugated position in society, with a view to rising above the prejudiced notions of 'lack', is central to the women's motivation to attend university. The paper shows that while some of the motivations of women with disabilities to go to university are similar to those of non-disabled individuals, women with disabilities have to struggle much harder to accomplish their goal because of societal barriers and prejudices towards people with disabilities. The success of the women in the study highlights the need for the society, families, governments, and friends to be more supportive and more systematic in ensuring that individuals with disabilities get the access and resources they need to attain their educational goals and dreams.

Keywords: Kenya; disability; women; university education; motivation

Introduction

Education plays an important role in any country's socio-economic development through availing knowledge and skills that produce a stronger workforce and that impact a country's cultural, social, economic, and political dynamics (Amutabi 2003). In Kenya, university education¹ is an important bridge to accessing employment and a pathway to personal prosperity. The Kenyan government formally recognizes university education as key to human development and as a crucial exit route from poverty. Since independence in 1963, the government has made efforts to expand university education in order to support and accommodate the increasing demand for university enrolment. This expansion has also been prompted by the rising demand for an educated workforce (Chege and Sifuna 2006). Consequently, more students in Kenya choose to attend post-secondary education in order to be better able to compete for the limited job opportunities available. However, despite this widespread recognition of the importance of education, students with disabilities² remain grossly underrepresented in the universities. Drawing on data from a larger qualitative research project, which examined the experiences of women

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students with disabilities in two Kenyan universities, this paper discusses factors that motivate women with disabilities to attend university. The findings offer useful indicators to educators, parents, and policy-makers on ways to support the learning and academic aspirations of disabled women students.

Research context

This research is limited to the African context. It was conducted in Kenya, a country located in Eastern Africa. The country's economy is largely dependent on agriculture and tourism, with half of its approximately 37 million people relying on subsistence production. The majority of the population lives in rural areas although there is an upsurge in the urban population, due to rural-urban migration by high school and college/university graduates seeking jobs in the cities.

Very few studies have been done to determine the condition of people with disabilities in Kenya. These studies show that disabled people in the country remain a marginalized group. Provision of essential services such as education and healthcare to this population is often given secondary treatment and as a result their overall condition, when compared to that of the non-disabled population, remains wanting (Nkinyangi and Mbindyo 1982; Republic of Kenya 1993).

With regard to education, most persons with disabilities in Kenya have limited or no education. They are poor and live in rural areas (Oriedo 2003). A survey conducted in July 2003 by a Task Force on Special Needs Education revealed that the majority of students with disabilities in Kenya do not receive any special education services and are either at home or in regular schools without any support (National Development Plan 2002–2008 cited in Republic of Kenya 2003, 17). This shows that, in spite of the acknowledgement that education can enhance the economic and social development of individuals with disabilities (Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Education 2006), disabled people continue to have limited or no access to education.

Only a few disabled people make it to higher education. A majority of those who enrol in elementary school dropout due to negative societal attitudes, rigid curriculum content, inadequate infrastructure, poor facilities, and scarcity of resources. These factors force poor parents to make difficult choices in deciding how to invest their limited resources (Republic of Kenya, Ministry of Education 2006). In times of economic difficulties when investments in education are threatened, the first people to suffer are the already marginalized groups, especially the girls, the poor, and those with disabilities (Gathenya 2003). In fact, a survey conducted in 1993 on the situation of disabled people in Kenya by gender showed that the greatest majority of disabled people are found in the category of 'no-education'. The survey also revealed that disabled girls were underrepresented in the entire educational system (Republic of Kenya 1993). This underrepresentation of disabled girls in the education system was attributed to cultural practices of favouring the education of boys compared to girls and lack of sufficient resources both in the family and in the education system to support the education of disabled students (Republic of Kenya 1993). These findings are consistent with prevailing national trends in gender differences in educational opportunity, whereby males dominate, with respect to the number of educated persons at all levels of education in the country (Kamau 1996; Kiluva-Ndunda 2000). What is unclear is how disabled women students fair in university educational levels, and this is what the larger project referred to above sought to examine.

Perceptions and interpretations of disability in Kenya

Kenya is a diverse country with about 50 linguistic communities. Each of these communities has their own unique cultural practices and beliefs. Disability is also understood and dealt with differently in these varied cultures. For instance, Ogechi and Ruto (2002) investigating disability among the Gusii and Nandi³ communities in Kenya demonstrated that impairment did not necessarily determine the status and inclusion of a person in society. Family and kinship ties, competence in doing useful tasks for the good of the household, and the ability to behave in a socially accepted manner were more important. Ogechi and Ruto (2002) further noted that not having children was considered a far more 'serious disability'. For the Gusii and Nandi people, beliefs about the origin of disability and how it could be prevented were more crucial in understanding disability and disabled people in society (Ogechi and Ruto 2002).

Similarly, Talle, writing about the Maasai of East Africa, noted that 'the Maasai do not regard people with a disabling condition as a single unified category to whom they relate by a standardized set of behaviours (1995, 56). The Maasai did not use disability as a basis for defining persons, rather one's sociability was more important. Impairment was seen as one aspect of being a person (1995, 71) and disabled people were part and parcel of society. But, being integrated in a social group had its disadvantages. For example, since the disabled and weak children were not offered any special treatment, this resulted in early deaths (1995, 67). This non-partial treatment of disabled people might explain why travellers who were struck by the absence of disabled people among the Maasai drew the erroneous conclusion that the Maasai practiced infanticide on children with congenital deformities (Merker 1910, 51 as cited in Talle 1995, 67). Ingstad (1999, 757) emphasized that when African families were unable to cope with the care of a disabled relative it was more a result of poverty, lack of support, and lack of knowledge about how to improve the lives of these persons than the result of social ostracism.

Even so, African communities have changed over the years. Outside influences, particularly shifts from communalism to capitalism among other factors, have impacted perceptions of people with disabilities in Africa today. Disability is also interpreted through religious and cultural lens. Some communities see disability as a punishment from the gods for a people or community's wrongdoing (Ogechi and Ruto 2002). In such cases rituals are performed and precautions taken to correct those wrongs. Other communities see disabled individuals as 'sacred beings' with divine powers who serve as rainmakers, seers, diviners, prophets etc. and thus treat them with respect. Notwithstanding these varying interpretations of disability, the legislative framework in Kenya adopts the following World Health Organization definition:

Impairment: any loss or abnormality of a psychological or anatomical structure or function. Impairments are disturbances at the level of the organ.

Disability: any restrictions or inability (resulting from an impairment) to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being. This describes a functional limitation or activity restriction caused by impairment. Disabilities are descriptions of disturbances in function at the level of the person.

Handicap: any disadvantage for a given individual, resulting from impairment or a disability that limits or prevents the fulfillment of a role that is normal...for that individual. The classification of handicap is a classification of circumstances that place individuals at a disadvantage relative to their peers when viewed from the norms of

society. The classification of handicap deals with the relationship that evolves between society, culture and people who have impairments or disabilities, as reflected in people's life roles. (cited in Titchkosky 2003, 14)

This is the definition that guided the Persons with Disability Act (2003) and the recently passed constitution in the summer of 2010. The definition takes into account the issue of environment, and recognizes the role of social factors in the production of disablement (see Turmusani 2003).

Overview of relevant literature

Existing literature reveals that disabled people experience marginalization in society which often leads to social exclusion. As a result, disabled people remain among the poorest citizens globally and have limited access to education and employment. Scholars critical of medical readings of disability observe that the societal deprivation and exclusion of disabled people is not necessarily a consequence of having an impairment, but is the result of the psychological barriers and restrictions created by society (Fontes 2008). Thus, Oliver (1990) concluded that disablement is a creation of our societies (Fontes 2008; Thomas 1999; Wendell 1996) because of the prevailing 'ableist' societal structuring by non-disabled persons that presents individuals with disabilities as deviant and as being outside the constructed societal 'norm' (Goffman 1963; Titchkosky 2003). It is through this construction that disabled people are placed in a dependency situation and portrayed as passive players in their own lives, 'unable' to lead the so called 'normal' life (Fontes 2008).

In education, although an increasing number of disabled students are graduating from elementary and secondary schools and more are joining colleges and universities, disability discrimination persists (Fuller et al. 2004). The increased enrolment could be attributed to the shifts in understanding of disability and particularly the shift away from the traditional interpretation of disability predominantly using the medical model (Titchkosky 2000) towards more inclusive interpretations of disability. Thus, more positive efforts in addressing impediments to disabled students' success in education have been a consequence of the move toward inclusive educational practices that are based on the social models of interpretation of disability. The social model puts weight on how physical, cultural, and social environments exclude or disadvantage disabled people (Oliver 1990; Soorenian 2008; Thomas 1999). This does not mean that the 'can't do' attitudes towards disabled students have ended. In fact, globally, poor advice to, and lack of encouragement of, disabled students, which starts at elementary school through to secondary and college/university, continues (Stannett 2006).

In Kenya, disability oppression (Thomas 1999) is manifest through practices such as having low expectations of disabled people; setting up structures that fail to adhere to the Universal Principles of Design; using ableist language; limitations in accessing employment; limited admissions and accommodations of disabled students in educational settings etc. This is compounded by, among other factors, a lack of resources and commitment on the part of government and society to address the plight of disabled people (Kiwara 1998). Many people do not even know that they are exuding ableism. When a persons' needs are not addressed, there are limitations when it comes to accessing essential societal services. As Thomas notes, 'disability becomes a particular form of unequal social relationship which manifests itself

through exclusionary and oppressive practices at the interpersonal, organizational, cultural and socio-cultural levels in society' (1999, 40). Disabled people in Kenya are, however, actively challenging ableism and exclusion using different approaches. The disabled women students interviewed in this study chose to fight ableism by, among other ways, pursuing higher education.

Study approach

The study on which this paper is based was qualitative in nature. It was conducted in Kenya in 2006. The research investigated the experiences of disabled female students in two selected universities in Kenya. The goal was to show how disability impacts the educational experiences of women with disabilities who are in the higher education system. The research sought to answer the following questions: How do disabled women students in Kenyan universities explain their participation in university education? What motivates women students with disability in Kenya to pursue university education? What factors facilitate and/or hinder their participation in university education? What coping strategies have the women developed to cope with the challenges they face in their participation in university education? And what policies and supports have Kenyan universities put in place to address the needs of the disabled women students? This paper focuses on findings relating to the women's explanations of their motivation to pursue university education.

Study participants were drawn from two public universities in Kenya (referred herein as University of Ongozi and University of Khafee), located in one large city in Kenya. Both universities offer graduate and undergraduate degrees. These universities were selected as part of the study partly because they could be easily accessed transport wise. Moreover, the researcher felt that these institutions, being among the largest public universities in Kenya, they were a good starting point to investigate public higher education institutions' commitment to widening access to university education for students from 'non-traditional' groups, and particularly students with disabilities.

Data was generated through a combination of personal interviews and document analysis. The interviews were conducted in English and utilized both semi-structured and open ended questions. The goal was to gather descriptive data in the participants' own words (Bogdan and Biklen 2006). Two categories of participants were interviewed: (1) 20 women students with disabilities enrolled in the selected institutions and with a range of disabilities – visible and invisible (10 from each university) and (2) four officers who had worked in these institutions for at least a year (two from each). The recruitment of the disabled women students sought to reflect type of disability, programme and year of study, age, marital status, class, and religion. The aim of interviewing the officers was to examine how they and their institutions viewed issues of disability, and how they adhered to stated policies and practices (see Table 1 for demographic information of study participants).

As for document analysis, official university documents including statements of philosophy, strategic plans, students and faculty's handbooks, as well as websites of the universities in question were reviewed (Bogdan and Biklen 2006). The intention of reviewing these documents was to examine the stated policies and support systems put in place to address the needs of disabled students in the selected universities.

Research participants were first recruited by contacting faculty known to the researcher in the selected sites and requesting them to assist in identifying potential

Table 1. Summary of participant demographics: female students with disabilities

Name	Age	Type of disability	Self-sponsored/ JAB*	Programme of study/Level	Marital status	Institution
Afya	Mid 40s	Blind	Self-sponsored	MA	Married	Ongozi
Aminia	Early 20s	Physical	JAB	B.Ed.	Single	Khafee
Aziza	21	Partially Blind	Self sponsored	B.Ed.	Single	Ongozi
Dada	Mid 40s	Physical	Self-sponsored	B.Ed.	Single	Ongozi
Dhahabu	23	Blind	Self-sponsored	B.Ed.	Single	Ongozi
Faizah	48	Physical	Self-sponsored	B.Ed.	Divorced	Ongozi
Fedha	Early 20s	Physical	JAB	B.A.	Single	Khafee
Feruzi	24	Physical	Self-sponsored	B.Com	Single	Khafee
Hawa	23	Partially Blind	Self-sponsored	B.Ed.	Single	Ongozi
Hereni	24	Physical	JAB	B.Ed.	Single	Khafee
Jamila	Mid 30s	Deaf	Self-sponsored	M.A	Single	Khafee
Johari	23	Physical	Self-sponsored	B.A.	Single	Khafee
Karuli	22	Physical	Self-sponsored	Law	Single	Khafee
Lulu	44	Blind	Self-sponsored	B.Ed.	Married	Ongozi
Mkufu	23	Physical	JAB	B.Com	Single	Ongozi
Nadra	24	Partially blind	Self-sponsored	B.Ed.	Single	Ongozi
Pete	34	Physical	Scholarship	B.A.	Single	Khafee
Shani	28	Blind	JAB(for undergraduate)	M.A.	Single	Ongozi
Yakuti	22	Physical	JAB	BScN	Single	Khafee
Zumaridi	Early 20s	Physical	Self-sponsored	B.A.	Single	Khafee

Note: *Admissions into an undergraduate degree programme in Kenya are managed by a centralized body called the Joint Admissions Board (JAB). The admission requirements for undergraduate programmes are determined by the performance of students from year to year. However, the minimum requirement is an aggregate of C+ in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination or its equivalent. Applicants must also meet specific degree programme subject cluster points. The entry requirements are regarded as the minimum, which do not entitle an applicant to a place in public universities. Those who meet the aggregate grade set for that particular year get admission into university as 'regular students' and are entitled to a student loan from the Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) of Kenya. Students who do not meet the aggregate grade set for admission for that particular year, or those who want to join university as mature entrants, have to do so as 'self-sponsored students'. They are not guaranteed to receive a full loan though.

interviewees, both students and university officers. The faculty were provided with copies of the research recruitment notices for distribution to potential study participants. Following these initial recruitment initiatives a few disabled women students came forward expressing interest in the study. After interviewing these initial women, the snowball sampling approach to recruitment was adopted henceforth. Participants were requested during the interviews or through informal conversations, to recommend other individuals who could be interviewed (Creswell

2005; Trochim 2002). The interviews started with general discussions of daily happenings so as to create rapport with the interviewees (Bogdan and Biklen 2006). The interviews then proceeded as conversations, although conversations with a 'guided purpose or plan' (Najarian 2006). This allowed for maintenance of some order in the interviews and facilitated asking similar questions to each respondent, while leaving room for the participants to discuss their experiences in their own way. Participants were also encouraged to talk about their personal biographies and experiences in order for them to have some control over what was discussed. This approach led to gaining a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of their lived experiences (Vernon 1996). Probes were used to elicit more information whenever participants raised useful points that needed further elaboration (Creswell 2005).

With the participants' consents, the interviews were audio taped to provide an accurate record of the conversation (Creswell 2005). Field notes were also written to supplement the tape recording in case the tape recorder malfunctioned and also as a reminder of any occurrences, body language etc. to be reflected on after the interviews. The interviews were transcribed and read to get a sense of the whole. While reading the transcripts, notes/codes were made on the margins to serve as guides for emerging themes. The transcripts were re-read to generate more specified themes from the first round of codes. These themes were used in the final write up. The findings from personal interviews were examined closely together with those from the analysis of official university documents to determine the policies and support systems put in place to address the needs of disabled students.

'Why' university?

When the disabled women students in this study were asked to explain their choice to attend university they pointed to the following factors: economic independence; realizing personal dreams; education as a better option; credentialism; and influences from significant others.

Economic independence

All the 20 disabled women interviewed identified going to university as the key to attaining economic independence. They saw university education as a gateway to realizing their career ambitions, participating in the job market and, thus, enabling them to beat the marginality that characterized their lives. Hawa⁴, a visually impaired Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) undergraduate student at the University of Ongozi, explained her decision to attend university as follows:

With my disability, it is a bit expensive. I need to work hard so that I can sustain myself in the future. Instead of relying on my parents I can start living on my own. I need extra stuff that other people who are not blind do not need and they are more expensive. Things like Braille papers, readers, and even seeing the doctor at least once or twice a year.

For Hawa, higher education is central to equipping one with skills and tools for self-reliance. This would subsequently help her cease relying on her parents for financial support.

Poverty also motivated most of the disabled women to attend university. Zumaridi, a Bachelor of Arts (B.A) student at the University of Khafee who is physically disabled, chose to attend university because of the 'poverty her family languished in and she wanted to change things for the better'. Zumaridi's parents are subsistence farmers. Subsistence farmers mostly live in rural areas and produce crops for home consumption. They may sometimes have a little surplus for sale in the market. Subsistence farmers largely rely on land as their chief means of production (Nyakundi 2005). They have limited access to money for investment. In an examination of the determinants of poverty in Kenya, Geda et al. (2005) found that poverty was concentrated in rural areas in general and in the agricultural sector in particular. Geda et al. (2005, 14) indicated that people employed in the agricultural sector in Kenya tended to be generally poorer. The authors added that educational attainment of the head of the household was a significant determinant of a household's poverty level. The situation was particularly improved, if the head of the household had high school and university education. A lack of education accounted for a higher probability of poverty. Also noticeable in Geda et al.'s (2005) findings was the fact that female education was correlated with reductions in poverty. Nevertheless, female-headed households were more likely to be poorer than male-headed households. Although Geda et al. (2005) did not explain this differential, studies have shown that in Kenya males have better opportunities to access higher education compared to women and thus have greater chances of accessing salaried employment (Sifuna 2006; Kamau 1996; Kiluva-Ndunda 2000). Zumaridi was inspired to attend university so that she could improve her life and that of her family.

Johari, a physically disabled BA student at the University of Khafee, was motivated to go to university by the prevailing poverty in her family:

My parents are living a very hard life. I wanted to improve their lives in one way or another. I have not yet done something to improve their lives but I want to build a house for them in town so that they don't move from one place to another anymore.

Johari's parents are pastoral farmers who rely on livestock as their means of livelihood. They often move from place to place, depending on the season, generally in search of water and pasture for their animals. Although pastoralists in Kenya constitute a significant economic grouping, they are not always reflected in the country's economic data or acknowledged in economic policy discussions (Odhiambo 2006). Their economic marginalization dates back to the colonial era when the British colonialists chose to develop particular regions of the country at the expense of others (Sifuna 2005). Unfortunately, even after independence, not much has changed. The arid and semi-arid parts of Kenya, especially Eastern and North Eastern provinces, remain poor and largely underdeveloped. There persist inequalities in resource distribution in the country with these two provinces being the worst affected (Hogg 1986; Narman 1990). Johari comes from one of these regions and the challenges of poverty motivated her join university so that she could improve her situation and that of her family.

The narratives above reveal that the women's choices to attend university were defined by the conditions of their families (Hay 2006; Wane 2002). Sharing and interdependence are part and parcel of community and humane living in many African communities. Children are socialized to look at their families as part of who they are. Hawa, Zumaridi, and Johari understand that acquiring a university

education is not only for their own good but also for the good of their families. They thought of how to make things better for themselves and their families.

Realizing personal dreams

Most of the women interviewed reported that attending university was an important step toward realizing their dreams. Shani, a visually impaired and Master of Arts (M.A) student at the University of Ongozi, observed: 'It had always been my dream to pursue a university education'. Fedha, a physically disabled female and a B.A student at the University of Khafee, added: 'I guess it [university] is one of those things that your heart has already set out for you'. Dada, a physically disabled mature B.Ed student at the University of Ongozi, also reported that she was not stopping at the undergraduate level but would continue with her education until she becomes an academic:

I don't want to just study for a degree, I want to move on, move my career further. I think by the time I am through I will even continue with my masters. I want to continue and become a don.

Joining university is a goal Shani had set for herself from an early age. For Fedha, attending university was something dear to her heart while Dada aimed at becoming a university professor. The participants' stories demonstrate that contrary to the biased assumptions that disabled people are passive individuals who rely on charity (Linton 2006; Shakespeare 1994), these women had goals and aspirations for higher education and they worked toward realizing those goals. The women challenged the everyday stereotypes about disabled people, especially regarding academic success.

Education as a better option

All the disabled women students interviewed in this study reported that university education was a 'better option' for them because it would allow them become a 'somebody'. Aminia, a B.A student at the University of Khafee who has a physical disability, explained why university education was a better option as follows:

Considering my disability, I thought that it was wise to get education, because right now there is little I can do physically. Education was the better choice, as it will increase my options in future...

Dhahabu, who is totally blind and is a B.Ed student at the University of Ongozi, added:

I am blind, so I knew that the only thing I can do is pursue an education because there is nothing else I could do comfortably right now. If I try to set up a business, I cannot run the business alone. I have to look for someone to help me. I knew the only thing I could do comfortably and alone right now is education.

Aminia and Dhahabu acknowledge that they could not perform manual tasks well. They saw higher education as a way of empowering themselves to cope with social, political, and economic challenges. Empowerment would make it possible for them to become a 'somebody' in society. The disabled women's views that university

education is a 'better' option are congruent with the existing literature on post-secondary education and persons with disabilities. For example, writing from a North American context, Frieden (2003) noted that post-secondary education increases the number of opportunities for disabled people to participate in salaried employment which, in turn, improves their quality of life. These women believed that higher education would lead to an improvement in their quality of life.

Expounding on the notion of becoming a 'somebody', Aziza, a partially blind undergraduate student in education at the University of Ongozi remarked: 'I knew I have to work hard so that I could at least achieve *something*. . . . So it is like it is only education that can make me be a *somebody*'. Aziza employed the words 'somebody' and 'something' to emphasize the importance of higher education in not only enhancing her social mobility and empowerment (Oanda 2005) but also in generating her self-worth. Robert Hattam (2000) describes the notion of 'becoming somebody' as follows:

'Becoming somebody' might be understood as 'the daily project of establishing a social identity' or the 'construction of the self' Becoming somebody might also be thought of in terms of a 'desire for recognition, and protection over time and in space and always under circumstances not of their own choosing'.

Aziza's point shows that the disabled women believe that university education would help them acquire a particular form of identity or recognition. It would empower them to experience a sense of personhood and worthiness in a society that denigrates people with disabilities and projects them as passive non-persons (Charlton 1998; Willett and Deegan 2001). Ingstad and Whyte (1995) writing about personhood and disability noted that the relational concept of personhood is elaborated in different ways in different cultures. Personhood is provided and legitimated by society. In Kenya for instance, studies have shown that among the Gusii, Nandi and Maasai people of Kenya, personhood has to do with one's ability to live communally with other people (Ogechi and Ruto 2002; Talle 1995). Physical differences are accepted as part and parcel of life but they do not restrain sociability. The Kenyan society has nonetheless changed tremendously. Socialization alone is no longer the only benchmark of legitimizing personhood. As the participants' narratives above demonstrate, the notion of personhood is now increasingly being gauged against factors such as one's ability to lead an independent economic life. This is why the study participants looked at university education as a means to changing how they are measured, represented and treated in society. The women believed that a university education could accord them social status and recognition and that way lessen the impact disability will have on their personhood and overall societal relations.

Credentialism

Study participants acknowledged that transgressing societal prejudices was complex. They explained how they had to continuously prove themselves far more than their non-disabled counterparts before being 'fully acknowledged' as 'capable' of contributing to society. This is why they chose to obtain degrees in order to be able to compete with non-disabled people in society. Dada, a physically disabled B.Ed student at the University of Ongozi, who had been teaching reported that she

had to come back to university and get her degree in order to be recognized as being a ‘good’ teacher:

It is not really nice not to have ‘those papers’... Sometimes when you have a disability you need to prove so many things, you need to prove yourself. We used to work very hard in our department, our [name of the subject she taught] would be done very well otherwise there would be so many nasty comments. Even in teachers’ teachings there is a lot of tension between diploma and the graduate teachers. So they would just throw comments. You can imagine that kind of scenario when you are actually untrained. Luckily, I was shielded by the fact that students were doing well in my subject that shielded me a lot. But I also felt that if I was good, if I kept on saying I was good, then there were things that should show... I felt I needed to come and read.

Dada explains how disabled people have to pay a high price to earn acknowledgement as being capable of doing something (Maskos and Siebert 2006). She talks about the competitive and hierarchical working environment in her school particularly the culture of ‘teaching excellence’ her department laid out for itself and how she had had to work hard to prove herself as an ‘excellent teacher’. Dada felt that her authority remained incomplete without credentials to back up her assertions of excellence. This finding points to the prevailing trends in contemporary societies, which dictate that expertise and professionalism be substantiated with training and credentials.

Pete agreed with Dada’s observation that the contemporary world is indeed about credentials:

I realized that the current world is a paper world, as in documentation; are you trained in this? Have you reached university? I knew I can work towards that. So I asked myself, what is it that is in this paper that I cannot get? I have to say this paper comes with hard work. I have completed this degree.

Pete thinks of the increasing trend toward credentialism as a means of not only facilitating institutional hiring and promotional processes but also as a way of increasing her professionalism. In contemporary times, diplomas/degrees are more than ever a power phenomenon. Diplomas/degrees are ‘scaling tools’ (Goffman 1963) used to measure performance and to determine who gets the job and who does not. Virtually all employers demand postsecondary diplomas and degrees for employment positions (Walters 2004). Disabled people in Kenya end up being locked out because not many of them have access to postsecondary education.

Credentialism is also tied to upward mobility in the work place. Some of the study participants, who had already entered the work force and attended university on study leave, were at university in order to move up the employment ladder. For instance, Afya, a visually impaired graduate student at the University of Ongozi, remarked:

I felt that I needed to study so that I could improve my status. The very thing that made me to go for a diploma course was that I wanted to be promoted and by then those people who were being promoted were those who had worked for longer years than I had worked. They wanted people with more experience like 10 years or more. I had worked for only five years so I could not be promoted on merit. I said the best thing to do was to go and work hard in school so that I get a degree and knowledge. That is what made me to go for higher learning – to better my life. So when I got my diploma, I got a promotion, when I got a degree, I got a promotion. From that I feel that I have added

myself value and some knowledge which those people who were promoted on merit may not have. I feel good and I can never regret.

Afya wanted to improve her status and also to facilitate potential promotions in her teaching career. She started off as a non-graduate primary school teacher and went for further training to obtain a diploma and degree. She is now working toward a master's degree in education. This shows that in the Kenyan context, as is the case in many other countries, educational attainment is a central factor in gauging one's upward professional mobility. This is why Dada and Pete kept emphasizing that having 'those papers' established quantifiable benchmarks for recognition of their expertise and knowledge.

Influences from significant others

Family members, peers, friends, and people with disabilities in wider society also played a significant role in motivating the disabled women to attend university. Speaking of family, all the disabled women students interviewed, except for one, indicated that their family members were very positive and supportive of their academic endeavours. For example, Zumaridi, the physically disabled BA student, affirmed that family was a key factor in her decision to go to university. Not only did her parents encourage her to work hard, but she was also encouraged to follow the footsteps of her uncle who was at the university:

I have an uncle who also passed through here [name of university] so they [family members] used to tell me, 'you just work hard and if you work hard like your uncle did, you shall see the doors of university'. So, I got motivated through that and I used to work hard and God answered my prayers.

Dhahabu shared similar views noting: 'The motivation I got from the parents was that they were supporting me. They told me to always go to school'. Zumaridi's and Dhahabu's responses illustrate how material support and positive encouragement from parents and other family members can inspire children to further their education (Ceballo 2004; Rhamie and Hallam 2002). These women's voices demonstrate how positive support gave them a sense of hope and assurance that they were capable of academic success.

Aminia, an undergraduate student in education at the University of Khafee, was also inspired by her parents to go for higher education. Additionally, she wanted to be a role model to other disabled people:

My parents always encouraged me to work hard. Also, because in our village there are some people who are disabled but who have not achieved much in terms of education, I just wanted me to be like a role model to them.

Aminia's response underlines the importance of family members in motivating students to further their education (Dennis et al. 2005). In Aminia's case, her parents instilled in her the expectation of attending university and provided the encouragement and emotional support that enabled her to meet these expectations (see Dennis et al. 2005; Rodriguez, et al. 2003). Aminia's story also lends support to the theme that people with disabilities often remain an invisible group in their communities (Whitehead 2004). In Aminia's case this invisibility motivated her to pursue

university education so that she could serve as role a model to other people with disabilities.

For Aziza, University of Ongozi, other students with disabilities motivated her to go for university education: 'I have interacted with other visually impaired persons and they have been a source of motivation'. Aziza's comment reveals that peers are an important influence in the career pursuits and decisions of the women students with disabilities. This finding resonates with Hurtado et al.'s (1996) report about the role of peers in Latino college students' lives in the US. Hurtado and others found that peers were key in students' social adjustment in college. For Aziza, interactions with disabled peers boosted her self-esteem and confidence.

Discussion

This paper has examined the factors that influence disabled women in Kenya to pursue a university education. Findings from the interviews indicate that the disabled women students recognize higher education as an important tool for empowerment. They see university education as a vital stepping stone toward success in life (Okeke 2006; Paul 1999). In contrast to societal perceptions that disabled people are charity recipients that need pity, the interviews revealed that the disabled women are actively involved in changing their lives through among other ways acquiring an education. In many African nations 'higher education is seen as the basic mechanism for equipping... women with the skills for participation in the public sphere' (Okeke 2006, 83). This may explain why the disabled women students in this study viewed education as an important gateway to their career dreams and to breaking the social, economic, and psychological barriers and restrictions created by society (Fontes 2008).

The research findings also indicate that disabled people in Kenya continue to be marginalized. This marginalization is a blend of cultural, social, economic, and political factors and it poses challenges to full integration of disabled people into mainstream society (Oliver 1990; Thompson and Dickey 1994). The disabled women interviewed are cognizant of this fact. They know that negative attitudes contribute toward placing disabled people in a dependency situation which hinders them from participating in employment so that they can support themselves; a practice that makes them feel underestimated (Fontes 2008). Such feelings of underestimation motivated some women such as Faizah to pursue university education.

Important in the women's responses as well is the centrality of family and significant others in motivating respondents to attend university. This finding is consistent with findings from studies done in North America and the UK. For example, in the US, Paul (1999) reported that the disabled students recognized personal aspiration and pressures from family, peers, and friends as key motivators that influenced these students' decisions to attend university. Paul also found that the disabled students believed that post-secondary education could take them wherever they wanted to go in life (see also Fuller et al. 2004). All the 20 women with disabilities interviewed in this study saw university education as a tool for upward mobility and as a way to earn respect in society. It was an avenue through which they could object the 'can't do' attitudes society holds about disabled individuals (Stannett 2006).

Recommendations and lessons to be learned from the women's experiences

Before making recommendations, this paper acknowledges the limitations of reflecting on the experiences of women students with disabilities who had been successful in attending university and who were able to stay in university and continue with their studies. This focus left important voices of women who were perhaps unable or discouraged and, therefore, did not get to attend university or those who got into university and dropped out for different reasons. Future studies should consider including these women's experiences. There are many disabled women out there wishing to attain a post-secondary education but cannot, due to various barriers. A lasting solution should be found to ensure these women are not locked out of post-secondary education because of barriers of any type or because of lack of support. Career guidance and counselling especially at high school levels, support from family and friends, and government support in form of assistance and resource provision are key to ensuring their success and their integration into society.

We can draw a number of lessons from the women's voices presented above. Firstly, disability stigma persists in Kenya and it has implications on disabled people's educational choices. It is imperative that Kenyan educational institutions and the Kenyan society as a whole address this stigma. A starting point would be to sensitize society about disability. In schools, it would be important to draw attention to the fact that, with the right support and accommodations, people with disabilities do succeed academically and contribute to societal economics, politics, culture, etc.

Secondly, motivation and support for disabled students, and particularly women, is fundamental to their academic achievements. Parents/guardians, schools, colleges, and universities should consider putting in place mechanisms to attain this goal. For example, there is a need for high schools and universities in Kenya to seriously review their practices and to put in place policies that promote transition and inclusion of disabled women students in universities. These policies should take into account curriculum; pedagogy; assessment practices; the equipment that students need to enhance learning; physical access; attitudinal barriers; finances; technology, etc. (see Barton 1998). Additionally, disabled women students planning to attend higher education should be provided with information on what is available for them in those institutions, their rights and responsibilities as well as the responsibilities that higher education institutions have toward them. Being well informed will help these students to have opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the higher education experience without feeling excluded. Most of all, while policy-makers, educators, and parents are important in making decisions about increasing the participation of disabled students in universities, it is also important to remember that these decisions should not only reflect increased presence of disabled students in universities but also their increased participation in decision-making processes and policy formulations.

Thirdly, in Kenya, poverty continues to pose significant challenges to students striving to attain post-secondary education. Students from arid and semi-arid areas are more disadvantaged because their provinces are underdeveloped, which means reduced financial resources for parents wishing to send children to school. Disabled students from these regions experience further disadvantages because of disability stigma. The government needs to address this marginalization. Programmes such as enhanced bursaries and scholarships for disabled students from marginal areas would be a step towards bettering the lives of these students. Fourthly, the women in this project have demonstrated that accessing and participating in university education is their priority.

This commitment proves to the universities in the country, both private and public, that limiting or denying admission of disabled students to their institutions would be doing them a disservice. It is high time that all Kenyan universities took it as an institutional responsibility to admit, to accommodate, and to support disabled students in their academic endeavours instead of the select few that are currently striving to make their campuses accessible to disabled students. Perhaps the greatest lesson of all is the recognition that disabled women have the same ambitions and aspirations as non-disabled women and men. The difference is that because of disability, they are disadvantaged and have to fight harder to get to where they need to be to attain their ambitions and succeed. Society should endeavour to provide the access and the required financial and other supports to ensure that disabled people's dreams, like anyone's dreams, are achieved.

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Notes

1. In this paper the words post-secondary education, higher education, and university education are used interchangeably to refer to university.
2. This paper uses the terms people with disabilities and disabled people interchangeably. The use of disabled people connotes Oliver's (1996) argument that individuals are disabled by their environment.
3. The Gusii are a Bantu-speaking people in the western part of Kenya. The Nandi are a subgroup of the Kalenjin speaking people in Kenya. They belong to the larger group of Nilotes and occupy the Nandi Hills in the Rift Valley Province of Kenya.
4. All the participant names in this paper are pseudonyms

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